



Cousin Summers



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To all those who dream of fathers...and to my own wonderful family who let me do the same.

1

The first time I ever saw my father, I couldn't believe we were related. We couldn't be. He looked like some sort of macho military type—the kind you see in movies. What was Mom thinking? She must have been kidding to send for him like this.

She wasn't kidding.

I wasn't too worried, at first. I mean, I was fifteen years old—what was he going to do—spank me? Besides that, where had he been all my life? Laurence J. Cooper, United States Navy. Big deal.

He'd probably take me out somewhere for a hamburger and coke. Give me the great lecture about how I was ruining my life, driving Mom crazy, and let's get serious here, straighten-it-up type lecture. He came three thousand miles to tell me so I was supposed to be impressed. Well, did I have a surprise for him.

I had it all planned out. And it was a fantastic plan considering I only had one day to think about it. That's how long I knew he was coming. Can you believe that? Ten years go by and she barely tells me his name—much less anything about him—and all of a sudden he's coming. Like I should be so elated.

But her sending for him told me something. It told

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me that Mom—the perfect, level-headed, corporate executive Mom—had finally given up on me. It would have been depressing if I hadn't already suffered the shock, way back when I gave up on her. Only she had been too busy to notice.

"You know what it takes to make a living these days, Mary?" That was the famous line she was always giving me—her excuse for everything, that left absolutely no room for anything else. Including me.

Not that I was neglected, or child abused, or anything radical...I was just plain getting in the way. At least that's how I felt for the last year or so. That's why it was sort of surprising when she got so upset last summer when I ran away. It didn't work out and I was back in a week. But ever since then we had been just awful to each other.

She said I needed help—like running away was some sort of a crime—and sent me to Grandpa's for awhile. Then Aunt Jane's (who has five kids and ought to know how to raise one). After that, there was an expensive boarding school that lasted less than a month, and finally she even bought me a shrink. But I think she needed the guy more than me because she spent a lot of time in therapy.

Now the father routine.

According to Aunt Jane, my dad was something of a runaway specialist himself. A no-good bum (her words, not mine) who ran away from home to join a band, and then Mom and me to join the Navy. I wouldn't know. It all happened when I was too young to remember.

But I knew one thing. I wasn't going to be traded back and forth between parents like some kids I know. No way. Especially when one of my parents was a perfect stranger.

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The trouble was I had this feeling that's just what they might be leading up to. Anyway, whoever heard of coming three thousand miles for a hamburger and a coke? Nope. Something was definitely up.

So, even though I only had one day, I came up with a plan of my own. Mom's no dummy. She knew something was up when she came into my room while I was getting ready, but she didn't have the faintest idea what it was.

"You're not going to wear that, are you?" she asked. "He'll probably take you someplace nice, and you look like a—a gypsy in heat dressed like that. Where's your sense of pride?"

"Never had one." I put on the gold, hoop earrings I bought the week before. It needled her when I talked like that. Because if there was one single most important thing to my mother, it was having a sense of pride. I was still mad at her for sending for him, anyway.

"Comb your hair."

"I did."

"At least take the scarf off. Or put it on your head or neck where it belongs. It looks ridiculous wrapped around your ankle that way."

"Everybody wears them like this now, Ma—it looks sexy."

"Don't call me, Ma, Mary Elizabeth. And for your information, there are other achievements in life besides looking sexy."

Mary Elizabeth—she was still pretty ticked, too. I leaned closer to the mirror while I put on my mascara, and gave her the silent treatment. She hated that. Actually, I hoped she'd get mad enough to say I wasn't going anywhere looking like this, and maybe I wouldn't have to go with him at all. He could just say whatever it was he had to say right in the living room—get it over with—and I could go spend the night at Sarah's.

She didn't. Instead, she said, "Hurry up, he's waiting," and walked out.

He was sitting on one of the deck chairs out on the balcony with his legs propped up on the rail. Totally relaxed. If he was nervous about meeting me for the first time, he didn't show it. He was smoking. Jeeze—hadn't he ever heard the word cancer before? He looked at me for a few long moments—like he could see right through me, it was weird—then he smiled.

"Ready, kid?" He tossed his cigarette over the rail as he got up.

"Where we going?" I had to find out before we left, it was part of the plan.

"Like seafood?"

"You've always liked fried shrimp, haven't you, Mary?" Mom answered for me—all butter and sweetness, now. As if we hadn't been arguing just five minutes ago.

"You mean like they serve at the Sea Lion downtown?" I asked him.

"Sure," he said, "like that."

"I gotta get my purse."

Back in my room I went to the phone and dialed Sarah (my cell phone was a thing of the past on account of my behavior). She must have been waiting for my call because she picked it up on the first ring.

"Sea Lion downtown," I whispered quickly. "Meet me in the parking lot in half an hour."

At the door when we were leaving, Mom said, "Bye, Mary," and got sort of misty-eyed. That wasn't like her.

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She's the type that's always in control. Even during some of our worst arguments, she never yells. She can deliver some pretty cutting remarks, though. The kind that stay with you for a long time afterward. I only know when she's really upset because I can feel it.

On the outside, she looks perfectly calm, not a hair out of place—and she always matches no matter what sort of crises we're in. Sometimes I think her worst nightmare would be not being color- coordinated. Or if terrorists blew up the local mall. Anyway, when her eyes started to water at the door, it gave me a funny feeling.

I even had second thoughts about dressing like this. Until it hit me she was probably emotional because she hadn't seen him for so long. Neither one of them were really thinking about me.

Not really.

Oh, they were going through the right motions...but it was all hollow. They'd be thinking different in an hour, though. That's about how long it would take for them to realize I was gone. For good.

Then we could stop all this pretending.

The car was a rental. It was some small, white foreign thing that had a lot of zip to it. Nice, but it didn't tell me much about him...maybe it was the only thing available. He didn't say a word until we were on the freeway. Then he reached into his pocket for another cigarette. Great. I was going to smell like smoke for the rest of the night.

"Don't you know that stuff's bad for you?" I was hoping he'd change his mind and try to impress me by doing the right thing.

Instead he said, "There's worse," and lit up anyway. I opened my window a little and glanced behind us, wondering if I'd spot Sarah's little blue and white bug on the road before we got there. Not a sign. She'd be there, though. Sarah and I had been friends since junior high and there wasn't a doubt in my mind whether or not I could count on her. It was a real break for me that she had her license for six months, already, too.

"Hey—" I said when he missed the turn, "you passed it."

"Passed what?"

"The downtown turnoff. Aren't we going to the Sea Lion?"

"Nope."

"But I thought you said—"

"I said we were going for seafood, and we are. We're going to the coast."

"The coast—but—that's two hours away!" "Is that a problem?" 2

He was looking at me—waiting for an answer—when all of a sudden I noticed he had my eyes. Irish eyes, Mom always called them. Because they could turn blue, gray or green, depending on what color I wore or the mood I was in.

The way the sunset was pouring in through the windows, his looked sort of blue-green and there was that strange feeling again. Like he could see right through me.

"Look," I finally answered, "you don't have to go to all this trouble—take me to the coast and all. I'm sure you have better things to do. Right? I don't even know why she sent for you."

He didn't say anything. You'd have thought I said "Nice night for a drive" the way he glanced back to the road and revved up to eighty as he passed a slow moving station wagon. Traffic was thinning out. A little longer and we'd be totally out of the city. I wondered how long Sarah would wait before she realized I wasn't there.

"You're wasting your time, you know," I told him. "Whatever you're gonna say to me, I've heard it before. From Mom, from Grandpa, Uncle Lee and Aunt Carol. Even the high school counselor. Do you really expect me to listen to you? I don't even know you!"

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All of a sudden I was upset. I felt like screaming. I didn't care if he came three thousand miles to see me—he could've come from the moon for all I cared. I just wanted to go back.

"Don't you remember me at all, Ellie?"

I was stunned. I did remember somebody that called me Ellie, but it was a long, long time ago It couldn't have been him. The person I remembered was big and strong and gentle, like God...and there was a song...

Before I knew it, I was hearing it again right there in the car—like he had thought of it the exact instant I did. He just sang it right out, with a voice like you hear on the radio. That's how good it sounded. I don't know why, but it made me feel all choked up and fluttery inside.

Roses have sunshine, violets have blue, All the angels in heaven know I have you. They know I have you, dear, they know I have you. All the angels in heaven know I have you.

It was like some sad country song I come across sometimes when I'm scanning the radio late at night, only I couldn't flip past it. Like watching some depressing movie I couldn't walk out of—it wasn't fair—and why did it make me feel like crying? A total stranger had no right to show up in my life out of nowhere and make me feel like this.

"Remember that song, kid?" he asked.

I remembered. I remembered the song and the name —maybe even the voice—but I didn't tell him. Instead, I looked out my window and watched the twinkling lights of the city fall away and disappear into the glow of sunset behind us. I took a deep breath and said, "No."

We didn't talk anymore. I had plenty of things I wanted to say, though. Like if he really cared, where had he been all my life? Or what in the world had Mom told him that made him come three thousand miles—didn't he know she exaggerated? More than anything I wanted to tell him to just take me home.

Only every time I tried getting up the nerve, I got this dumb ache in my throat and had to look out the window again, bite my lip and say over and over to myself, "I'm not gonna cry, I'm not gonna cry." What was the matter with me?

Fifty miles went by and it was pitch dark when I finally blurted out, "I hate shrimp!" and practically choked myself to keep from bawling like a baby.

"I know where we can get some great hamburgers. Sodas, fries, whatever you want. A little place about twenty miles up ahead." He paused and I knew he was looking at me—I could feel it. Then he said, "Relax. I'm not going to give any lectures."

"I just want to go home."

"I know."

Now, what kind of an answer was that?

The hamburger place said Bill's Bar and Grill. We stopped long enough to get an order to go and I found my way to the ladies' room, wishing I had the nerve to skip out and leave him there. But this wasn't the movies.

With my luck I'd probably find three crazies and a serial killer before I could get somebody normal to drive me home. Besides that, the place was practically deserted and I wouldn't get far without him noticing, anyway. Sarah was gonna be mad at me tomorrow for standing her up.

We ate on the road. Halfway through my hamburger and strawberry shake I realized that we were clipping along the coastline in the same direction as before. If we weren't going for seafood anymore...where were we going?

"I have a friend," he explained—jeeze, it was like he could read my mind—"has a forty-two foot ketch out here on the bay. Thought we might do a little night-fishing."

"Sort of like the Big Brother program," I said. "And I'm supposed to have a good time and tell you all my problems—no thanks."

"No lectures."

"Promise?"

"Scout's honor."

"Boy Scouts, too, huh. I guess that makes you an all around good American."

"Got something against America?"

"Maybe. I think the System stinks for one thing. The way they're always—"

"Hold it right there. No lectures, remember?"

"But that was just—"

"It's gotta go both ways. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I said.

He smiled at me then, and I couldn't help smiling back this time. Maybe he was as fed up with all this as I was. At least he was honest.

Looking back on it, I think it was pretty naive of me to be thinking of him as honest. Because at that very moment we pulled into a marina full of restaurants, parked cars, and row after row of boats tied up at the nearby docks. We parked at a yellow curb that said, Car Rental Returns, and he threw the keys on the seat as he got out.

I was wondering if we were going to rent a different car for the ride back when he pointed to a dimly lit dock off to our left.

"There she is," he said. "It's the big one with the lantern in the cockpit...hey, it looks like Martin's there, already."

And like a dummy, I went right along.

3

The boat was one of those old-fashioned sailing-type things that looked like a miniature ship. The name Sonata was painted on the side. That's Italian for some kind of song. The man standing at one end of it, under the light, hollered when he saw us coming.

"Come aboard, Joe, you sure took your—"

"Martin, this is Ellie–Mary, I mean."

"Hello, little lady." He held out his hand and helped me onto the boat. "Easy does it—just make yourself comfortable there. It's a great night for a sail." He had gray hair—almost white practically—so it surprised me how strong his grip was when he took my hand.

Even tied at the dock, I could feel the uneven sway of water beneath us. Joe hopped up on the rail right after me, like he'd done it a hundred times and felt perfectly at home on a moving floor. Joe. That's what I called him in my mind when I noticed that. I sure wasn't going to call him Dad.

"Daniel aboard?" Joe reached under one of the seats and took out some jackets. It lifted up on a hinge and there was storage space underneath.

"Picked him up this afternoon," Martin answered. "Seventeen hours from New Zealand—he's sleeping off some jet lag."

Joe handed me one of the jackets. It was a blue parkatype thing with at least a hundred pockets. "Here," he said. "Gets cold out there past the breakwater. And it can be inflated for a life jacket if you happen to fall overboard. Just pull this little ring here—see? But don't fall in. It's too hard to find people at night." Then he smiled.

I didn't know if he was joking, or not.

Not that I cared. What I was wondering right then was why someone would bother to come night fishing if he was too tired from a long trip to stay awake for it. There was another glow of light coming from the cabin and I peeked down inside...but I couldn't see much more than a tiny kitchen.

"Prepare to cast off the bowline," Martin said, and suddenly there was the rumble of an engine close by.

Joe moved forward along the deck and untied the rope at the front of the boat. The Sonata swayed a little, and as we slowly moved away from the dock, I sat down on one of the seats and watched the lights of the restaurants slip by. I thought of Sarah, again, She probably went home a long time ago.

So much for the big surprise.

Oh, well. At least I didn't have to sit through any lectures. I'd heard enough of them in the past two months to last a lifetime. Adults. They have this way of talking like there's some great secret only they knew about, but can't tell you. Like you're retarded until you get out of your teens or something.

It smelled good out on the water.

People say the city smells, but I've lived there too long to notice it. I noticed the ocean smell, though, and it

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was nice. There was a cool breeze blowing against my face as we moved along. And there were all these flapping, bell-like sounds of ropes clanking in the wind against metal masts of other boats still parked in their places as we passed by. There was one boat moving farther along in the lane ahead of us—probably going night fishing, too.

Nobody said anything. Martin was standing on the seat behind me, so he could see his way out of the harbor. He kept one foot on the spokes of the wheel to steer...worn out tennis shoes with no socks. Joe was standing up by the mast lighting up another cigarette. The motor chugged along at a slow, steady pace; guaranteed not to win any races.

"Take up the fenders, will you, Mary?" Martin said from behind me.

"What?" I asked.

"The fenders. Those three white things dangling over the port side," he explained. "Just untie them and toss them into the cabin."

I looked over the side but didn't see anything.

"That's the starboard side," he said. "Port's the other one."

The fenders looked like three, cylinder-shaped volleyballs. They were bouncing and splashing at the end of the ropes, and it wasn't as easy as it sounded to get them untied. The knots were wet. When I finally got all three, we were coming to the end of the jetty and the boat started to move up and down on swells of incoming ocean. It was like a slow motion merry-go-round ride. I felt like a drunk trying to walk back to the open cabin over a moving floor, and carry those three big things at the same time.

Totally uncoordinated.

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I dropped them through the doorway—that was the best I could do—and had to look down when I heard a big bang. Fender number three had bounced off the stove and knocked the lid of a tea kettle onto the floor. The kettlepart must have been tied in. I was about to climb down and put it back when something weird happened.

I got this terrible dizzy feeling just looking down in there, and all of a sudden I felt sick. Instantly. God—I was going to puke! All over the fenders and that cute little kitchen! I couldn't! I headed for the rail and barely made it to the side in time to lean over...

Nothing happened.

The cool breeze hit me in the face, again, and the sick feeling started to fade away. My stomach was still doing somersaults, but at least it was under control.

"This will help," Martin handed me a stick of gum as I sat back slowly on the seat again. Then he yelled, "Ready to make some sail, Joe?"

"Anytime," came the reply.

After that, I heard a long grating sound and a lot of thundery flapping noises as he put up the sail, but I was too busy fumbling with my gum wrapper to watch. I hate throwing up. I'd rather have a headache or a sore throat, or anything.

Throwing up is disgusting. I'd absolutely die if I did it in front of strangers. I decided I wasn't going near that little cabin, again. Let someone else take care of the volleyballs. About that time, the boat tipped over. That's what it felt like, anyway. I grabbed for the rail, but it wasn't a rail—it was just some plastic rope type stuff that was strung between poles. Joe was still standing on the deck like there was nothing unusual, and in a few minutes he was pulling a smaller sail up in front of the big one. Martin turned off the engine.

"What's wrong?" I tried not to sound as scared as I felt. These guys acted like tipping over was an everyday thing.

"Wrong?" Martin laughed. "Nothing's wrong. She's purring along real sweet. Must be...what would you guess, Joe? Five, six knots?"

"About that."

"Real talkative, tonight, Lieutenant. Putting out to sea is supposed to be a festive occasion. Now, here I am with a festive occasion on my hands and..." He stepped down from the seat and made himself comfortable on the one across from mine. "I got to keep company with two people that aren't talking to each other."

"Nothing's easy, Martin," Joe ducked under the sail and came to sit down with us.

"Hey, who's driving?" I asked, when he sat down on my side. Nobody was sitting behind the wheel—nobody even had a hand on it.

"She's driving herself, baby. On auto pilot," Martin threw me a teasing smile. I know a teasing smile when I see one, and that's just the kind it was. "Hey..." he said sort of quiet, like he was about to tell a secret. "They call that a hairdo where you come from?"

"The latest," I said in my coldest tone. Two could play this game. The thought that I maybe shouldn't be rude to Joe's friend crossed my mind—especially when he was taking us fishing. But I ignored it. I wasn't going to put up with comments about my hair all night. And I didn't like anyone calling me baby, either. Especially an old man like him. "You ought to see when I really dress up," I told him. "Totally bad."

"That's just what I would've said," Martin laughed.

"Bad means like really great," I explained. He didn't even get it. Where was this guy from anyway? I gave up on him and looked over at Joe. "Are we going to do any fishing, or not? I mean it's almost nine o'clock, already."

"Ellie..." He sighed as if he had bad news to tell but he didn't say anything. Why wouldn't he look at me? "Ellie..." he tried again, but that was as far as it got before he looked over at Martin. Like maybe he should say it.

There was something really wrong going on here. I could feel it.

"Won't get any good fishing until we get in warmer waters," Martin stood up long enough to reach under his seat and take out a can. "Want a beer, Joe?"

"No, thanks."

"Warmer waters." I could hardly believe what I heard. "Just where are we going to? Hawaii?"

"Want a soda, Mary?" Martin asked like he didn't even hear me. "We've got cola, lemon-lime, and root—"

All of a sudden, I was furious. I jumped to my feet and hollered, "I don't want anything! I want to go home—I don't even like fishing!"

Neither of them said anything. Martin opened his beer, and took a long swallow. The man who was supposed to be my father just sat there. Were they deaf?

"I said I want to go home!" I yelled even louder. "Turn this boat around—do you hear me?"

Joe got to his feet. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "You're not going home, kid."

4

"You can't do that." I looked at him like maybe I didn't hear right, or he was just kidding. "You can't just take someone—make them go somewhere without even asking. You can't!"

"Well, I just did." He reached down to pull on the end of a nearby rope as he talked.

The front sail tightened up, the boat leaned over a little more, and we started to move faster. I had to catch my balance just to stay standing.

"I decided..." He sat back down and started coiling the end of the rope as he talked. "If this thing between us was going to work at all, we'll need some time to get to know each other. Some uninterrupted time."

"Well, I'm not interested!" Forget the small talk—I had enough of all this. "I make my own decisions! I'm fifteen years old, not five. Nobody makes decisions for me, but me!"

"Not anymore."

"You can't do that."

"Yes, I can."

"You don't have the right!"

"Yes, I do."

Martin started laughing then—like he was watching

a good movie—and suddenly, I couldn't stand him. Not for another minute. I had known him less than an hour and I hated him, already. I hated both of them. They couldn't treat me like this, no matter what they said.

There are laws against stuff like this.

"Shut up, you—kidnapper!" I screamed at him. Then I knocked the beer out of his hand and yelled, "They put people in jail for things like this!"

"That's some bad kid you got, Joe," He said, like I wasn't even there. He picked up the can that was rolling around on the wooden floor, dribbling beer all over. "I hope we don't have to put up with this kind of crap all the way to Hawaii."

"I'm not going to Hawaii!" I screamed at them. "And nobody's gonna make me!"

I felt this panicky feeling churn inside me. Like the emotions I had been trying to keep down all night were going to spill out all at once. But I wasn't going to cry in front of them—give them the pleasure of thinking they had got to me.

I'd make them take me back.

There was one thing I was sure of: they didn't want to be with me any more than I wanted to be with them. Not really. And if I could give them a hard enough time within the next few minutes, I was pretty sure they would come up with a more important obligation than reforming me. Something that would suddenly need their attention.

That's the way adults operate. They don't give up on you necessarily...something just sort of comes up to get in the way. They get busy and then pretty soon they forget you. Zippo. You're a nobody. Unless you get in more trouble. Then you get bounced to the top of their list again

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for awhile. Being raised an only kid gave me a real insight on adult behavior. I always had plenty around to learn from.

I decided to concentrate on Martin because he was already disgusted with me. I was going to throw the biggest fit of my life—a scene Hollywood could buy. I took a deep breath to steady myself—jeeze, I was so upset I was shaking. When I turned toward him our eyes met.

"Make it a good one, brat." He said it like he knew what I was going to do. "See where it gets you."

"You better worry about where all this will get you!" I warned. "You dirty old man—they'll put you away for life!"

"That's enough, Ellie," Joe said from behind me. But I ignored him.

Martin was seething. His expression didn't change, but the way he crushed his beer can and tossed it over the side before it was even empty gave him away.

"You know they give more time for kidnapping than they do for murder in this state?" I taunted. "And what they do to old men, like you, that offer drinks to fifteenyear-old girls and call them baby..."

"Hey—" He jumped to his feet like somebody pinched him. The shocked look on his face should have warned me I'd gone far enough.

Only I was feeling pretty desperate by then, and I wanted to make sure I got back. They had to take me back! So, while he was still staring at me with his mouth open, I screamed as loud as I could and told him to get away from me.

Then a strange thing happened.

Even though it was just an act, and I remember

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making the decision to do it...it turned real. Once I let the cap off all that garbage I couldn't get it back on, again. I mean, I lost total control of myself. Boom! Like high voltage explosives. The next thing I knew, I had called him every R-rated thing I could think of. Even the all time worst expression—the one that got you an automatic ticket to the Principal's office if you said it in school.

I went too far.

Joe came up behind me without a word and when I felt him grab hold of me, it flashed through my mind that a guy who thought he had a right to kidnap somebody just because he was their father—might think he had the right to hit them, too. All of a sudden I was scared.

Then when I felt myself being lifted into the air—and go flying toward the water—I was hysterical. I screamed bloody horrors but it was too late. I splashed into an icy coldness that took my breath away. When it closed up over my head I realized if, by some chance, I managed to keep from drowning, it was all going to end. Just like in the movies...

Some giant, ugly thing would come up out of that deep, dark water and eat me alive!

5

It's funny how a different set of circumstances can change your whole outlook on life. I had taken a few calculated risks in my time, but I had never been in an honest-to-God life and death situation before. Your whole sense of values change.

I mean a few minutes ago, I hated those guys.

Now, I didn't care if they were Jack the Ripper and the Devil—I was begging for them to help me. Let me define the word begging: I was screaming, crying, and swearing to do anything if they'd let me back in the boat. Absolutely no pride. No guts, either.

All the movies I ever saw about killer sharks tearing people to shreds, watching blood and gore pour over the screen while I sat there eating popcorn and candy—it all came back to me in full color. God—it would be horrible to die that way! And all this splashing and thrashing—it was like ringing the dinner bell for them. But I couldn't quit or I'd drown.

I was drowning!

Even with all the splashing and thrashing, I was swallowing and choking on more water than I was staying on top of. The boat was moving farther away and

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sometimes I could barely see it between the swells. What kind of a father would let his kid drown without lifting a finger to help? Jeeze—what kind of father would throw his own kid over the side?

He was yelling something at me but I was too busy trying to stay alive to understand what it was. I didn't care what it was—whatever it was, I'd do it. So, I shouted, "Yes —yes!" But a million gallons of water rushed into my mouth when I opened it. I don't think he heard.

About that time I suddenly felt myself being dragged through the water from behind. I just knew it was the end. Some monster shark had probably snapped off the whole lower half of my body and I was in too much shock to feel it. Then it was dragging me around—tearing at me—just like in that old movie, Jaws when the girl got eaten alive because she went swimming after dark.

I wanted to say a prayer before I died but I didn't know one. Not even one. The best I could do was keep saying, "Oh, God! Oh, God!" over and over, and each time, another wave rushed into my mouth. It was a nightmare! This couldn't be happening to me!

Then I felt myself rising out of my body...up...and up...I didn't have any visions of light. My whole life didn't pass before me or anything, but I knew I was dying. I just knew it. There was a cold blast of wind as I came up, choking, and coughing up burning seawater. I say burning because it felt like my nose and throat were on fire.

"Why didn't you pull the ring, kid?" Joe set me down on the seat. "You said you pulled the ring."

So, that's what he was hollering at me.

"She's swallowed half the ocean," said Martin.

"Better turn her over your knee, Joe...make her get rid of it."

"No! Don't hit me!" I cried.

"Nobody's going to hit you," Joe answered. "You have to get rid of the seawater, though. Here—" He put a hand on the back of my head and made me lean over the rail.

"Don't!" I tried to get away from him but he had too good a hold on me. "I won't throw up! I—"

I threw up.

All it took was the feel of leaning over and the pressure against my stomach. It was disgusting. It burned like fire and I felt sick—and—I even cried. I mean, what an experience! I'd had it with life—with everybody! I wished I was dead.

"Leave me alone!" I moaned when Joe picked me up, wet clothes and all, and headed for the little cabin. "I just want to die!"

"No, you don't," he said. "You'll feel better after you get out of these wet things."

Then there was warmth and light. We passed through a narrow hallway and a room of some kind. The next thing I knew he was setting me down in a tiny, closetlike shower. I still felt sick, and I was shaking so much I had to lean against the wall just to keep myself up.

"Listen, kid," he said. "This is a marine shower and it only stays on for two thirty-second intervals. So, just drop your wet things right there and let the water run over them as you wash down. Here's the soap—"

He pointed to a plastic squeeze bottle inside a little built-in shelf with a bar across it. "All purpose shampoo, conditioner, body soap—everything. This is it. Wet down as fast as you can and then save the rest for rinsing off. Don't let the water run while you're soaping down or you won't have enough left to rinse clean. Can you handle that?"

"I don't want a shower," I whispered. I was losing my voice. "I just want to die!"

"I'll be back in five minutes. If you're not done by then, I'll have to do it for you."

I took a shower.

I was half dead but I took one. I mean, I was a grown woman, physically speaking, and I wasn't going to let some strange man give me a shower. Father, or no father. What was he, some kind of weirdo? Maybe he just said that to scare me. It scared me alright. So I wasn't taking any chances...I took the thirty-second shower.

Thirty seconds—what a joke!

It warmed me up, though. I wrapped my hair in a towel, put on a blue terrycloth robe I found hanging on the back of the door and came out. The room outside the bathroom was a bedroom. It was a small one—barely enough room for a bed with drawers underneath, a closet and some bookshelves. There were windows on the end and one side, but it was too dark to see anything out of them. I climbed up onto the bed.

The spread was navy blue with big, pale pink orchids on it. I got underneath. The pillows were soft and it felt good to lie down. I might have gone to sleep if my throat didn't hurt so much. I could hardly swallow.

I wished I was home.

It's true I had run away, twice. And I was even going to run again tonight, if my plans hadn't fallen through. But those things didn't seem so important anymore.

Cousin Summers

Home wasn't so bad, really. I just got tired of Mom always treating me like a baby and telling me what to do. I wondered if she missed me, yet.

And all of a sudden, for the first time in a long, long time...I wanted my mother. She would never have let Joe treat me this way if she had been here. I knew it. Mom and I had our differences, but deep down, I knew she cared about me. If I was home right now, she'd be worried how I felt. She'd bring me a nice warm cup of milk and honey —that's what she gave me when I had a sore throat, and it always made me feel better. She had been doing that ever since I could remember. That's what being a parent is it's caring. A person can't just drop out of the sky after ten years and expect you to take anything he said seriously. He didn't know me! He didn't even—

There was a knock on the door.

I didn't answer it because all of a sudden I was crying, again. Can you believe that? I was bawling like a baby and I couldn't quit. I pulled the covers up over my head when the door opened. Maybe he'd get the hint I just wanted to be left alone. Maybe he'd see I took the stupid shower like he told me—and just go away and leave me alone.

There were a few seconds of silence, a thump of something being set down on one of the shelves, and then the sound of the door closing, again. He was gone. I peeked out of the covers and leaned over to see what he brought in...

It was milk and honey.

6

I guess I must have slept all the way through the night, because the next thing that happened was morning. Bright sunshine streaming in all those windows and warming up the whole room. I was roasting. What's more, I fell asleep with the towel wrapped around my head and my hair was a disaster...sticking up all over. My throat felt better, though. The smell of coffee and bacon was sneaking under my closed door and I suddenly realized I was starving.

But how was I going to face those guys?

It would be downright embarrassing to have to look him in the eye—Joe, I mean—after the way I acted last night. Not that I was ashamed of myself. A person has to do what they have to do, but...well, jeeze...screaming, crying, cussing and throwing up is a bit much. Last night I wished I was dead, and today I wished I was an ant.

Like totally invisible.

I sat up to look out the nearest window. Nothing but water. Everywhere. Deep, gray-green shiny water with a white, frothy "V" spreading out behind us where the boat was moving through. And we were still on a slant. Not a steep one, just sort of tilted over. I couldn't believe all this was really happening to me.

But I couldn't sit here forever trying to figure everything out. The plain truth was I had been kidnapped. That thought was enough to make me realize I didn't care what these guys thought about me. I just might do a little more screaming and crying and cussing if I had to. Not throwing up, though. That was awful. But I'd figure out something to get out of this mess, even if it was the last thing I did.

First I had to get dressed.

That turned out to be harder to do than I expected. The clothes I left in the bottom of the shower because I was too miserable to care about them last night were still wet. Now what was I going to do? I could deal with my hair looking like Bozo, but I sure couldn't go around in somebody's bathrobe all day.

Maybe there were some extra clothes in the drawers under the bed. Not that I expected them to fit, but anything would be better than a bathrobe. I was thinking how I could maybe find a tee shirt and tie a knot in the bottom of it, or something, when I got one of the biggest shocks of my life.

My own clothes were in those drawers! Not everything. But there was no mistaking the bathing suit I bought at the mall last month for a beach party, and my favorite jeans...even my spare make-up case was in there. All of it was neatly folded—even color coordinated. Only one person could pack like this, and the realization made me feel like I just got hit in the stomach.

Mom was in on all this.

My own mother! Jeeze—didn't anyone in the world care about my feelings? And to think I had missed her last night! I even worked out a plan how I would watch for a chance to use the radio—there had to be a radio somewhere—and send a message to her that I was kidnapped. But she already knew.

Now, just who was I supposed to tell?

There had to be some sort of a law against this. Didn't there? I mean, two parents who had gone berserk shouldn't be allowed to force a practically grown woman to go someplace she didn't want to. That was child abuse.

I got so worked up thinking about it, I forgot about the thirty second shower. Right in the middle of rinsing my hair so I could at least comb the kinks out, the water shut off. In the end, I pulled it up into a ponytail on top of my head—but a little to one side—and forgot about it. Good enough. Especially under these circumstances.

I'll have to admit I was pretty nervous about leaving the room. I stood with my hand on the door for about five minutes just waiting for the butterflies in my stomach to go away. Somebody was humming in the little kitchen—it had to be Martin because Joe had that radio voice.

It wasn't.

It was a guy. I mean a young, great-looking, with reddish brown hair and a smile you wouldn't believe type of guy. He was standing over the stove flipping pancakes when I walked in. I nearly fainted. "Hey—the lady is awake." He smiled at me. "Hungry?"

"Sure," I answered. Like being kidnapped was an everyday thing. "Did they hire you for a cook?"

"I'm Martin's son. Daniel. And we all take turns with the cooking..." He piled two huge pancakes onto a plate and threw a couple pieces of bacon on the side. "Want coffee?" "No thanks."

"I guess you're more the hot chocolate type. Maybe I can find some."

He was wearing cutoff jeans and a yellow tee shirt that said "Here today, gone to Maui" on it. He had one of those deep dark tans that meant he probably spent a lot of time there, already. His hair was curly and he was barefooted. I noticed all that while he was rummaging through a cupboard. When he turned around I pretended to be busy buttering my pancakes. Even though the boat was on a slant, the table wasn't. Figure that out. It was on some sort of swivel thing so it stayed level all the time.

"Ever been sailing before?" He broke part of a Hershey bar into a cup and poured hot water from the teapot over it.

"No," I answered. Now he was pouring canned milk into it—my gosh, that mess was going to taste like—

"You'll get the hang of it. We'll start you out with the easy jobs. You'll be a pretty good sailor by the time we get to—"

"I'm not doing any jobs," I interrupted. "They forced me to come here, did you know that? They kidnapped me. They almost killed me while they were at it, too! I hope they both end up in jail. Because I'm going to—"

He was laughing at me. I hate it when people laugh at me. It makes me feel the size of a pea. Especially people like him, who—under better circumstances—I would have given up a month's allowance for a chance to go out with. He looked so cool it was unnerving, so I zeroed in on my pancakes again.

"They don't put people in jail for taking care of their kids." He set the mug of hot chocolate down on the table in front of me.

"You call almost drowning somebody taking care of them? I could've been eaten by sharks! I could've been lost at sea!"

"You weren't in the water long enough to get lost at sea. Besides that, Joe had a line on you the whole time. How do you think he pulled you back into the boat so fast?"

"He threw me overboard!"

"Yeah, but first he tied the end of the main sheet to the belt of your jacket, while you were busy hollering and swearing at Pop."

"That's a lie—whatever he told you is a lie!"

"He didn't tell me anything, I saw him do it." He flipped another pancake while he was talking. Like people get practically murdered every day.

"How would you know? You weren't there."

"I was standing right in the cabin-way and saw the whole thing. Nobody could sleep with that kind of racket going on. And after some of the things you yelled..." He put two more pieces of bacon on a plate, added pancakes and turned toward the little ladder that led outside. "You're lucky that's all that happened to you. Pop's on watch, so I'm taking these topside."

He left too fast for me to think of a good answer. I mean, there's answers and there's answers. I'd like to say I'm the quick and witty type, but the truth is, I usually come up with my best answers about two hours too late, when the opportunity is long gone. That's just the way it is.

So, he left me staring at the wall with my mouth open trying to figure it all out...and that's when I noticed the radio. It was sitting on a shelf along with a bunch of other electronic type equipment. I was alone in here for the moment, and who knew how long it might be before a chance like this came up again? If I was going to call the police...

I had to do it now.

7

It looks so easy in the movies. People in situations like this just pick up the mike, say, "MAYDAY! MAYDAY!" and pretty soon there are cops swarming all over the place. In real life, that only happens if you have a degree in electronics.

That radio had buttons and dials all over the place. Besides that, people in situations like this aren't always in their right mind. I mean, if someone would have asked me two days ago what branch of law enforcement had the ocean beat, I would have said the Coast Guard. No hesitations.

Now, all I could think of was boat patrol.

I was so nervous I was shaking, and I whispered, "Boat patrol, boat patrol, come in, somebody!" three times before I realized I wasn't pushing the mike button down. You have to push it down to send something—I remembered that much—and you had to let go if it when you wanted to listen. I tried again.

"Come in boat patrol, this is Mary Elizabeth Cooper. I've been kidnapped...do you copy? Kidnapped! I'm being held hostage in a boat called Sonata and my position is..." God—I didn't know my position! "My position is...somewhere...off the coast of Los Angeles, maybe... please send help! Over."

I let go of the button and waited. Nothing.

Maybe I wasn't talking loud enough. But I had to be careful. If I got thrown overboard just for cussing, who knows what they would do if they found out I was trying to call the police. I set the mike down for a minute and tiptoed up the ladder that led outside. Not all the way...just enough to peek up over the opening.

Martin was sitting down eating his breakfast and Daniel was standing with his back to me, talking to him...something about the weather. I hurried back to the radio. There was a jacket lying on the seat by the table, and I grabbed it before picking up the mike again. This time, I squeezed my self under the little map table near where the radio was, and stretched the cord on the mike to its limit. It had one of those curly telephone cords that was expandable until you stretched out all the loops.

Anyway, I put the jacket over my head, squeezed myself under the table, and talked louder this time. "Help! Boat Patrol! This is Mary Elizabeth Cooper, and I have been kidnapped! Help—somebody! I'm in—"

All of a sudden there was a terrible racket of shouting and pounding feet. At the same time I felt the ladder shake with the weight of somebody flying down it, I heard a door bang across the room in another direction.

Joe was coming!

"What's going on in here!" he shouted, and I knew by the sound of his voice he was standing right next to me but I was too scared to answer. I didn't even come out from under the table, or take the jacket off my head.

"Well, Ellie was right here a minute ago." It was

Daniel's voice.

There was some clanging and banging around the stove and I let go of the mike real quiet, hoping it would look like it just fell off the radio or something. But the expando cord still had a lot of spring left, and it bounced the mike against the wall like one of those paddle ball games with a new rubber band. BOOM!

I could have died.

"Ellie!" Now it was Joe's voice, and this time it was close. Like maybe he was bending down right next to me. "Ellie, for crying out loud, what are you doing under there?"

"I was—I was—" I was tangled up in the jacket, that's what I was. Stuffed under that table was too small a space to get it off my head.

SWOOSH! All of a sudden I was out of there. Jeeze why did he have to get so physical all the time? The jacket fell on the floor and that's when I realized the entire place was filled with smoke. Daniel was rinsing a pan in the sink.

"Didn't you smell these pancakes burning?" he asked, not bothering to turn around as he talked.

Joe just looked at me for a few moments without saying anything. He was wearing jeans with no shirt or shoes—I guess he had been sleeping—and he had a tan just like Daniel's. After a minute he sighed and went over to the cupboard for a mug. He poured coffee from a thermos and sat down at the table, pushing my half-eaten breakfast aside to set his mug down.

I hated it when he looked at me like that. It was worse than calling me names. A person has no right to look into somebody's brain and see what's going on in there. It's an

invasion of privacy. This whole thing between him and me was like something out of the Twilight Zone...and it was really starting to rattle me.

But I wouldn't have admitted it then if you paid me.

"I thought the whole place was on fire," I lied. "How was I supposed to know there were still pancakes in there? I smelled smoke and I panicked!"

"Lotta good it would do hiding under a table and letting the place burn down," Daniel put the washed pan back on the stove. "All you had to do was turn off the burner."

"Well, I don't know anything about boats," I argued.

"Boats don't have anything to do with it." He poured fresh batter into the pan. "That's just plain common sense."

I sat down at the other end of the table but I didn't look at Joe. Instead, I picked up my hot chocolate and sipped...it tasted great. Nobody said anything for a minute, and it actually looked like I was going to get away with it. I mean, I'd rather have them all think I was a dumbo than let on I was trying to use the radio. What a scare!

"Gonna stay up, Joe?" Daniel asked.

"Might as well," he said. "Rustle me up a couple of those pancakes will you, Hot Shot? And see if you can keep from burning them this time."

Daniel glanced at me with a look like I was good for nothing, but I didn't let it bother me too much. I was too relieved. If he had wanted me to watch the pancakes, he should have said something. Were people just supposed to figure everything out without talking around here? Sorry, but I did not have ESP. But Joe did.

Because when I said, "I'm not an extra terrestrial. If there's something I should know, I'd appreciate being told," he reached for a pack of cigarettes and looked me straight in the eye.

"Alright, kid," he said, lighting one up—as if we didn't have enough smoke in here already. "Next time you want to use the radio...might help if you turned it on."

8

My entire life was out of control. A trip to Hawaii would have been fun under different circumstances, but this was awful! To top it off, it was overcast outside and the waves were getting to be gigantic. It was like being on a roller coaster.

Just about the time I was getting used to living on a slant, we started this wild up and down stuff. And I mean wild. Up one side of a giant roller, and WHOOSH! Like a bobsled down the other. It was sort of scary.

I was trying not to let on, but the fear that the boat was going to tip over and sink was a little hard to take. Besides that, I was starting to feel sick again. I decided to go outside for some fresh air even though I wasn't too thrilled about having to be in the same place everyone else was. They were all out there.

By the time I put on a jacket—I don't know whose it was but mine was still wet—and climbed up the ladder, all sorts of things were happening. Joe and Daniel were up front doing something with the sails. I don't know what it was, but the sails were flapping and making terrible sounds. Like thunder.

Martin was back at the wheel. He looked at me when I came up, like he was going to make some remark about

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me, but all he said was, "Don't fall over now, brat, we'd never get you back in this kind of weather. Put a line on."

"What?"

"Alifeline. Here..." He lifted the top of the seat he was standing in front of and took out a long, thin rope with a clip on both ends. "Snap one end to your belt." He looked ahead as he talked, to where Joe and Daniel were still working on the sails. "The other to the rail. Look out on your port side, boys!"

Just as I turned to see what he was hollering about, a big giant wave came crashing over the front of the boat and we tipped over. A mountain of cold green water smacked into me, knocking me off my feet so fast there wasn't a thing I could do. I felt myself tumbling toward the side.

But just about as fast, I was back on my feet again.

Martin had reached over and pulled me up by my jacket. He held on to me for a minute while the boat shook the water off its decks and rose up again. We had tipped over alright—but we didn't sink. The Sonata bobbed right back up, like a cork, as all that heavy water poured back into the sea.

Joe and Daniel were drenched but still standing. They had hung on to the mast as soon as Martin yelled, and now they were hurrying to finish whatever they were doing up there. My ponytail was plastered over my left eye, and as I brushed it back, I realized I was still holding on to Martin.

"Alright?" he asked, as if he wasn't sure he should let go of me yet, or not.

"I think so."

"How much water did you swallow this time?"

"None," I answered. "I guess I kept my mouth closed."

"Well, you're learning." He laughed, only it wasn't a teasing kind of laugh—it was just a comfortable sort of enjoyment kind of laugh. "Now finish clipping the other end of that line to the rail. This weather's going to get worse before it gets better."

He had saved my life like it was something he did every day—he just reached out sort of casual like and kept me from washing overboard. It happened so fast and he hadn't thought twice about it. Even after the awful things I said to him last night. Suddenly, I felt guilty about them now. And I felt like I should thank him, or something...but I couldn't. Don't ask me why.

"Alright," Joe said as he and Daniel came back to join us, "we got two reefs in the main and the storm jib up...that ought to keep us stable for awhile. Looks like this is going to be a big one."

"I'll say," Daniel wiped his face with the back of his hand. "Feels just like the one we hit off the coast of Madagascar last year, doesn't it, Pop?"

"That was a long one, alright," Martin replied. "We better batten things down below and shorten the watches. It's already too rough for the self-steering gear."

"Your turn at the wheel, Hot Shot," Joe sat down on the seat next to me. "Martin, you better try and get a little sleep while you still can. I'll take care of things down below."

"What happens if we sink?" I asked.

"Nice thing about sailboats," Joe answered as Daniel took the wheel and Martin went below, "is they're made for this kind of weather. The only time you have to worry

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about sinking is if you run into something and put a hole in them. Don't worry, we're too far off shore now to be running into anything."

"We gonna stick to our bearings, Joe?" Daniel asked without looking over at us. His face was a mask of concentration and seriousness as he worked the wooden wheel with one hand and held tightly to an iron cable that stretched from the top of the mast all the way down to the rail behind him.

It was getting so rough everyone had to hold onto something. Up and down, crash, bang, and a cold splash of water over the rail. It was wild.

"We'll stick to them as long as we can," Joe replied. "Hand me one of my smokes out of that left pocket, Ellie." So, it was his jacket I was wearing. I reached into the pocket and handed him a battered pack of cigarettes. "Thanks. Going to get rain in a few minutes. If the storm gets too fierce, we'll run with her." He cupped his hands over a match and lit his cigarette. "But let's stay on course as long as we can."

"What if we get lost?" I worried.

"There's lots of equipment on board," Joe said. "We just wait 'til the weather clears, take a few sights, turn a few dials and find ourselves again. No worries." He got to his feet. "You going to come below, or stay up here with Hot Shot for awhile?"

"Stay up here, Ellie." Daniel flashed me a friendly smile. "I'll show you how to steer a course by the compass."

I looked at Joe, and as our eyes met, my mind raced ahead to think up some excuse why I should stay. I couldn't let him think I was enjoying all this. Kidnapped

was still kidnapped. No matter how nice people treated you afterward. Except my mind went blank.

I couldn't even think of a smart remark.

Now, that was a surprise. If there was one thing I never had a shortage of, it was smart remarks. So, while I was still sitting there like a space case waiting for something to trigger my usual couldn't- care-less attitude...

Joe just smiled. I couldn't hide anything from him. And to prove it, he winked at me before he turned and went below. That wink meant, "Sure, kid, go ahead—stay up here and enjoy yourself." That's what it meant as plain as if he'd said it. But he hadn't said a word.

That's when I first realized that this ESP stuff between him and me worked both ways.

9

Like Martin said, the storm got worse before it got better. I tried my hand at keeping the boat on course, but it wasn't like driving a car. Everything happened a lot slower and you had to have some real strength to keep it steady when those rolling waves were pushing against us.

It took a lot of concentration to keep the needle on the compass pointing in the right direction. The compass was mounted just ahead of the wooden wheel, and while I was busy getting the hang of steering by an instrument instead of my eye, Daniel was busy rummaging through the seat lockers for some yellow rain slickers we could wear.

I was already soaked from the big wave, but I put one on anyway. I was surprised I wasn't more seasick with all the pitching and rolling around, but being out in the cold air and feeling a sudden cold spray in my face every once in awhile seemed to keep the sick feeling away. I wasn't as scared as I had been at first...especially since I was wearing the lifeline. Even if I fell overboard, I'd still be attached to the boat. I wasn't afraid of sinking anymore, either. Mostly because after we got knocked over the first time, we just popped right back up again.

I figured if Joe could be housekeeping in all this, and Martin could be relaxed enough to sleep through everything, we couldn't be in too much of a lifethreatening situation. Still, it was pretty exciting with just Daniel and me out there.

It only took him a few minutes to show me how to steer by the compass—that's how simple it was—and after that he was busy doing other things. Tightening a rope here...loosening one there...and only every once in awhile glancing over my shoulder to see if I was still on course.

"Hey, you're pretty good," he said after the third or fourth time he checked on me. "If you can keep her on in this weather, you'll be great at the helm. Looks like you have a feel for it."

"I'm just doing what you told me," I answered, remembering how I said that I didn't want to learn any sailor jobs. But this wasn't a job, this was fun.

"Some people can't do it," he insisted.

"Really?"

"Yeah. The rain's coming, better put this up." He pulled the hood of my yellow slicker up over my head and tied it, since I needed both hands on the wheel. It gave me flutters in my stomach when he did that. I don't know why. I mean, it wasn't like he was flirting or anything.

He just went right on talking like it was the most natural thing in the world to be helping somebody dress. "Some people can't steer this well even in good weather."

"Well, I'm...just doing what you told me."

"That's the sign of a good sailor. They do what they're told without having to think about it first. Especially in an emergency."

"Have you been in many emergencies?" I asked.

"A few." He pulled his own hood up then, and tied it under his chin as he spoke. "I'd like to be just half as coolheaded as Pop is, though. He can think straight in a hurricane."

"He seems more like the type that would yell and swear."

"Oh, he yells and swears, alright. But he thinks straight at the same time. I guess it comes from a lifetime of facing those kind of things."

"Emergencies?"

"In one form or another. Pop's retired military—he's been in every kind of action from Desert Storm and on. Now he works special assignment for the Government."

"What is he—a spy or something?"

"You watch too many movies," he teased. "Next thing you'll be asking is if he works for the CIA. Here—" He reached for the wheel. "I'll take over for awhile. I'm dying for something hot to drink and I wonder if Joe's got any coffee on yet. We usually keep plenty of it in weather like this. Mind checking?"

"No, but wouldn't you rather go down yourself for a few minutes? Maybe change into something dry?"

"I've got charge of the deck and I can't leave my watch."

"Jeeze—is your dad that strict?" I asked.

"Yep. And yours is even worse."

"But it's your boat, isn't it? Martin's, I mean. How come Joe keeps telling everybody what to do?"

"It belongs to both of them," he explained. "They've been partners for years."

"Doesn't it bother you, though? Being told what to do all the time by someone who isn't even related?" "No." "I hate being told what to do."

"So I noticed. But it's not so bad when you have a lot of respect for someone. Besides that, Joe's been like family to me and Pop for a long time. Him and Suzie both."

"Who's Suzie?"

"Man-don't you know anything about him?"

Didn't he understand what was happening here? The way he talked made it sound like I was to blame. Like I should have hunted Joe up through the missing fathers bureau, or something. Sorry, but I was not the one who left. "I've never seen him before in my life," I informed him, feeling a little more irritation creep into my tone than I intended. "Not until yesterday. He just swooped down out of nowhere and kidnapped me!"

"No, he didn't." Daniel laughed. He was awfully handsome when he laughed but I didn't look at him too long. I felt the first few drops of rain and looked up into the darkening sky, instead.

"What else would you call it, then?" I said.

"He just outsmarted you, that's all. You'd have run, and you know it."

Time to change the subject. This one was making me feel emotional again. And I did not want to start bawling in front of Daniel. How come I didn't know a thing about any of these guys but they knew every little detail about me? Mom must have talked her head off. "So, who's Suzie?" I finally asked.

"Why don't you ask Joe?" he challenged.

"He gives me the jitters."

"Chicken."

"I wouldn't brag. You won't even go down for coffee without asking permission."

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"That's different. You don't break nautical tradition out here—especially in weather like this. Besides that, he's my C.O."

"What's that?"

"Commanding Officer."

"Are you in the Navy, too?"

"Yep. The Academy, actually. But I've worked a couple of special assignments with him and Pop, and I'm hoping to be assigned to his squadron when I graduate."

"Hoping? Like that's what you really want to do?" I shook my head and looked at him, trying to see if he was just teasing again. But I couldn't tell. "Sounds like maybe you like being told what to do."

"I like flying."

"Flying? Then what are you doing in the Navy? Seems to me you should be in the Air Force or something. They're the ones that have all the planes."

"You don't know much about the Navy. Ever heard of the Naval Air Patrol?"

"Nope."

"Ever see the movie Top Gun?"

"Sure. But that was—"

"That was the Navy."

"I thought it was just one of those old movies my mom likes to watch." The rain began to really pour and a chill ran through me. "I guess I'll go see about that coffee. But I don't know how anyone could make coffee standing on a slanted floor in a bouncing kitchen."

"It's a galley," Daniel said. "On a boat it's called a galley. And the floors are decks—all of them. Above and below."

"Above and below what?"

"Everything outside here is above decks." Then he pointed to the little door that lead downstairs. "Everything down the cabin-way stairs there is below."

"Sounds complicated."

"You'll catch on after awhile. Watch out—" He reached over and grabbed my sleeve just as another wave came crashing over us.

I didn't fall this time, but I nearly lost my balance as the water frothed and churned around my ankles before disappearing over the sides and into the sea again. It was amazing how the boat just took those giant waves in stride and kept chugging along.

"Thanks." I felt a little embarrassed at having to be rescued all the time. "It might sound hard to believe, but I'm not usually this uncoordinated."

"I bet you'll be walking like a pro around here in a couple days." He smiled. "Wait and see."

"A couple days? Just how long are we going to be on this boat, anyway?"

"About...three weeks."

"Three weeks!" I couldn't believe what I heard. "I can't be gone for three weeks—what's Joe thinking? They'll flunk me for the whole semester if I miss more than fifteen days of school! What's he trying to do—turn me into a dropout?"

"The way I heard it, you were doing a pretty good job of that all by yourself."

All of a sudden I was furious again. These people were ruining my whole life and I was just supposed to sit quietly by and take it?

No way.

10

The way I felt, I could have marched right down to where Joe was and told him everything I thought about him and his big ideas. Not that I hadn't already tried. But flunking my last semester of the school year—not being able to graduate with the kids I grew up with because I'd be trailing a semester behind—gave me the courage to face him.

"Joe!" I hollered before I even got halfway down the ladder, "Joe—"

He was leaning over the little desk where the radio was, looking at some map or something. He had one hand braced against the ceiling to keep his balance—it was totally crazy down there, ten times worse than outside. The whole place was shaking and banging like in one of those earthquake movies.

"What's the matter, kid?" He looked up at me. "Had enough already?"

"You bet I've had enough! I—I—"

That's when I realized the lifeline I was wearing wasn't long enough to reach all the way down there. Two steps from the bottom was the farthest I could go, and about the time I figured out what was holding me back, the same thing that happened the night before when I

dropped the volleyballs down there happened all over again. Only worse.

Climbing back up that ladder was like trying to scale Mount Everest. Every muscle in my body suddenly felt like lead and the door at the top seemed to keep getting farther away as I pulled myself toward it. It was like a nightmare.

I barely made it to the top in time to stumble across the deck, lean over the rail and throw up. That's how fast it happened. I had absolutely no control.

No pride, either.

Yesterday, I would have been totally disgraced doing that in front of somebody like Daniel. Today I was just glad I made it to the rail instead of doing it at his feet. I was just too miserable at the moment to care what he thought about me, no matter how cool he was.

"Drink some seawater," he said, as I sat there in the rain with my head in my hands.

"Some what?" I wasn't any sailor, but even I had read enough history to know about all the people who had died from drinking seawater.

"Just a few swallows," he insisted. "It's an old fishermen's trick, and it works too."

"Won't I get scurvy, or something? What if it has germs in it?"

"Works for me." He shrugged.

"What works?" Joe came up the ladder behind me.

"Drinking a little seawater when you're seasick," Daniel answered. "But then, you wouldn't know, right? This guy..." He looked over at me and pointed to Joe, "doesn't even get sick in a flat spin after taking three Gs."

"Well, I don't know about seawater." Joe handed a

thermos to Daniel and reached into the seat locker for another rain slicker. "But it might help to eat something, Ellie. You haven't had anything since breakfast and it's after eight o'clock."

"I couldn't eat anything if I tried."

"Try a soda, then. That helps sometimes. And in the meantime, Hot Shot, let's ease this baby off course and let her run with the storm awhile. Put her south about thirty degrees That ought to give us a smoother ride."

"Thirty degrees south," Daniel repeated. "You want to trim up the sails, Joe—or take the helm while I do?"

"I'll do it." He opened the ice chest at the end of the seat locker and tossed a can of lemon-lime soda into my lap. Even before he went forward to fix the sails, the boat was riding a lot smoother.

I felt better already.

"By the way," Daniel said to me, "you don't get scurvy from the ocean. You get it from not having enough vitamin C in your diet. Oranges, lemons...stuff like that."

"I'll remember that," I answered.

I was getting tired of feeling like such a dumbo about everything.

Like an alien. It was like being on another planet out here. Definitely not my thing. So, I sat there in the rain, drinking my soda and thinking of what I could say that would convince Joe to take me back. I had to get back! If tantrums wouldn't work, maybe logic would.

By the time he finished with the sails, I had thought of a pretty good angle. What was the most important thing to parents? Education, right? I'd tell him he was jeopardizing my education by keeping me out of school like this. It was against the law, too, but I wasn't going to bring that up. A person who didn't think twice about kidnapping somebody wasn't going to give a hoot about crossing the local truant officers.

"Daniel says it's going to take three weeks to get to Hawaii," I began as he poured more coffee into the thermos lid Daniel had been drinking from and sat down on the seat beside me. "I can't be gone that long. I'll flunk the whole semester if I miss that much school."

For a minute he didn't say anything. Between the dark and the rain, it was hard to make out the expression on his face under the yellow hood. He took a long swallow from the plastic mug before he answered, "You want to talk about school, Ellie?"

"Well, it's...kind of important," I said. "Especially if it means whether you're going to flunk out, or not. Mom would be—"

"You've already flunked the semester."

"But my counselor, Mrs. Stonehill, she said if I worked hard and didn't miss any more days, I could get by."

"That was before your little jaunt to Palm Springs. And so far, your hard work has brought your grade point average up to a whopping one point two five. According to Stonehill."

"You talked to old Stoneface?" Jeeze—was there anything this guy hadn't thought of?

"Talked to her last week," he said.

"But I didn't miss any days from the Palm Springs trip. All I got was a tardy. She didn't even know I was out of town."

"Your mother told her."

"Mom? I don't believe it! She wouldn't ruin my life in

one clean sweep, just to get back at me for lying to her about where I was—she wouldn't!"

"Your mom's pretty fed up with you, kid." He said that in a tone that was soft, sort of gentle even, but it hit me like a brick wall. Like somebody had stolen something special of mine from a secret place I didn't think anyone could reach.

I always thought my mom loved me.

"Your counselor gets a report from attendance that you sauntered in the last half of the last period—just so you could show up on the charts that day. You were already on probation with them, did you think they wouldn't report it? So Stonehill gives you one last benefit of the doubt and calls your mother to see if maybe you were sick that day."

"Mom didn't have to narc on me!" I cried. "Not if it was going to ruin my life!"

"You hung yourself, baby," he said. "Nobody was ruining your life but you. And your mother can't help you anymore."

I was glad for the dark and the rain and the yellow hood that could hide my face. I was glad that he couldn't look right through me like he usually did and know what I was thinking. I was thinking nobody in the whole world cared about me anymore. And if I'd felt sorry for myself for being kidnapped, I was downright floored to find out nobody even cared that I was.

I wasn't usually the emotional type. In fact, I was sort of proud of always being the one that was hardest to break. I never cried in the counselor's office, and I never let myself cry in front of Mom anymore, either. No matter how she got to me. I might stomp off and cry in my room, or even into my pillow at night. But I never let her know. Nobody knew.

Now I had been with Joe for twenty-four hours, and I had done more crying in that one day than the last two years put together. And not just crying, either. Out and out bawling like some five-year-old kid that couldn't have her own way.

What was wrong with me?

All I wanted to do was run down to the privacy of that little room downstairs and cry my eyes out. But I couldn't have made it without throwing up three times on the way. I couldn't even get up off the seat without feeling sick. So, I bowed my head and sobbed. I couldn't help it—I had never felt this bad in my whole life.

Like I was deserted.

That's when I felt Joe's hand under my chin, and I knew he was going to look me right in the eye and say something. Whatever it was, it was going to break me—I knew it. And I wasn't going to let anyone break me. Even if it was the last thing I did. Especially someone who showed up on the scene after everything was over—when it was too late, and there was nothing left to do.

I pushed his hand away, but he held onto mine for a moment and said, "I do care, Ellie."

"You left me!" I practically choked on the words as I snatched my hand out of his. "Just like everyone else!" Then I turned away from him, laid my head in my arms, against the rail...

And bawled.

11

It was like a dam breaking or something. Before I knew it, the words came pouring out of me. "If you really cared, you'd have shown up in my life a long time ago!"

"I tried a few times," he said. "Especially after I married Suzie and settled down in Hawaii."

"I bet."

"Well, I wrote some. But I guess letters aren't much of a substitute for a father."

"I never got any letters."

"Figures."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means your mom and I don't get along, that's what it means."

He took another swallow of his coffee and was quiet for a minute. Like maybe he was trying to think what to say.

"I'm not going to lie to you, kid. Getting mixed up with your mother was one of the biggest mistakes of my life. Happens sometimes when you jump into a heavy relationship and you're only seventeen. You hardly know yourself, much less the other person. You're mom and I...well, we just turned out to be worlds apart."

"She told me you were a bum." I said it as awful as I could, thinking maybe it would get to him more if Mom had said it.

"I believe the phrase was, a lazy, good-for-nothing, low-life bum."

"I can't believe she would let you do this to me! I mean, Mom and I have our differences, but—"

"But the Cooper side of you was starting to come on pretty strong, and as much as she hated to admit it, she just plain couldn't handle you anymore."

"And you think you can?" I challenged.

"Well, I sort of have an advantage. If there's one thing I know inside and out...it's a Cooper."

"I'm not all Cooper, you know. I'm part McKenzie, too. And maybe the McKenzie side of me doesn't want anything to do with you! If Mom knew I was unhappy, she wouldn't make me stay. I at least have a right to call her!"

"You can call her when we get to Hawaii."

"Don't think I won't."

"But you might as well know right now, you're not going back.

The only way I agreed to go for this thing, was if the McKenzie clan would stay out of my way as much as they made me stay out of theirs for the last twelve years. No tradeoffs and no compromises."

"Not Mother."

"Especially your mother."

"She agreed to that?"

"You're here, aren't you?"

"What did you guys do, sit down and figure it all out how you were going to ruin my life? You and Mom must have been planning this for weeks."

The Kidnapping of Mary

"We've been talking back and forth for about a month. Got in an argument the day I flew in—just like old times. She almost changed her mind. But then you decided to take your little jaunt to Palm Springs..."

"You were there then?"

"Yep."

He rummaged through his pockets for a second, and even though it was dark, I knew what he was looking for. In a moment, there was the flare of a match as he lit up, and his face looked hard and tired in the few seconds before it went out. "She knew you were about ready to hit the streets. So...she decided to give me a try."

"Well, I think what you two did to me is pretty lousy!" I sniffed. I couldn't believe it. I had been bawling so hard my nose was running. I reached into one of my pockets, not really expecting to find anything, and there was a handkerchief in there. I blew. "It was cruel even! A downright, rotten thing to do to somebody!"

"You sort of picked your own weapons, kid. It was pretty cruel of you to take off like a light, traipse all over the state, and not think twice about letting your mom worry whether you were dead in some alley or something."

"What makes you think I won't do the same thing to you the minute your back's turned?

"It's a long swim to dry land from here."

"I hate you, Joe Cooper!" I screamed at him. But about that time, the biggest wave yet came splashing over the side, and I swear it felt like the whole thing went right in my face. It would have knocked me off the seat if he hadn't reached out and grabbed me just as I slipped off.

I guess it was sort of silly to be screaming "I hate you!"

at somebody and hang on to them for dear life at the same time. Not that I could have gone overboard being tied to the boat the way I was. But I could have drowned in all the water that rushed into the cockpit that time.

"Get your lifeline on, Hot Shot," Joe called out to Daniel over the top of my head.

"I got it," he hollered back.

"Sure you don't want to go down below, Ellie?" Joe asked me like we had just been talking trivia instead of my life. "It's really starting to kick up now, and you're going to be wet and miserable up here."

"I'd just be throwing up and miserable down there," I complained. "I ought to turn you in for child abuse!"

"Yeah, and I ought to turn you over my knee." He set me down with a thump on the corner of the seat closest to the cabin before he got to his feet. "Sit there if you want to stay. It'll be less wind and water in your face. And hold onto something."

I guess we were done talking. With me in the corner, we were too far apart to carry on a conversation anymore, and he wasn't making any moves like he was planning to sit down again. I was so frustrated with him I wanted to scream.

So I did.

Not that it sounded like much with all that wind and weather that was building up, but it was a scream alright.

"I'm going down to dig up some blankets and things," he called over to Daniel like he hadn't even heard. "If our troublemaker here gets too much for you to handle...you have my permission to do whatever you think necessary."

I couldn't believe my ears. After he disappeared into the cabin, I glanced back at Daniel, and caught him looking at me with a mischievous grin.

"If you even try anything," I warned, "I'll make you all so miserable, you—"

The way that next big wave splashed onto me was like he had it fixed or something. He laughed and spun the wheel back around again before the sails snapped to the other side in response to the quick turn. He had done it on purpose! Maneuvered the boat around at just the right moment, and kerSPLASH! I got at least a ton of water dumped on top of me.

He probably did that the last time, too, when I was busy screaming at Joe. Well, now I was wet and miserable, alright. The whole bottom half of my jeans where the rain slicker didn't cover me, was drenched right down to the skin. And before I knew it...

I was bawling again.

12

I must have cried myself to sleep. The next thing I knew I could feel the sun on my face and the boat was moving along real smooth, like the storm had been nothing but a bad dream. I could hear voices talking low and close by. It was peaceful. I laid there for a long time, knowing I was awake but not opening my eyes, just letting the warmth soak into me and listening to the conversation.

"Look at it this way..." It was Martin's voice, and I could tell by the sound of it that he was sitting on the seat across from me. "We may lose an extra two days if we turn back, but if we don't, we're going to end up with one of those vacations you have to rest up from. Self-steering units take a lot of strain out of round-the-clock watches."

"A little extra strain isn't worth being late for," Joe said.

That's when I realized exactly where I was...and I couldn't believe it. Somehow, I had ended up lying on the seat with my head in Joe's lap. He had his forearm resting on my shoulder, and I could tell by the way it felt that we must have been like that for a long time. He was too casual and comfortable to notice I was awake.

The Kidnapping of Mary

"This isn't an assignment, Lieutenant," Martin said. "We're supposed to be taking it easy here. Have a little fun. You've got Suzie, Little Joe and another week off waiting for you back home. What have I got? Danny goes back to the Academy and I get another assignment. I'm getting too old for it all. I ought to be retired."

"You know they don't retire people in your league, Martin."

"Well, I'm tired. So give me a break. I want to eat some real Mexican food, see Danny dance with one of those pretty señoritas, and drink margaritas when the sun goes down tomorrow."

"Alright, Commander," Joe laughed. "We'll put in at Todos Santos and you can have a fling. A short one."

"As long as we're going that far, why not Cabo? That's where all the fun is these days. Want an orange?"

"Sure, toss one over."

He reached up to catch it, and as he was peeling and tossing the bits of rind over the side, I decided it was now or never. I was going to have to face him sometime. Being on this boat was a real bummer. There wasn't any place far enough to go so that you weren't right on top of people all the time. Literally. Everyone knew all your moods and feelings because in this small space, there was no way to hide them.

No way to ignore them, either.

"Sorry, kid," Joe said when I moved. "Did I wake you up?"

"I...guess I was taking up more than my share of the space." I pushed the wool blanket back that was covering me. "You should have woke me up the first time I crowded you."

"I enjoyed it actually." He separated a section of his orange and offered it to me. "It's been a long time."

"Well, I don't remember." I took a bite off the orange slice, then handed it back to him. I don't know why I did that. It was like a habit or something. I did it without even thinking...then I was embarrassed.

"You remember more than you like to admit, don't you, Ellie." He popped the half-eaten slice into his mouth and broke off another section. It was like a rerun of a movie I had seen before, and I knew he had done that on purpose. Just to prove to me we had shared lots of oranges —a long time ago.

"Next thing I'm waiting for is for you to remember what you used to call me."

"I'm gonna go change my clothes," I said. No more memories, thank you. All they did was get in the way and make me feel emotional when I least expected it. What was the point? This time, I took the lifeline off my jacket before I went below.

As I was doing that, Martin said, "While you're down there, try fixing that ponytail of yours.It's on crooked."

"Is it?" I bent down to look at my reflection in the nearest porthole window. I pulled on the elastic band to make it even more crooked. Then I said, "There," and headed down the ladder.

Daniel was sleeping on the bench-like seat behind the table. He was wearing cut off jeans with a worn leather belt and no shirt or shoes. He looked a lot younger when he was asleep. Then it occurred to me I didn't know how old he was. I'd have to ask next time I thought about it.

The galley, as Daniel called the little kitchen, was a pretty cozy place. I had been too caught up in my situation

The Kidnapping of Mary

and what was happening to me to really notice before. Now, as I looked around at the light-colored wood cabinets, white counters and table top, I realized it was really pleasant down here.

The stove was level, even though the rest of the boat was on a slant, and a copper teakettle was steaming gently on one of the burners; ready for morning tea, or chocolate, or whatever else anyone might want. Coffee had already been made because I could smell the rich, lingering aroma —and there was something else that smelled wonderful.

Cinnamon rolls. I peeked into the oven and saw the most delicious looking homemade cinnamon rolls just turning brown. Then I noticed a bunched up sail in the seat across from where Daniel was sleeping, and nestled into the folds like a baby that needed a safe place to ride were two beautiful loaves of bread, rising. Just waiting for their turn in the oven.

Somebody here was a real chef...I wondered who it was.

A person can only be upset for so long. Especially with so many nice things around. All of a sudden I wanted to eat oranges and cinnamon rolls, put on my bathing suit and get a tan, and see if I could spot any sharks in the water as we moved along.

I decided to take a break. Like Martin. I decided that just for today I'd forget about being kidnapped, or that Mom dumped me. I'd forget about the fact that Martin thought I was a spoiled brat, or how I made a real dumbo of myself in front of Daniel, last night. Or how Joe made me feel every time he talked to me. It wasn't so bad.

Maybe just for today I'd forget about Mary Elizabeth and see what it was like to be Ellie Cooper for awhile.

Maybe that wouldn't be so bad, either. Who knows? It would probably shock everybody—they wouldn't know what to expect next. If Joe was so sure he knew me inside and out, let him take a turn at feeling all emotional inside. I could play the memory game, too. 13

By the time I came out on deck again, I was ready for a day in the sun. I covered myself with tanning oil, pulled my hair to one side, braided it over my shoulder and tied it off with the bandanna I wore around my ankle when I first came.

I took a large blue towel from the bathroom and a magazine I found in a rack by the table. I was going to get one of those deep, tropical tans everyone paid money for back in L.A. By the time I had my towel spread out and got myself settled down on the triangle shaped deck at the front of the boat, I noticed something.

I wasn't the only one who felt like kicking back.

Martin was stretched out on one of the seats, dozing. His wavy gray hair and leathery face were totally hidden beneath one of those crazy grass hats you buy for souvenirs in places like the Bahamas or Disneyland. Daniel was sitting on the seat across from him, trying to pick out some tune on an old guitar, and Joe was driving.

Sort of.

Anyway he was sitting in the shorter seat that ran across the back of the boat, with one foot propped up on

the wheel to keep it on course. He was wearing white jeans —no shirt or shoes—and there was a familiar-looking metal necklace glistening against his tanned chest. Dog tags. Up until now, I had only seen them in movies.

Daniel was wearing dog tags, too. I hadn't noticed earlier when I saw him sleeping; it had been darker down inside and I had just come out of the bright sun.

"How's that go again, Joe?" Daniel asked. "That little calypso thing Doolie was trying to teach us at the barbecue last summer. Do you remember?"

"Try the key of A; you're in C," he answered. Then he called over to me, "Want to do some fishing, Ellie? We're in game fish waters now...where the big ones are."

"Sure," I called back. "What do I do first?"

"I'll help you rig up a line," Daniel handed the guitar to Joe, then stood up to rummage in the seat locker. "Hand me a beer while you're in there, will you Dan?" Martin mumbled from under his hat. "It's getting hot already."

"I'll get it." I reached into the ice chest so Daniel could finish getting the pole ready. How about it—I was even going to be nice to Martin.

It was a great afternoon. I didn't catch any big game fish, but I hooked a yellowtail tuna and that was pretty exciting enough. Joe said they were better eating anyway. We fired up the little stainless steel barbecue that was bolted to the back rail and, since it was Martin's day to cook, he went down below to mix up a salad to go along with the fillets.

"Let's do a little jammin', Joe." Daniel cupped his hands around a harmonica and blew a few bars of a blues song that wailed so sweet it sent a tingle through me.

The Kidnapping of Mary

I love music—that's half my problem. Mom never seemed to like the same kind I did. She always swore it was warping my brain. Anyway, when Joe joined in with the guitar, the rhythm and moods were electric.

I knew he was good. Mom had mentioned it once in awhile, mostly when she was complaining how he used to get carried away playing with friends and be gone till all hours. What came across mostly wasn't how much talent he had, but how inconsiderate he was.

So, I was surprised when I heard him and Daniel. Maybe it was the magic of sailing into the setting sun—I was starting to like sailing. It made me feel sort of good just to be alive. Or maybe it was sitting in on a jamming session in person.

I had heard about how fun it was but I never experienced one before. The only musicians I knew personally were the "Slag Heaps," whose lead guitarist lived next door, and you couldn't help but overhear some of their practices.

But I wouldn't exactly call what they did jamming.

It was different listening to Joe and Daniel. Half the fun was the cutting up and laughing, the hoops and hollers, and the spontaneous solo runs they took off on every once in awhile, just trying to outdo each other.

"You ought to know this one, Ellie." Daniel drummed out the catchy rhythm of a popular radio tune on the cabin-top where he was sitting. "Sing along with us."

So I did. And I was feeling so good by then, I might have even danced to it. If Martin hadn't hollered out the cabin-way door to turn over the fillets and bring him another beer.

"Hitting it kind of hard, aren't you, Pop?" Daniel

asked while Joe took care of the barbecue and I headed for the ice chest again. "Running a race, or something?"

"Yeah, I'm taking a poll," Martin answered. "I'll let you know the results as soon as I tally."

He was being the usual grouch. I decided not to let it bother me. I wasn't going to let anything bother me. Not today. So even though he gave me a funny look when I handed him the beer, I just ignored it and sat down at the table while I put more suntan oil on. Being outside all day, I was starting to burn.

"Just what I thought," he muttered. Then he went halfway up the ladder, stuck his head out the cabin-way and said, "Hey Joe, this kid of yours is taking the top off all my beers."

So much for the laid back atmosphere.

There were a few moments of total silence, then, "Take the helm, Hot Shot," before Joe's footsteps sounded across the deck and he leaned down inside to look at me.

"What's the big deal?" I answered before he even had a chance to say anything. "I do it at home and Mom doesn't mind. Are you one of those 'do as I say and not as I do' people?"

"I'm one of those 'do as I say period' people," he told me in a tone that said he meant every word. "I got a thing about minors playing around with booze, kid. It's one of my pet peeves, you got that? Don't do it again."

"You think some sort of magic happens to a person when they get to be twenty-one?" I challenged.

"I sure do. Hopefully by that age, a person's managed to develop a sixth sense that's strong enough to override the other five."

The Kidnapping of Mary

Well, I was expecting any answer but that. I had pretty much heard them all, and I had pat answers for all of them, too. But in the few moments I was trying to figure out just what the sixth sense could be, he said, "Common sense," and went back outside again.

Martin went back to making his salad, and for a minute I just sat there. Seething. Joe was going to end up like everyone else in my life...just ordering me around. But why had I thought he might be different? Then Martin made the mistake of looking over at me.

"What'd you have to narc on me for?" I whispered angrily, "I've been trying to be nice to you all day!"

"Nice to me. Like the flu you were nice to me. Trying to make things nice for yourself, that's all you were doing."

"You made me start off on the wrong foot with Joe!"

"You started off on your own wrong foot. Sneaking around like a little lush. You want to end up being a drunk?"

"Well, with people like you around to set the example..."

"Don't try any of your tricks with me, brat. I had your number the minute you came aboard."

"Well, I got yours too, Pop," I said with all the brattiness I could muster. "So, we're even."

"We're even." He set aside the large wooden salad bowl that was filled to overflowing with lettuce, tomatoes, and about ten other things that taste good in salads. He reached into one of the wooden cupboards and took out two new bottles of dressing. "You're bad right down to the ground, that's your problem. Ought to be real interesting to watch while Joe catches on. He thinks you've just taken a few bad turns. His patience isn't going to last forever, you know. And when it goes..." He laughed at the thought as if he could picture the scene perfectly. "Well, then we'll see some mud hit the fan!"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Make it a real interesting voyage," he chuckled to himself.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I make my own choices. And for your information, Martin, I can be good if I want to."

"Think so?" He came over to the table, leaned his forearms on it and looked me straight in the eye. "You're farther gone than you think, Miss Mary. Fifty bucks says you can't be good for twenty-four hours straight."

I leaned my own arms on the table and looked right back at him.

"You're on," I said.

14

Late the next morning, the Sonata glided into a cove on the southern tip of the Baja—that's what the map said —and dropped anchor in front of a little Mexican town. I had never been to Mexico. We were stopping there because one of the giant waves that hit us during the storm put a crack in the self-steering gear.

Getting it fixed and going out of our way to come here would take a couple extra days, but everyone seemed to think it was worth the bother. I didn't have much of an opinion one way or the other until we went ashore.

There were so many shops I thought I died and went to heaven.

Eighty degrees in the shade. We walked down a dusty main street that was lined with shops and stands on both sides. It was like a carnival fairway—jewelry, leather goods, pottery and rugs. There was even one stand that had hundreds of hand-painted string puppets hanging from the roof. There were crowds of people everywhere.

I had almost a hundred dollars with me. Not that I usually had a lot of cash. Since I was striking out on my own the night Joe came along (actually, I was planning to

hide out at Sarah's place until I could get a job or something) I had cleared out my savings jar. But I had been borrowing from it pretty regularly already, so there wasn't a whole lot left in it.

Anyway, I was absolutely shocked what less than a hundred dollars could buy in Mexico. It was better than day after Christmas sales at the local mall back home. I had some dangly copper earrings, sunglasses, and a new leather purse before we were halfway down the road. By the time we stopped for lunch at the one and only highrise hotel, I had shopping fever like you wouldn't believe.

I wanted a whole new outfit. The works.

But my stash was dwindling. Mom, being a professional shopper, was a pushover when it came to talking her into buying me something. Especially if it was on sale. I wondered what my chances would be with Joe. He didn't look like much of a shopper, and he was definitely no pushover. Still, I decided it was worth a try.

Of course I wouldn't even bring up the subject until after lunch. I'd wait until he was full of the best Mexican food he'd had since I don't know when...until he'd cooled off from the heat of outside...and until he'd listened to at least three songs by the Mariachi band that was floating from table to table with their guitars and castanets.

I wasn't born yesterday.

The restaurant was one of those "cater to the tourist type" places that you see in Las Vegas or Palm Springs. It looked like the inside of the Alamo in there. Big thick adobe columns, and an arched window that went through to the kitchen where you could watch a Mexican lady making tortillas by hand.

We must have hit it at just the right time—as soon as

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we ordered, about a hundred people from a cruise ship came in. The restaurant was probably a regular stop on the tour because the establishment was ready for them. They even had a floorshow.

Talk about a party.

People everywhere and the drinks were flowing. They say teenagers do crazy things...well, you should have seen some of those adults. After awhile the middle of the room was crowded with dancers—in the afternoon, no less—and this one couple (that had to be at least a hundred and fifty years old) were really going to town.

"Can I go sit on the other side of the room so I can see better?" I asked Joe. I was finished with my tostada and they had ordered six course meals and were in no hurry.

"Sure, go ahead," he said, heaping more salsa onto his plate. "Just don't leave the restaurant."

I had to skirt the edge of the dance floor to get around. Halfway there, some middle-aged guy that was dancing with someone else grabbed my hand and spun me around as I passed by.

"Harry!" It had to be his wife. "Leave the kid alone."

I sat down at one of the side tables toward the front, real close to the stage so I could watch the band. In a few minutes a waiter came by and asked what I would like. I had always heard there was no drinking age in Mexico, so I seized the opportunity. "Sure, give me a tequila sunrise," I told him.

I could hardly believe it. He came back later, set down a tall pink glass with an umbrella in it, and I took a sip while I was fishing through my purse for some money.

"Hey," I said to him, "there's no tequila in this what's the deal?" "Bartender says no alcohol for the young lady," he apologized.

"Hey, there's at least fifty young ladies in here," I pointed out to him.

"Si. But only one Lieutenant Commander's daughter." He smiled, making change for my last five. "He tipped me plenty big to make sure."

Fathers.

So this is what I've been missing all my life. Undercover surveillance. I sighed and sipped on my drink. It had a fruity, refreshing taste—pretty good, actually. The truth was I never had a tequila sunrise before. It was just the only Mexican drink I could think of on the spur of the moment. Oh well.

Freedom is a state of mind. Instead of letting myself get all bothered about being watched like some sort of baby, I decided to forget it and enjoy the show. If I was home right now, I'd be sitting in my English lit class, passing notes to Jeremy Collins in the next row and hoping he'd ask me to meet him for a hamburger after school. This had that beat by a mile.

Just then I felt a tap on my shoulder, and I looked up into the most magnificent brown eyes I had ever seen in my life. Wavy black hair and a flashing smile that nearly knocked me over.

"Would you like to dance, señorita?" the vision asked. It had to be a vision—this couldn't be happening to me.

I don't think I answered. I just sort of floated away from the table when he took my hand and followed him onto the dance floor. It was a slow dance. He put his arms around me and held me so close I was sure be could feel

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my heart pounding. And boy, was it pounding.

He was wearing a white silk shirt and some exotic men's cologne. I could feel the ripple of every muscle as we moved—that's how close he was holding me, and when he kissed me on the neck I nearly fainted. About that time, someone tapped him on the shoulder and a familiar voice said, "Do you mind?"

It was Daniel.

"Of course not." My vision melted into the crowd without even looking back at me.

"What did you do that for?" I said indignantly when Daniel took his place.

"What do you think?" He glided into a smooth turn that made it impossible not to glide right along with him. "Don't you know a snake when you see one?"

"Maybe I like snakes."

"Well, stay away from that kind. They bite."

"Are you going to start bossing me around, too?"

"Why not—we're practically family. Besides, people as naive as you have to be told what to do."

"And you actually think I'm going to listen to you?"

"Actually, I think you're a pretty good dancer, Ellie Cooper. So, put your claws back in, quit spitting and hissing like a wildcat...and let's dance."

C¹

I don't know how it happened...or even why. But somewhere along the line, it occurred to me I didn't mind so much being with Joe. At least it wasn't boring. After lunch, we went looking for a telephone while Daniel and Martin searched out a shop where the self-steering unit could be fixed.

As we walked past the hotel tourist shops along a wide corridor of cool red tile, I tried to picture him with Mom. It was practically impossible because they were so different. Even I could see it was a pretty lost cause to try to put two personalities like that together.

Mom was locked away somewhere inside a hard shell of totally perfect behavior. A conversation with her was like talking to an issue of Cosmopolitan. You never knew how she really felt because she was too busy giving you the latest views or the appropriate responses to things.

Joe was so open it was scary. He didn't avoid talking about the heavy stuff—and he talked straight, no matter what the latest views were. I was even starting to get the feeling he didn't mind having me around. Maybe this whole thing would turn out to be more than just a charity drive for an ex-wife. Maybe he really did want to be my dad.

"Something on your mind?" he asked. "You're sure looking at me hard enough."

"What am I here for?" I replied. All of a sudden I just had to know. Because if Mom didn't want me, and the school wouldn't let me back in—if he was just bothering with me out of duty because he was the next in line...

"That sounds like the lead question for the big lecture, kid. I thought we agreed to no lectures."

"Well, what happens when we get to Hawaii? Can I fly back on a plane if I don't like it? And what about school? Mrs. Stonehill said if I turned into a hard case and got myself kicked out, I wouldn't have any more options."

"Are you a hard case, Ellie?"

"What do you think?" I countered.

"I think you don't know what you are. You're just trying things on for size. Hey, here's a quiet spot." He laid his forearm across my shoulder and steered me through the crowd toward a bench near a potted plant. "I want to call Suzie and let her know we'll be a few days late getting home."

"Can I call Mom?"

"No."

I looked over at a little dress shop across from us as he sat down and punched in the number. He was quiet for a moment, waiting for her to pick up, so I asked, "Mind if I take a look in that shop over there?"

"Just don't get lost."

"I wanted to get one of those cute Mexican skirts but I'm out of money."

He looked toward the bright-colored cotton skirts that were hanging in rows outside the shop and reached

into his pocket. "Hey, Tiger," he said to someone on the phone, "you taking care of things for me back there? I'm in Mexico buying you a surprise. Sure...soon as I get back. Put Mommie on the line will you, bud?"

He handed me his wallet and whispered, "See if there's a twenty in there and you can get something to go along with it. But don't pay the first price they—Hi, babe...yeah, a little place at the end of Baja."

I took out the money and would have given the wallet back, only I couldn't pass up the temptation to look at his pictures. The first one was a shot of him and another guy, both dressed in flight suits, and standing in front of a jet. Then there was one of him sitting on the hood of a jeep, lighting a cigarette, and the person next to him was a younger version of Daniel. I'd recognize that smile anywhere. The next one was a close-up shot of a blonde— I mean a gorgeous blonde like the kind you see on the cover of magazines. Had to be Suzie.

There was another one of Suzie in a bathing suit, holding the hand of a little boy at the beach. They were laughing and running away from a wave. He had blond hair just like hers, and the water behind them had to be the bluest color of ocean I ever saw. The next picture shocked me.

It was me. About ten or eleven years ago.

Curly hair swept up into ponytails. Blue checked dress with color coordinated ribbons to match. I was sitting in Joe's lap with one arm reaching up around his neck as he gave me a kiss. It must have tickled because I was laughing. There was a billowed lace curtain behind the brown leather chair we were sitting in. I remembered that chair, and my dress. I remembered that white uniform he was wearing, too, with the shiny buttons and gold stripes.

All of a sudden a feeling swept over me. It was a strong wonderful feeling, like being safe and totally happy —like being special to someone, and them being so, so special to you. That man in the picture was my daddy. I remembered him all in a rush like it was yesterday. And that man in the picture...was Joe.

The memory of him was so long ago, I thought it was a dream. Or something I made up when I was little. Something to make myself feel better when I was all alone in my room at night. How many times had I fallen to sleep singing the same two lines of the nursery song, "Hush little baby, don't you cry, Daddy's gonna sing you a lullaby..." over and over to myself as I laid there. I was so lonely back then—aching lonely—for somebody. Even though Mom was in the next room. But I didn't have a daddy, so I always thought I had made him up. I didn't make him up. And I knew if I asked Joe about it, he would probably tell me he sang that song to me a hundred times before. When I was very small.

I flipped past the picture in a hurry—I had to, it was getting me all emotional inside. Right here in the hotel with all these people walking around. The next picture was a credit card. So were the rest. Bank card, social security...but I was still trying to collect myself, so I absently kept shuffling through.

I didn't realize until then that Joe had been quiet for a long time behind me. Now he was talking again, and the statement—after what I had just been feeling about him was like running into a brick wall.

"Susan, don't start with that, again. It wasn't my

choice in the first place. You know that. And I at least owed the kid—"

That's all I stuck around for. Whatever spell had come over me was shattered like one of those shiny, round Christmas ornaments that never seem to make it from one year to the next. I flipped back to the credit card—and took it—without so much as a second thought. Then I shoved the wallet into his hand and...

In five minutes, I was out of there.

16

That little town was so small you could walk across the whole place in about forty-five minutes. But even in the crowds, I knew it wouldn't take long for Joe to find me. Especially when Martin and Daniel pitched in. But I had a few ideas I was banking on.

The first thing I had to do was change the way I looked, and fast. They'd all be looking for me in these purple jeans and hot pink sun shirt, along with my crooked ponytail and bangs that were poofed practically straight up. For once in my life, I wanted to blend in with the crowd.

I figured I had about ten minutes max before Joe realized I had split. So I didn't waste time. I ran to a place I'd seen about five blocks back where I could get my hair cut. It would be worth the time it took to get it done, and besides that, it would keep me off the streets when they would be looking for me the hardest.

I had planned this out a long time ago. I might be in a different place alright, but the plan clicked in my brain and started working itself out so smoothly, you'd have thought I'd been practicing. Well, I guess I had, sort of. This plan was based on fixing the mistakes I made the first

time I ran. Back then the cops picked me up within three days because there was an APB out on my description. Not this time.

Halfway to the beauty parlor, I stopped at a sidewalk shop long enough to snatch a skirt and blouse from one of the racks. I didn't have time to dicker, so I paid the first price the guy asked, and left him smiling behind the counter like he had just stole the bank.

There was one thing I hadn't planned on, and that was the fact that I couldn't speak Spanish. Oh, I knew a few things like, "hello, how are you, I love you, and how much?" But other than that I was strictly limited to taco, enchilada, burrito, and "Como frijole?" which to the best of my knowledge meant something like, "How you bean?"

So far, I had done alright in the shops and the restaurant. But when it came to trying to describe how I wanted my hair, it was a nightmare. Finally, I got the bright idea of showing the hairdresser a picture. I grabbed the nearest magazine and flipped through, came to the first short haircut I saw, and pointed.

The lady who did it was a middle-aged type woman who was about as wide as she was tall. We didn't talk while she was working—or even try to—because after the first conversation, neither of us were in the mood. She didn't do a half bad job, though. In about twenty minutes, my wavy long hair was lying on the floor and I had a head full of close-cut curls.

Definitely not me. But the price of freedom is not cheap, and I had already made up my mind this was one I was going to pay.

Besides that, it would grow back.

Once more, I paid full price, which made her happy,

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and seemed to make up for all the trouble we had trying to communicate the first time. When I showed her my new clothes in my bag she pointed me in the direction of a little bathroom, way at the back, where I could change. In went Ellie Cooper, and out came...well, whoever she was, she wasn't me. It was going to take a long time just recognizing myself in the mirror for awhile. I put on my new sunglasses and the dangly earrings, as a last finishing touch, and hit the streets, again.

So far, so good. Now all I had to do was find the airport, and hope they took credit cards. Most tourist towns did, so I wasn't too worried. Even though this was Mexico. Half the people mulling around here looked like Americans.

It was amazing how much cooler I was in a skirt and blouse. They were made of that light, crinkly cotton stuff —just perfect for such a hot climate—almost like wearing nothing at all. The skirt was a Mexican-looking print on a black background, not quite as bright as I usually liked, but then I'd been in sort of a hurry. The blouse was a white sleeveless thing with lace at the scooped neck and arms.

Since I bought a pair of brown leather sandals to match my purse before lunch, my new outfit was complete. But then I had second thoughts about the earrings—Joe had already seen those. Not to mention Martin had commented how they could do double duty as a necklace if I hooked them together. So, I decided I better put them away in my purse. Next jewelry booth I came to (they were all over the place) I picked up a pair that were made of tiny pink shells.

Now, all I had to do was find a taxi.

The success of my plan depended on getting out of

town as quick as possible. I figured I would have a head start there because it would take Joe awhile to discover I had taken the credit card. That's what I was hoping, anyway.

When I saw a battered blue taxi parked in front of a sleezy-looking hotel across the street, I headed over. The driver was snoozing in the front seat. I knocked on the roof a few times and he startled awake. He pushed his red cap back on his mop of stringy black hair, and mumbled, "Sí -si-" while he started the engine. I barely had time to hop into the back seat and close the door before we roared off into the road.

"Hey," I said, tapping him on the shoulder as I leaned up over the seat. "You could at least wait 'til I told you where I want to go."

"Sí," he answered without even looking back at me. "Adonde, señorita?

"The airport...got that? Airo plano." "Sí."

The guy drove like a maniac. In and out of traffic, around pedestrians—it was a real joy ride. We jutted over dirt roads with potholes the size of swimming pools, because nothing but half the main street was paved in this town. You can imagine my surprise when about fifteen minutes later we ended up at something called the Airport Plaza Hotel that turned out to be right on the main street at the other end of town.

I'd been ripped.

"Ten dollars," he said in English as we pulled up to the curb.

"What's the ten dollars for, a tour of the city?" I couldn't help being ticked. Besides the fact I only had

twenty-nine dollars left, we were smack downtown, again, and I was afraid every person that walked by was going to be Daniel, Martin, or Joe.

"Ten dollars." This time he held his hand out and looked back at me.

"This isn't the airport! I don't want to go the Airport Hotel, you—you dumbo! I want to go to the airport!"

"No airport," he replied. "Una hora."

"Una what?"

He pointed to his watch. "Una hora," he repeated. Then he made a gesture like he was riding a wild horse but I knew what he meant. Wherever the airport was, it was a long way over the dirt roads.

"Can't you take me there?" I asked.

"Mucho dinero," he said, rubbing the fingers of one hand together.

I knew what that meant alright. "I don't care how much it is," I fished through my purse and pulled out the card. "I have a credit card!"

"No, no—" This time he shook his head so hard his stringy hair slapped against his face. "Ten dollars, señorita."

"Oh, alright! But you're a crook, you know that?" I counted out a five, four ones, and barely enough change to make another dollar, then handed it all over and opened the door. "You're a big fat crook!"

"Gracias," He smiled. Like I had just given him a present. Then he revved up the engine, roared back into the street like he was in some kind of hurry. Probably to find another sucker.

I decided to try the hotel. Maybe they had a shuttle. And someone who spoke more English. Besides, why

would a place be called the Airport Plaza Hotel if it didn't have something to do with an airport?

There was an old marble fountain in front of the building that had water trickling out of the mouth of a giant fish statue. Which would have been cool and peaceful looking if the water hadn't been a putrid-looking green color. And there were rust marks where it was running down over the marble.

I was thinking something about how you're not supposed to drink the water in Mexico. Then all of a sudden I was thirsty. But just as I headed up the steps, wondering if I could find a bottled drink machine inside the lobby, I looked up toward the wide, glass doors...and nearly fainted.

About ten feet away—headed right toward me—was Martin.

17

There are times when it helps to be an obsessive movie watcher. The first thing that popped into my mind when I saw Martin was how this guy in a spy movie had attached himself to a group of people when the KGB was after him. And because they were looking for a person alone, they walked right by him without noticing. Like he was invisible.

The only group near me at the moment was a mother standing back at the fountain with her two kids, watching the goldfish. I turned around before Martin saw me, and the next minute I was leaning over the green water next to the nearest kid.

"Look at that pretty one," I whispered and pointed. Like I was a big sister, or something. "He's about as—"

"Don't talk to strangers, Jeffery," his mother said. Then she took him by the hand and they moved around to the other side of the fountain.

But by that time, Martin had passed by.

I couldn't believe it! My heart was pounding about a million miles an hour—but it worked. My knees were still shaking as I headed up the steps and into the lobby.

I had to get out of this town one way or another, before I had a nervous breakdown. No way was I going to stay with people who didn't want me around. But I was starting to think I had been a little too hasty. This was not Los Angeles. And the person I might have to deal with afterwards was not Mom, it was Joe. I started to worry about what would happen if I got caught.

"Does anybody here speak English?" I asked the clerk behind the reception desk.

He was a little short guy with a curly mustache. "Sí," he replied, looking up from his paperwork. "I es—peak English. Can I 'elp you?"

"I need to get to the airport."

"Then you must take the bus, señorita. It leaves from the hotel. Cost...ten dollars."

What was the deal? Did everything in this town cost ten dollars? All I had left was a twenty, and I might need that cash for something else. "Will you take a credit card?" I asked.

"The Airport Plaza Hotel will be taking all major credit cards. Eh—shall I book you?"

"Yes, please. What time does it leave?"

"It will be leaving in ten o'clocks."

"At night?"

"At morning. Tomorrow morning. All bus for today are finished."

Then he handed me the register and held out his pen. "You will be wishing to book a room?"

"No—I couldn't. Well, maybe later, I mean."

"As you wish."

I didn't dare book a room with the credit card. As soon as Joe found out I took it, all he had to do was call each hotel and ask. Ten in the morning! I had to find someplace to wait it out.

There was a lounge off the lobby that looked out onto the ocean. I found myself a little table in the corner and ordered a soda. I figured I was pretty safe for awhile since Martin had already been here. I needed some time to think over my plan. There were getting to be too many kinks in it.

About the time I decided to hang out in some museum, or something, I noticed a familiar picture on a poster near the door. Bambi and His Friends. It was in Spanish but I knew that's what it said because I recognized all the Disney characters. Then the words: something, something...theater.

That was it.

Why hadn't I thought of that before? A theater would be the perfect place to hide. That's what all the criminals did in movies.

They waited it out in theaters so they wouldn't have to be seen in the streets. Not that running away was something a person ought to be arrested for—you shouldn't have to stay where you're not wanted. But I had to admit I was starting to feel something like a criminal.

By now, even the police were probably looking for me.

I found out from the waiter where the theater was. A little more than halfway across town again. But forget the taxi—I walked this time. It was getting on toward the dinner hour and the crowds were starting to thin out, so it gave me a real case of the nerves to walk that far. No troubles, though.

It was strange listening to all the animals in the

movie speak Spanish. Halfway through the second showing I fell asleep. When I woke up I had no idea what time it was or how long I slept. I just knew I was totally depressed. I tried to sit there and make plans. I knew I had to go back to LA because I didn't have any money to live on. I'd have to get in touch with Sarah and hide out at her place for awhile—like we first planned—and hope we could get by with it until I found a job somewhere. Her parents both worked, so it shouldn't be too hard. Still, it was a depressing thought. It seemed so boring after what I had been through the last few days.

I sort of liked being on the Sonata. Martin was hard to put up with, but I really didn't mind Joe so much...and Daniel...I could have at least finished out the trip if I had been a little more cool-headed. But the thought of Joe feeling like he owed me, and his wife not even wanting me around, would have changed everything anyway. Still, it would have been nice. I would probably never see Daniel again. Even if I did, he'd think I was some kind of nutcase. There'd be absolutely no—

All of a sudden I felt a warm hand on my knee, and the guy sitting next to me whispered something in my ear. I didn't have to understand Spanish to get that message.

"Leave me alone, you jerk!" I said as I pushed his hand away. Then I picked up my things and moved.

Two minutes later he was sitting next to me again. Him and two of his buddies. I didn't need this. I moved again. This time I sat down next to a big family that was only two rows from the front. The picture was so huge that close up, it was more like watching a light show. To top it off, the kid sitting next to me spilled his drink on my shoe.

But it was better than being victimized.

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After that showing, everybody left and an usher started sweeping out the theater. I was hoping it would just be an extra long intermission, but when he came to my row, he pointed to his watch and motioned me outside.

It was pitch dark outside. The town looked totally deserted, now, like the Twilight Zone. I started heading back in the direction of the hotel. I hadn't gone very far before I saw the three jerks again, hanging around a dark doorway about halfway up the block. My heart started pounding.

I knew my best bet was just to walk past them like they were dirt, and not even glance in their direction. I tried. But the closer I got, they started whispering and laughing. Just as I passed by, one of them said something and reached out a hand, but I dodged it. Now, I was scared.

I was doing more than a fast walk already, so when I heard them following behind, I lost whatever cool I had left. I took off into a run. Then all of a sudden, someone else jumped out from between two buildings farther down —and grabbed me. The guys behind me yelled and I felt myself being lifted right up off the ground and spun around with a scary growl, like it was Frankenstein, or something.

I never screamed so loud in my life.

18

The growl ended in a familiar laugh, and before I had time to catch my breath again, Daniel said, "Hey, it's me —it's just me."

I was so relieved I couldn't help hugging and hugging him as he set me back down on the ground. I wasn't even mad...for about thirty seconds. Then I smacked my hand against his orange "Surf The Sun" T-shirt and said, "God —you scared me!"

"Serves you right for running off by yourself like this. Especially at night. What got into you, Ellie? Joe's about fit to be tied."

"Well, it's just an act. He doesn't want me around any more than I want to be here. How'd you find me?"

"You've been leaving a trail even a blind man could follow. I like your disguise, though." He ruffled the top of my hair. "It's a nice improvement."

It seemed like he left his hand there longer than just being friendly, and for a minute I thought he was going to pull me closer and kiss me, or something. I mean, I was so sure of it, I could feel my heart beat faster.

But then he said, "So are the clothes," and hooked his

thumbs in his pockets instead. "It took me halfway through Bambi to pick you out in that crowd."

"Where's Joe?"

"Waiting for us back on the Sonata."

"He must have been awful sure you'd find me," I was surprised at the stab of disappointment I felt that he wasn't still frantically searching the streets. "He at least could have come himself."

"He would have, but I talked him into letting me come instead."

"Well, thanks for the favor. I'm touched."

"I hope so. Because the mood he's in, it would have been some reunion. Besides, I wanted to see Bambi again anyway."

"How did you know I was even here?"

"Pop saw you down at the Airport Plaza Hotel. Found out you were asking about buses to the airport, and when the next showing of Bambi was going to be." Then he laughed at the look I must have had on my face and teased, "Cut and dried case of the runaway adolescent."

"You're not so far past adolescence yourself, you know. Nineteen is still a teenager. Being in the Navy doesn't hide the fact you were playing like a school kid when we were fishing, yesterday."

He shrugged. For the next few moments we just stood there without saying anything. A warm gust of breeze blew an empty candy wrapper down the sidewalk and—except for a lighted bar sign flashing about three blocks away—the streets looked dark and deserted. Even the jerks had disappeared.

"Ready to go back?" he asked quietly. I shook my head. "Want to go somewhere and talk for awhile, then?" "About what?"

"Anything you want. I'm easy."

"Oh, Daniel!" I felt like maybe he really could be my friend. I needed a friend. "Will you help me?"

"Sure." He smiled. "What do you want me to do—run interference between you and Joe? He's had enough time to cool off a little."

"Joe doesn't want me around, he just thinks he owes me something."

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is. I heard him say so when he was on the phone with Suzie."

"Is that why you took off so fast?"

"He said it wasn't his choice. They were arguing."

"Ellie—this whole trip is his choice. And for your information, they were arguing about Pop and me. Suzie's just upset about these extra days cutting into their vacation."

"She thinks I'd be cutting in to their life. He was talking about the kid, Daniel. And how it wasn't his idea in the first place."

"Coming to this town wasn't his idea. I know this might come as a surprise to you, but you're not the only kid in his life."

"He wasn't talking about Little Joe."

"He was talking about me. They have this ongoing thing about how Pop never spends much time with me." He sighed, then looked off down the street for a minute. Like he was trying to decide if he was going to tell me or not. "My pop's a little loose. About everything. Don't get me wrong, he's a great guy. The best. But he just hasn't been the same since my mom died. That's why I went to live with Joe and Suzie during my senior year. Suzie and I got pretty close, but..." He got quiet again, and I knew he was leaving something major out. Or he wouldn't be skirting the issue like this.

"But what?" I prompted.

"But there's this...bond. Between Joe and Pop and me. I guess it comes from all the things we've been through together. Anyway, that really gets to Suzie. She thinks Pop's the bad influence on Joe and me, and Pop thinks the same thing about her. The two of them don't get along at all."

"Then I wouldn't have a chance in that house," I said. "Because as much as he gets to me, your dad knows just what I'm going to do, before I even get the idea to do it. Like I'm a book he's already read before. If Suzie thinks Martin's bad, and Martin already knows I am, then why waste everybody's time? We're never going to get along."

"You at least gotta try. Suzie's a great lady. I love her like my own sister. She wants you to come, Ellie. She told me so. Heck, she's even redecorating my old room for you, since I'm not around much anymore. So, what do you say? Let's head back."He glanced at his watch. "Come on, it's almost midnight already."

"I don't want to."

"Don't be so stubborn."

"I'm not going back, Daniel. I've made up my mind. I want to catch that ten o'clock bus tomorrow and go home to California."

"Without saying anything to Joe?" He gave me a look like I just asked him to help me rob the local bank. "It would be one stupid move if you did, Ellie. You'd not only hurt Joe, you'd be hurting yourself a lot more."

"It's my life! Why does everybody want to keep living it for me? I'm sick of people telling me what to do!"

"Try listening once in awhile, you might learn something."

"Does that mean you won't help me?"

"I'm not going to help you be stupid."

"Can you at least loan me some money? Just enough cash to get home on? Not everyone takes credit cards and I've been getting jipped all day. I'm broke."

"So, you took one of Joe's credit cards, huh." He sighed and shook his head.

"You make it sound like I'm the one who committed a crime here. He kidnapped me! He ruined things for me at school! Now, I'm stuck here until ten tomorrow and I don't even speak Spanish!"

I got so carried away yelling at him, I dropped my purse on the ground and some of the stuff spilled out. When he bent down to help me pick things up, I was close to crying and I had a lump in my throat.

"Please?" It was begging and I knew it, but I couldn't help myself. "I'll pay you back, I promise. As soon as I get a job!"

"That's not the point, Ellie." We got to our feet, again. "This isn't the right way to do things. It's the coward's way out, and you know it. What are you afraid of? That something might work out for you for a change?"

"Nothing ever works out for me!" Then I turned away for a minute because I was practically bawling.

"Maybe you just don't let it. Joe's a great guy. He's a good father too, but you have to give him half a chance to show you." I couldn't say anything.

When I didn't answer, he put a hand on my shoulder and turned me toward him again. "Will you listen to me? Don't throw away the chance just because you're too proud to admit you made a mistake. Admit you made it, take whatever's coming to you, and go on."

"Oh, that's easy for you to say. You're not the one in trouble."

"I've had my share of trouble. And plenty of it with Joe. I know he can seem hard and tough sometimes, but he's pretty soft on the inside. That's the truth. You know what he said when he first realized you were gone? He said _"

"Don't tell me!"

"Why, because it'll get to you? Maybe you're not as hard as you act all the time either."

"Because I'm tired of him always shaking up my feelings, that's why. Feelings are private."

"Only if you want to be a loner all your life." He said it so soft it was almost a whisper. That really got to me. The last thing in the world I wanted to be was a loner—I hated being alone. But I didn't want him to know. Don't ask me why. Maybe it was because nobody had ever talked to me about such personal things before, and it was scary. Besides that, it was getting harder and harder to resist him, and I knew if I listened much longer, I wouldn't be able to.

I'd end up back on the Sonata, getting in the way of everybody's life, and they'd all hate me for it. Especially Suzie. How could I handle a stepmom when I couldn't even get along with my own?

"Look," he offered, like I had said everything I was

thinking out loud. "I know you're scared. But if you come back with me now, I'll hold your hand all the way. Scout's honor. I'll stick up for you with Joe, and I'll even put in a good word for you to Suzie when we get home. You say Pop knows you like a book? Well, that's the way I know Suzie."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"No!" I backed away from him with all the determination I could muster. "I'm going home on the plane, and if you can't understand why, I'm sorry! I'll be broke, and I'll probably starve, but I'm going! And if you really care about what happens to me...you can at least walk me back to the hotel."

"No way." He stepped down off the curb and started in the opposite direction.

Now who was being stubborn?

"Daniel, it's scary out here!" I called after him. "It's no place for a girl to be alone—you have to agree with that!"

He stopped, and for a minute I thought he had changed his mind. But instead he turned around and said, "Right now, you don't leave me much choice but to agree with Pop."

"What-that I'm a brat? That I'm rotten to the core?"

He said, looked me right in the eye and moved backward a few steps as he talked."That you need your butt kicked, Ellie Cooper."

Then he turned and walked away.

19

I never felt so deserted in my life. For a minute I had the strongest urge just to run after him—but what would I say? How could I live with myself if I was always giving in? I had to stand up for something in my life, even if it was wrong...didn't I?

I don't know how long I stood there in pure misery before my old safeguard kicked in and made me suddenly and wildly furious with him. What good was a friend if they couldn't stick by you when you were down? And I sure didn't need anymore people who didn't think twice about invading my feelings whenever they felt like it. The kind that made me feel like I was on a roller coaster all the time.

If that was caring, who needed it?

It was a long way back to the Airport Plaza Hotel. And it was dark and creepy around those deserted shops. If Daniel really cared about me, he wouldn't put his principles above a life or death situation. Hadn't he seen those jerks that were bothering me when I left the theater?

I wondered where they disappeared to.

I heard noises everywhere. A couple of times I

thought I heard voices, but I didn't dare look around to see. I just kept walking as fast as I could without breaking into a dead run. Not that I wouldn't have. I just didn't think I could sustain it for a hundred miles. That's about how far away the hotel seemed to be. I was so relieved when it finally came into view, I thought I might even chance booking a room just to give my nerves a break. Why not? Daniel was going to narc on me anyway—I was sure of that—so I might as well go all the way.

I'd sign a fake name to the register, and unless Joe knew his account number, it would take him a long time to find out where I was. Even if he did, I'd be safe in a locked room and wouldn't have to open the door. I'd make such a scene he'd be glad to get rid of me.

I started to feel better once I had everything figured out. The feeling lasted for about two minutes max. When I walked through the big glass doors of the hotel I was stopped by two policemen.

"Señorita Cooper?" the fat one asked.

"No—no, you must be thinking of someone else," I tried to look insulted. "My name is...Sarah Farrell. And...and my daddy's a senator."

"We would like please to inspect your handbag," he said then.

"No way!" I held onto it tighter in case they tried to take it from me. "You can't just—"

"If you shall be so uncooperative..." He leaned over and whispered something to his partner who was just standing there. A tall guy with a thin black mustache that looked like someone had drawn it on with eye pencil. "We must insist you come to the station. For interrogations."

Interrogations-what was this, communism? All of a

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sudden I was scared. If I hadn't already told them I was Sarah Farrell, I would have given over the purse and let them find the card. Joe must have reported it stolen and given my description, or something. Typical.

He had already ruined my education—-was he going to ruin my record, too? How was I going to land a job with a record as long as my arm? So far, my dealings with the police had all been informal. Mostly because my infractions were runaways, related to family problems. I had never been involved in a crime, or anything. At least, not till the credit card thing, today.

The skinny guy went over to the registration desk where the clerk was working and in a minute, he was on the phone. The fat guy in front of me took a ticket book out of his back pocket, looked at his watch and began writing something up.

Oh, God—they were going to arrest me! I couldn't believe it. "Alright, let me start over," I said in one big hurry. "I am Ellie Cooper, Mister Officer, but you see...I've been kidnapped! And I'm just trying to get—"

"You will make your confessions at the station, please." He didn't even stop writing. "So, we can fill out proper papers."

"But I don't want to go to the station! Here's my purse. Go ahead, look at everything. I'm willing to cooperate right here. What's the charge—runaway? I'm...I'm perfectly willing to be released into the custody of my mother. Her phone number is—"

"Stolen property," he said, returning the pen to his shirt pocket and glancing over at his partner who was still on the phone. "We won't be needing numbers."

"But—"

"Step outside, please. A car is waiting."

I was getting desperate. I knew if I was formally booked, my whole life would go to pot. I just knew it. So, I had to make a sacrificial decision. It was the only way to save myself.

"Just a minute. My father is a Lieutenant Commander in the United States Navy. Got that? The Navy. Right now he's on a little boat down at the—"

"Señorita." The officer sighed and shook his head. "In five minutes you have said your father is a senator, that you are kidnapped, and you have run away. Now, you tell me your father is a military official. Who is your mother, the Queen of England?"

"But I was—"

"I am sure it will be a big story when we put it in the report. But—por favor, señorita—wait until we get to the station."

After that, the whole situation took off like a runaway snowball. Totally out of my control. I couldn't even understand half of what was going on around me because they were all speaking Spanish at the station.

Next thing I knew, I was sitting in a chair next to the fat guy's desk. Nobody had asked me anything yet, and it was a quarter after two in the morning.

Where was Joe?

They fingerprinted me. They took my picture. Then I was taken to a room with pea green walls and a naked light-bulb hanging down from the ceiling on a cord. There was an old wooden table in the middle with four chairs around it. I had to sit there while the fat man kept asking me the same questions over and over, while he filled out a stack of forms about six inches high.

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Somewhere around three-thirty, I lost it. I mean, I was so frustrated, I took a deep breath and a sob came out. He looked up from his paperwork and said, "You will be wanting your father now?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Then all of a sudden it dawned on me. Joe was probably in control of this whole fiasco. He had set it up. Just like in the restaurant when I tried to order a tequila sunrise—and now he was just letting me sit here until I got scared enough to give in.

The whole thing was a bluff.

"What do I have to do to get out of here?" I asked.

"Pay the fine," he answered.

"How much is it?"

"If charges are pressed? Five hundred dollars" Then he grinned as if he had just come up with something clever. "And we do not take credit cards."

"What if I don't have it?"

"Señorita..." He shook his head slowly this time, like he was trying to be patient with a stupid kid. "We already know you don't have it."

"Then, what are you going to do with me?"

"This is a small town." He set down the pencil and leaned back in his chair. "With many tourists. So, we have many troublemakers. My eh-sergeant...he is a generous man. Has a soft...how do you say it?" He tapped the front of his shirt. "Love—no, no—heart. He has a soft heart for young peoples like you."

"Does that mean he's going to waive my fine?" I asked hopefully.

"No. No, señorita. It means we have had a busy night. We have arrested too many...what you would call...drunk

and disorderly. And since we have only one jail, he wishes you shall not be put in it until they are...not so drunk and disorderly."

"I want to see my father, now."

A slow smile spread across his face. Like he just won the lottery. "Which one? The senator? Or the military official?"

"Laurence J. Cooper, that's who." I felt irritated he kept making me admit everything. But by that time I just wanted to get out of there. So I made it perfectly clear. "The one on the card. The one who turned me in."

"The owner of the card, Señor Cooper, lives in Hawaii. He will be notified by mail according to procedure."

"But he's not in Hawaii! He's on a sailboat down at the marina. The Sonata. If you'll just send someone down there—"

"Perhaps when the regular patrolmen come in. But not before. I'm afraid we are somewhat shorthanded on the night shift. Until then, you will have to wait in jail."

"With the drunk and disorderlies?"

"They will be asleep now. Of course, if you have a source for your fine, you may wire. But I must inform you that there is a twenty-five dollar fee for the service. Do you have a source in mind, señorita?"

"You bet your life, I do! Why didn't you say that in the first place? I want to wire my mother!"

"Madre de Dios," He sighed sadly. "There we have a problem. You see, we are under strict orders not to disturb the Queen of England... under any circumstances."

20

When I first heard Joe's voice, he was speaking Spanish to someone outside the door. I had been alone in the green room for half an hour, waiting to be taken to the jail. I was so relieved that he came, I forgot for a minute that he was the one who turned me in.

But it didn't take long to remember.

The look on his face when he walked through the door was as hard as rock. Nobody came in with him. He closed the door behind him without saying a word and when he came toward me, I started to worry about what he was going to do.

I wondered if they had child abuse laws in this country.

It might have made things easier if I could have said the right thing, but I couldn't say anything. I had such a lump in my throat I couldn't even look him in the eye.

He pulled out a chair, sat down at the table and reached into his pocket for a cigarette. "You ready to try again, kid?" He asked before he lit it. "Or are you going to drag your feet all the way back to the boat and take off when the next chance comes along." "I don't know."

"Better make up your mind. Because we're not leaving this room until we get a few things straight."

"Maybe I'm tired of being everybody's problem and I just want to be left alone! Is there something wrong with that?"

"You're not old enough to be left alone. As for being a problem..." He stashed the cigarette back into his pocket without lighting it, after all. "You're the only one who can do anything about that. It's your choice."

"Can I go back and stay with Mom?"

"No."

"Then I don't have a choice! Because you're making them all for me—it isn't fair! You pulled me out of school! You took me away from Mom without even saying goodbye. If I could just talk to her, I know she'd give me another chance! I wanted to tell her where I was, only they won't let me call her."

"I told them not to let you call."

"She'd want to know if I'm stranded in a Mexican jail!"

"Why, so she can worry some more about you? That's pretty selfish reasoning, Ellie."

"Maybe I have to be selfish sometimes! Because the only one who cares about me, is me. I have to take care of myself."

"Well, so far, you're doing a lousy job."

"I might have done better if you hadn't deserted me."

I knew it was a mean thing to say, but I was desperate to get back at him for making me so miserable. Only it didn't help. When he was quiet for a long time, I just felt worse.

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"That's the biggest regret of my life, kid." He finally admitted. "I've got a good job and a nice family. But there's a great big hole in the place where you're supposed to be."

I didn't say anything. I just sat there trying to look like I could care less.

"I've been missing you for years," he went on. "We used to have something special. You and I. And I guess I was hoping you'd remember it."

He was quiet again, and now I wished he would keep talking and not look at me that way. I laid my head in my arms on the table so I wouldn't have to look back at him.

"Now, I've got little Joe," he went on, "and he's a great kid. Then I've been so involved with Hot Shot over the last three years since his mother died, I love him like he was mine. But I'll tell you something, Ellie..."

He got to his feet and walked a few steps across the room and back. Like he was thinking. "Nobody takes the place of anybody. You just sort of scoot over a little to make more room. I was hoping there might be a place like that leftover in you somewhere, kid. A place for me."

That did it. I was bawling like a baby and I couldn't have stopped if you paid me. "I haven't cried so much since I was in grade school!" I wailed. "But it doesn't mean anything! I just hate losing, that's all. Whatever I do, you've already got me figured out, and I hate it!"

"I don't have to figure you out, baby, I know you like my own backyard. You're me...about twenty years ago."

"Then you ought to understand what it's like to want to be on your own!"

"You want to know what it's like to be on your own? It's hard, that's what it's like. And it's lonely, too. Every

lesson you learn leaves a scar that doesn't go away. Beside that, about half the people you deal with out there don't play fair—and there's nothing you can do about it, kid."

I didn't think being kidnapped was very fair but by the time I had swallowed hard and tried to say it, he was already talking again.

"There's no law that says they have to treat you fair. That's what it's like out there. And unless you're ready for it—it can break you. I'm not trying to ruin your life, Ellie. I just don't want you to make the same mistakes I did."

"You're like all the other adults that talk to me, Joe Cooper!" I practically choked on the words. "You want me to live my life any way except how you did! Well, maybe it's natural to want to do some things. So, don't do me any favors! If you want to help, get me out of here. Just let me go back to California and leave me alone!"

"Is that what you really want, Ellie?"

"You bet it is!"

"Well, I don't blame you for being mad at me. But if you can sit there and ignore your own feelings—if you can pass up what's best for you because you're too stubborn to admit you want it, then I guess you're a pretty hard case after all. See you around, kid."

"You're going to let me go?"

"If you can figure your way out of this one, then I guess you deserve a chance to find whatever it is you're looking for out there."

"You mean, you're going to pay my fine and just let me walk out of here?" I raised my head up to see if it was really true. "What about the credit card?"

"I'm not going to pay your fine, and I'm not going to finance any flights out of Mexico. I said if you could get yourself out of this mess, I wouldn't stop you. But if you can't, well, then you can just sit here until you're ready to try things my way for awhile."

"But that's not fair!" I cried. "You put me in here!" "You put yourself in here."

"If you hadn't turned me in, they never would have known!"

"I didn't turn you in."

"You told them not to let me call Mom!"

"Only after Daniel said you were down here. He's the one that turned you in. Sometimes I think that kid has more guts than I do."

Daniel!

I was so stunned, I was close to screaming. I could feel it welling up inside me like a tornado. I got up and just stood there for a minute. But this time, I knew if I gave into it, I would lose total control. Like the night on the Sonata when I was only faking it and it turned real.

I wasn't expecting what happened next.

While I was standing there fighting to get a better grip on myself, Joe came over and put his arm around me. When I tried to move away, he wouldn't let me. Then he turned my face toward him so I would look him in the eye, but I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to.

"That's right, kid. Just stay hard as nails. That's the only way to survive out there." Then he kissed me on the cheek and let go.

I could have handled it a lot better if he yelled.

I was falling apart and I knew it. But I couldn't help myself. When I heard the door close, I knew he was really leaving. No bluff. That's when I realized I didn't want him to. I knew because it felt like being deserted all over again.

The first time I lost control of myself, I had to make the decision and jump in. This time there was no choice involved. It was coming at me like a freight train and there was no way to stop it. I covered my eyes, leaned my head back and screamed, only not angry or swearing this time. What came out of my mouth shocked me.

"Daddy!" I yelled as loud as I could. "Don't leave! Don't leave me!"

Then I totally lost it. I mean, I got hysterical. All those feelings I had been holding in for so long tumbled out like a flood. I didn't even realize he had come back again, until I felt him holding me. Tight. Like I was somebody special.

Like he meant it.

Jeeze—you'd have thought I just missed getting killed and he couldn't stand the thought. But it felt so good I didn't ever want to be let go. And I think he felt the same way because he held me that way for a long time. Like he used to when I was little. I remembered being held like that before.

"Ellie Cooper," he warned, "don't you ever push me that far again." But that isn't what he meant. The way he said it he really meant, "I love you, kid—can you believe that?"

I don't know but I wanted to. Only I couldn't tell him the way I was really feeling, either. All I could do was hold on to him and bawl.

I think maybe he knew.

21

The fat man drove us back to the Sonata in a patrol car. Since no charges were pressed there was no five hundred-dollar fine. There wasn't even a ticket because what he had written up in the lobby of the Airport Plaza Hotel turned out to be a grocery list. I guess be had five daughters of his own and he didn't mind playing along. Anyway, when we said goodbye to him down at the docks, it was like a send off from a favorite uncle. He even gave us a little box of Mexican chocolates and told me to stay away from credit cards.

It was sunrise as we walked out to where the boat was tied, and nearly up to eighty degrees already. All I wanted was to find my way down to that little bedroom and sleep for hours, that's how tired I was. Even a thirty-second shower sounded good.

Then I saw Martin. He was sitting on one of the seats with his feet propped up on the rail, drinking coffee. Five fifteen in the morning and he was up already. Or maybe he had been waiting for us. Whatever it was, I got butterflies in my stomach at the thought of facing him.

I hardly realized I was hanging back until Joe

reached around and made me walk in front of him. "Come on, let's get it over with." Like he already knew what was coming.

Martin stood up to meet us. I couldn't look him in the eye any more than I could look at Joe back at the police station. When I reached for the rail to climb aboard, Martin held out a hand to help me. I felt the same strong grip I had felt the first time I climbed onto the Sonata.

"Welcome back, Miss Mary," he said when I looked up. Then he winked at me. That's when I realized I was worrying for nothing.

Martin was the one person—the only person—I had never put up a front with. And I didn't have to, now. "Well, Pop," I said, "I guess I owe you some money."

"Fair and square," he replied. "But I'll bet double or nothing you don't have much at the moment."

"I'm broke."

"That's okay." He laughed. "We got a three week cruise ahead of us and there's plenty of work to do around here. I'll take it out in trade."

"Let's get out of here, Martin." Joe untied the mooring lines and climbed aboard. "I've seen enough of this place to last me a few years. What do you say?"

"Suits me," he replied. "I sent Danny up to that little bakery for some fresh rolls and he's going to meet us at the gas dock. We'll take the first two watches and you and Mary can catch up on a little sleep." He lifted the seat locker that was behind the wheel, turned the key that was just inside, and the engine roared. "Coffee's on if you want any."

I was glad Daniel wasn't around because I sure wasn't in any mood to face him. So, while the Sonata

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chugged around the end of a long line of boats toward the gas dock, I hurried down to the safety of my little room. With four people living in fifty feet of space, there was no way to avoid one of them. I knew I would have to deal with it sooner or later.

I decided on later.

I took a shower and changed into a pair of cutoff jeans and a peach-colored T-shirt. I shut my eyes for a second —that's all it seemed like—and the next thing I knew, practically half the day was gone. When I sat up and looked out the windows, there was absolutely no land in sight. We were on a permanent slant as usual, but it felt sort of good and familiar. Even a little exciting to be sailing again.

I felt great. No lumps in my throat, no deep dark secrets to deal with at the moment. I hadn't felt this good in a long time. It wasn't just the Sonata, either, because even at home I always seemed to be worrying over something. Like maybe Mom would find out about my latest escapades and ground me. Always something.

When I heard someone banging around in the galley, I realized how starved I was. Come to think of it, I hadn't eaten anything since lunch yesterday. I went into the bathroom for a minute to straighten my hair, and was shocked to see myself in the mirror. Loose, wispy curls a little bleached from the sun...and my sunburn was turning into a tan. I hadn't put any make-up on after the shower, but with so much color in my face, I didn't seem to need much. I just put on a little eye shadow and mascara. Then some lip-gloss because my lips were chapped.

By the time I came into the galley, Joe was fixing

plates of fresh fruit and salad for everybody. Daniel was sitting at the table doing some kind of paperwork. There were maps and books spread all over. He looked up when I walked in but the smile he always had for me was missing.

"Are you mad at me, Ellie?" No beating around the bush, no nothing—he just came right out and asked.

"What do you expect? I almost got a record because of you—it was awful! I almost got put in with the drunks and disorderlies, too."

Joe looked up from the sink where he was peeling a cantaloupe and gave Daniel a questioning glance.

"There weren't any drunks." Daniel answered like he had asked out loud. "I checked it out myself. It's a quiet little town—they didn't have anyone at all when I looked in there."

"That's not what they told me," I said. "They told me there were drunks and disorderlies. And I sat there for almost an hour just worrying about it."

"That's not half as long as we all sat around worrying about you," Daniel tapped the tip of his pencil against the corner of a book as he talked. "You should've come back with me."

"You should have minded your own business," I snapped.

"I sent Hot Shot out to get you," Joe interrupted. "That's enough to make it his business. But all this seems a little after the fact anyway. Let's forget it."

Daniel and I looked at each other for a long hard minute. But even though he went back to his figuring, and I went over to the sink to help Joe, we both knew neither of us was going to forget it. I might have been willing to let it pass if he had given me half a chance. Half a smile even.

But he wasn't even sorry.

I actually think he was still mad at me for not coming back with him in the first place. Who did he think he was? My brother? You'd have thought so, the way Joe kept sticking up for him. I popped half a strawberry into my mouth while Joe was cleaning up and took two of the plates.

"I'll take this to Martin." I tried to make it up the ladder without spilling. "It's a lot nicer out on deck."

"Tell him I'll be up there to take over in a little while." Joe held the two plates until I got to the top and then handed them to me. "I want to look over Hot Shot's navigation figures first."

Maybe Martin would be a little more friendly. Besides that, there was something I wanted to ask him. I wanted to know why Daniel spent so much time with Joe and Suzie when Martin was still around. Because it seemed to me that the dads were playing musical chairs around here.

Who belonged to who?

22

Martin was not at the wheel when I went up on deck. Instead, he was standing on the narrow wooden platform that hung out over the very front of the boat—the bowsprit they called it. There was a stainless steel railing that went around it and that was called the pulpit. Sort of like church.

Anyway, the platform was only about a foot wide, and nearly five feet long, and if you stood way out on the end it was like flying. Nothing but water underneath you, and that was about ten feet down. With the boat slicing through the ocean, and gliding up and over a swell now and then, it felt like being on a carnival ride.

Martin was leaning over the front with his forearms resting on the circular rail, watching something. I set the two plates down on one of the seats, the lowest one so they wouldn't slide off, and went to see what it was. The way the boat was slanted, it was kind of awkward walking along the deck. I had to hold onto things all the way.

"Is it a shark, or something?" I peeked over the rail in time to see a long gray form cut in front of us and disappear into the water.

"Dolphin," he answered. "Two or three of them giving us an escort."

In a few seconds, I saw them—two swimming side by side just ahead of us—with their sleek gray backs glistening wet in the sun and short rounded fins that proved they weren't sharks.

"They're awfully fast," I said.

"The perfect swimming machine," he answered. "Aerodynamic. Complete with sonar."

"I wonder if they're as friendly as people say?"

"Curious, I guess. And they like to play. A little like humans that way. Maybe that's what makes us feel like we have something in common."

"Do you think they're more intelligent than we are?"

"I think the only thing they have over us is their freedom. And we envy that. Makes them sort of mystical. And magic."

"Don't tell me you believe in magic," I teased. "A tough guy like you?"

"I believe in everything, Miss Mary— makes life more exciting. But what is all this, twenty questions? What's for lunch?"

"Fruit and salad. Too hot for anything else. I brought a plate up for you. Joe says he'll take over in a little while, he's checking Daniel's math or something."

"Navigation."

"What's he doing, keeping up on his school work? How's he get away with missing a month of school? I thought places like the Naval Academy were pretty tough."

"He's in special training, so he does some of the work through correspondence. But the navigation's mostly a personal interest. Daniel's been plotting our courses since he was about fourteen."

"Sounds like you've done a lot of sailing."

"Two and a half times around the world in the last six years. All on the Sonata."

"I thought you worked for the Government."

He turned around and looked at me for a minute, sort of like he was figuring something out. "Let's get a couple of drinks out of the ice chest," he finally answered. "Then tell me what's really on your mind."

He stopped at the mainsail as we were passing, and untied one of the ropes that was coiled neatly against the mast. He pulled it out a few feet. As he did, I could feel the answering response of the boat as the sail tightened, the Sonata leaned over a little farther and took up a faster clip through the water.

"How come Daniel and Joe are..." I tried to think of a casual way to put it but there wasn't any. "Well, you know," I finally said when we sat down, "the way they are. What I mean is, well—you're his dad, not Joe. Don't you ever feel left out?"

"Do you feel left out, Mary?"

A couple of days ago, I would have been surprised at that question. But I was starting to get used to having my mind read all the time by these guys. So, I answered him right up front.

"Daniel's mad at me when I'm the one that ought to be mad at him. And Joe's sticking up for him. Like there's some kind of pact between them, or something."

"There is a pact between them." Martin looked at me with an expression that was dead serious. "The strongest kind there is. The kind that only comes from risking your life with somebody. Once that happens, nobody can come in between. That's just the way it is." "But doesn't it bother you sometime?"

"Nothing Joe does bothers me." He picked up one of the plates and took a bite of salad. Then he looked across at me like he was expecting something. "Know what I mean?"

"Sure," I answered. "How could I miss it? It's sort of like the Three Musketeers."

"Sort of."

"What Joe has for Daniel, you have for Joe. Right?"

"That's about it. Suzie never could adjust to that. She just puts up with it. Or maybe I should say she puts up with me. I get most of the blame for hauling Joe out of the country two or three times a year, when I could take someone else instead."

"So, why don't you?"

"Because I don't want to."

"Do you always do what you want?"

"When you get my age, you deserve it. But what's all this got to do with Mary Cooper? I know you haven't been sitting up nights wondering about the past history of the Martin family. And if you're worried about where you stand with Joe...well, don't. I've never seen him go to this much trouble for anybody. Ever. So I'd say you're in, little lady. Daniel, or no Daniel."

"I just can't figure them out, that's all."

He laughed, like he was enjoying the situation. "If it'll make you feel better, they're having a pretty rough time figuring you out, too. Neither one of them slept a wink last night."

"That didn't stop them from treating me like dirt," I complained. "Daniel turned me in at the police station, and Joe let me sit there."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Dirt, we shake off and leave behind. But we'd have turned the whole town inside out before we left you."

"I didn't have a chance."

"You were sort of outranked." Then he smiled. "That's partly what we do for a living."

"Chase people?"

"Find and relocate missing persons." He paused to take a bite of cantaloupe. "Of a certain political nature."

"What are you, some sort of secret agent?"

"You watch too many movies," he said.

But he didn't deny it, either.

23

There's a certain feeling you get when someone you've been personal with turns out to be a cop, or something. I felt that way about Martin. To tell the truth, I was starting to feel that way about Joe. Maybe even Daniel, too.

At the same time, it was sort of exciting.

For two days, I totally overreacted. I mean, I was reading double meanings into everything they said. Including things like "What's our position?" which we had to know every day just to keep headed in the right direction. But there were other things that definitely fell into the fishy category.

Things like radio communications that were in code, and late night discussions when I was supposed to be asleep, or on watch, about places that were nowhere near Hawaii. Once, when I was just trying to get back on friendlier terms with Daniel, I asked him to show me where we were on the map...and it wasn't even the right map that he was studying. He was working something out for an entirely different ocean.

About the time I was going to ask Joe, just come right out and ask him, because he was usually pretty straight

with me if I asked him about things, he asked me first. It was my turn to cook that day, and while I was trying to figure out dinner, he was in one of the seats across from the table, changing a broken string on the guitar.

"What's bothering you, kid?" he asked. No beating around. That's the way he was. "You've been too quiet the last three days."

"Are you a spy?" I couldn't believe I said it like that. Jeeze—I had been thinking of a million ways to ask him. Practicing even. Then when the time came I just blurted it out totally naked, because that was the way it was sitting on my brain.

For a minute he didn't say anything. Just sort of sat there with a surprised look on his face, like I had maybe overheard he was an alien. Then he laughed a little and shook his head as he set the guitar aside. When he reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette, I knew I had him on the spot. He always smoked when I had him in a spot. He was wearing a faded blue denim shirt but it wasn't buttoned, and there were no cigarettes in the pocket. He started looking around for them.

"I guess that means yes." I picked a half-empty pack off the counter in front of me and tossed them to him.

"Not the way you probably think about it," he answered. He shook out a cigarette and lit it. "I work for Naval Intelligence. But it's a lot less glamorous than the movies make it out to be. Most of it's just work."

"Daniel, too?"

"He slipped in by accident about three years ago. We ended up in a situation he just happened to be in the middle of...and the kid worked his way out with us like a pro. Got a real cool nerve and the Navy noticed. Now he's in for some special training."

"Is that when you started calling him Hot Shot?"

"That's the time." He smiled like he was remembering. "I'd tell you about it but most of the information is still classified. A lot of what I do I can't talk about. It isn't that I don't want to, it's just part of the job. Suzie has a hard time with it sometimes."

"You're gone a lot, aren't you?"

"Off and on. But I'm stationed in Hawaii. I spend most of my time there. The Coopers are a pretty ordinary family in most ways."

"Where do I come in?"

"Right in with the ordinary Cooper family. Think you can handle that?"

"For how long? Until I get my act together and promise not to give Mom any more gray hairs?"

"Until you're old enough to make your own decisions."

"Mom doesn't want me anymore...does she." I had been thinking that for a long time. But when I actually said it out loud, it felt like a smack in the face. Like I lost something important and there was absolutely no way to get it back again.

"She wants what's best for you, Ellie. And she wants it enough to agree to make it permanent. Like I told you before, I didn't want to give you the option of going back and forth between us. That wouldn't be good for any of us. I only agreed to take you if it was for good."

"But I should have had a say in that kind of decision."

"It was a decision your mother and I had to make. You didn't know me well enough to even consider me as an option. Am I right?"

I didn't answer. It was totally obvious, anyway.

"I made the decision based on three things," he went on. "One: that you had pretty much decided your own fate with your mother. The way you were going, you were headed for trouble and wouldn't have lasted much longer there, anyway. Two: my own belief that the best place for a kid is with a parent. And three: I just plain wanted you back, kid...and I didn't want to miss the chance."

"But you hardly even know me."

"Ten years might be most of your life, Ellie, but it seems like yesterday to me. And to me, you're still my little girl. Even though you've grown up awfully pretty."

"I'm a brat, Joe," I admitted. "You can even ask Martin, he sees right through me. I've never been good for more than a few days at a time in my whole life! What if I can't make it?"

"You'll make it." He laughed.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you're starting off right. In case you haven't noticed, you're being honest—I mean really honest—for the first time since we've been together. And there's another thing."

"What."

"I'm a specialist in brats. Especially the Cooper variety. On account of having been one for quite a few years myself. Now, does that cover it?"

"Mostly."

"What did I leave out?"

"Suzie. What happens when I give her gray hairs?"

"Suzie's the queen of the family, kid. She loves us, puts up with us, and pretty much gets whatever she wants. She's a special lady. But I have a feeling you two are going to get along great. I'll tell you something, though..."

He tamped the cigarette out in a nearby ashtray and gave me a look that I knew was dead serious. "Even if she was the witch queen of the underworld, you'd still have to get along with her. Give her gray hairs and I'll turn you over my knee. That's just the way it is. Can you live with that?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Nope."

"Then what's the point?"

"The point is, half of what you do in life is not what you would choose if you had the choice. I just want you to know what's going on...and adjust. If you can do that, you've got it licked."

It's funny, but if anyone had talked to me like that a month ago, a week ago, even, I'd have been furious. I don't know how he did it, but Joe had a way of saying things that made me feel like he really cared. So, I didn't mind hearing those things.

It was sort of a relief, actually. To be honest, I was glad to have somebody that cared enough to want me around no matter how much of a brat I was. I wouldn't have minded if he told me we were going to live on the moon.

I felt like thanking him, but that seemed sort of dumb and mushy. Like thanking the doctor for giving you a shot, or the dentist for giving you a bill. Then I had this incredible urge to hug him, like when we were in Mexico. Only I didn't have the nerve. I don't know why. I was thinking about all this but I couldn't do any of it.

But I could at least be honest.

From now on, no matter what, I was going to be

perfectly honest with Joe. That's what I decided. And at the very split second I decided that, I got tempted to lie. Now, is that fickle, or what? But jeeze, being honest about the next question he asked meant I was going to have to come right out and admit I was a dumbo.

He said, "What's for dinner?"

For a minute I didn't say anything. Then I decided, if he could put up with me being a brat sometimes, he could probably put up with me being a dumbo, too. So, I took a deep breath and answered, "I don't know how to make anything but mac and cheese, or Jello. And I can't find either one. There isn't even a microwave."

"Well..." He got up and came over. "That's what they invented cookbooks for." He reached up to a shelf over the stove and took one down. "If you can read, you can cook. You want to make spaghetti? It's not mac and cheese, but it's close."

He thumbed through until he came to a well-worn page that was splattered with the obvious signs of other spaghetti makers. "I think we have everything you need. Just take your time, follow all the directions, and holler if you get stuck."

Then be rummaged through one of the cupboards until he came up with a bag of chips. "This will keep everybody quiet until it's ready."

"I'll try." I glanced over the recipe. It looked more complicated than mixing up a box cake.

"You'll do alright," he said. "And don't worry about us, we'll eat anything."

"Can I have that in writing?" I teased.

"Ask Hot Shot about the time he made a chocolate pie, and got the salt mixed up with the sugar. We ate it anyway."

"Really?"

"Well, not all of it. But we tried." Then he gave me a hug. When I was still looking at the recipe and it was the last thing I expected. But that wasn't half as surprising as the next thing. He kissed me on the cheek and whispered, "Don't worry about Daniel, kid. He can't stay mad forever."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Those were my secret, deepest down feelings that I wouldn't have said out loud even to myself. I never shared my feelings about guys with anyone—not even Mom.

So, how did he know about them?

24

My spaghetti was a little sticky but it was real spaghetti. And when I tried it again about a week later, it came out perfect. By that time, I discovered if I followed the directions to the letter, I could make practically anything in the book. Which made me feel pretty proud of myself. My record wasn't totally perfect.

There was the time I tried making brownies and they didn't look done to me, even though they had been in the oven for as long as the cookbook said they should. They ended up burnt on the bottom and I had to feed them to the fish.

When Daniel told me they finish cooking while they cool off, I realized if they told you to do something in that book, it was for a good reason. I guess it would have been as thick as an encyclopedia if it took space to explain why each time.

Anyway, Daniel was talking to me, again. Really talking, I mean. Not just waiting for me to say something first, then giving me a short answer. Neither of us had given in or apologized, though. It was like we were having some sort of contest to see who was the most stubborn.

But that was all pretty much under the surface. It's

practically impossible to hold a grudge when you're sailing. You're skimming along at a fast clip, the sunshine's wonderful, and the ocean is full of interesting things to look at. My favorite pastime was sunbathing on the very bow of the boat. I would stretch out on a soft towel, lying close enough to the edge to rest my chin on my arms and stare down at the water. I must have watched a hundred miles of ocean slip by that way.

And jellyfish.

There were tons of them. Most looked like little clear parachutes with long dangly tendrils trailing along. But a few I saw were the big poisonous kind, Portuguese Man-O-War, they were called. They were like huge red and black brains floating by and it gave me the creeps just to look at one.

I saw a few sharks but they never came close enough to really see what they looked like. Mostly, I'd just catch a glimpse of a triangle-shaped fin cutting through the water now and then. You could more or less tell, by the different sizes of the fins, how big they were. Maybe it was better that I couldn't see.

There were lots of flying fish. They were little things that would pop out of the water and skim along the surface a few yards, then disappear again. Sometimes the timing would be just right and one would cross paths with the Sonata and land on deck. Then they'd flop and flutter, trying to get back in the water again. We usually threw them back.

I was getting so used to living on a slant, I could make my way around on deck without holding on to much of anything, unless the seas were up, and there were long rollers or waves to toss us around. But mostly it was a

smooth and easy rainbow ride. Like living in a whole other world.

About halfway through the cruise, we had one of the most perfectly clear nights I ever saw in my life. There were about a billion stars everywhere and they looked so close, you could almost reach out and grab one. Totally awesome. It was my watch, and I was just enjoying being outside.

I had learned so much about sailing without even realizing it. I was surprised at myself sometimes. I knew the names for everything just from hearing everyone talk about them all the time. I knew how to watch the compass to make sure the self-steering gear was keeping us on course, and I knew how to adjust the sails if the direction or speed of the wind changed.

I was even starting to learn something about charts and navigation, and the way we knew where we were without any signposts or landmarks around. It was by calculating the stars.You took a measurement with this triangle-shaped instrument called a sextant, noted the exact time, then worked it all out mathematically with formulas you looked up in books. The method was so accurate you could tell within a quarter of a mile exactly where in the world you were.

Pretty impressive. It's a system that's been used for hundreds of years. They had electronic equipment on board to do that stuff, too. But for some reason nobody would explain, the Sonata was not dependent on electronics. Something about it lowering our "invisibility factor."

When I mentioned there wasn't exactly anyone around to see us out here, Daniel mumbled something

about there being other ways of seeing besides eyes. But about the time I was going to ask what that was supposed to mean, he got a dirty look from Joe. So I didn't ask. I just figured it was one of those Government things and dropped the subject.

I might be slow but I'm not stupid.

Anyway, it happened to be my watch on this fantastically clear night, and when Daniel came up to "shoot the stars" as the sailors say, I asked him which one he was going to use to get a fix on our position. You didn't have to use the same one all the time—you could even use the sun during the day, but it wasn't as accurate.

"Venus." He settled himself on the cabin-top and peered at the horizon through the sextant. "It's my favorite."

"Can I try?"

"Sure. Come on over and I'll show you how."

I only caught about half of what he was explaining, and I didn't see anything through the sextant at all. That's because when I sat down in front of him to look through while he held it, the feeling of being so close to him made my mind go blank.

"I can't," I murmured. "I can't...see a thing."

"That's impossible." He pulled me back against him so he could look through himself. "It's right there. Try again."

I tried. But he didn't let go of me and by that time, my heart was pounding so hard, I was sure he could feel it.

"You smell good, Ellie...like summertime."

"It's just tanning lotion," I answered.

He set the sextant down on the deck beside him and slowly tightened his arms around me. What a feeling—it

practically took my breath away.

"I wish I hadn't turned you in." He said it so quiet it was almost a whisper. "I feel like it broke some kind of bond between us. Like you want to shut me out."

"I don't want to shut you out, Daniel."

"Don't then. I'm sorry I made you go through all that. It's just...I was so sure you wanted to come back. I was surprised when you held out so long."

"I did want to come back," I admitted. "I wanted to come back with you when we were standing outside the theater. I just couldn't give in."

"You're one stubborn girl, Ellie Cooper."

"Like some other people I know. Did you really check the jail for drunks and disorderlies?"

"I sure did. I would have got my own butt kicked if I left you in any real trouble. In case you haven't noticed, you're like the Crown Jewels around here. It's worse than having to watch little Joe."

"Is he a handful?"

"All you Coopers are a handful."

"I've heard a few stories about the Martins, so I wouldn't talk."

"Then you've probably heard it's been a long time since I've had anyone to be close to. What would you say, Ellie, if I said I wanted to be close to you?"

"I don't know. I feel pretty close to you right now."

"Friends are important, but that's not what I—"

All of a sudden there was this sound like a jet of air being blasted out through a tunnel right next to us. Then, not ten feet away, this huge black shadow rose up out of the water and turned itself back into it again, like a giant wheel. It scared the daylights out of me. "It's alright, it's just a whale." Daniel stood up and pulled me up after him. "They head north in the spring. Come on up forward—maybe we can see him come up on the other side."

"Aren't they dangerous?" I wasn't so sure I wanted to see something that big, close up. He was bigger than the boat. "What if he rams us, or something?"

"They're peaceful. Unless you ram them first, that is. The great thing about sailboats—they're so quiet the whales think they're just another creature and come right up to you. Makes you feel like a matchstick, they're so big."

"I don't know if I want to feel like a matchstick!"

"Don't worry. If he gets too curious, we just turn on the motor. Then he won't like the sound and he'll leave."

"Maybe we should stay back by the motor."

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

Then the most incredible thing happened. While Daniel was moving out onto the very tip of the bowsprit and pulling me along after him—that's how brave I was, I had to practically be dragged up there—this giant, massive tail came up out of the water right in front of us. It just hung there suspended for a minute about twenty feet up, like a wide graceful "V" dripping seawater down in sparkling little streams all around.

Then, it slipped back into the water without so much as a splash and disappeared again. Two seconds later, there was another rushing, jet-like blast of air—only it was about forty feet off the bow this time. The shiny black back circled up and into the sea again...definitely on his way somewhere, and he wasn't wasting time.

"Just crossing paths," Daniel said, looking after him. "He isn't even going to give us another pass."

"That was...amazing." I leaned way out over the rail to enjoy the rising up and down surge over the water. "I saw some killer whales in a tank at SeaWorld once, but it wasn't anything compared to this."

"You like it out here, don't you?"

"I love it out here." I looked over at him. He was leaning back into the round pulpit rail with his arms crossed—perfectly relaxed—like he was on an apartment balcony instead of suspended out over a froth of moving ocean. "Do you like it? Sailing, I mean...for weeks at a time?"

"It's the next best thing to flying," he replied. "I've spent half my life on this boat. It's like home to me."

"It scared me at first. But once you get used to the feelings, they're sensational. Especially out here on the tip like this—it's like a carnival ride."

"Come out here all the way," he said, "and I'll show you something that really feels wild."

I knew what kind of an invitation that was—I recognized it plain as day. I'd been around enough guys to know the warning signals, and how to evade an advance if I wanted to. Only I didn't want to. Just hearing him say that gave me a feeling like going down fast in an elevator, and this time it wasn't the boat.

I guess I must have hesitated, because he held his hand out to me with a half-teasing smile and said, "Afraid?"

"No." But I was lying. His hand closed over mine and as he pulled me toward him, my heart started doing cartwheels again. When he let go, put both hands on my waist and brought me even closer, I practically fainted.

"Close your eyes," he coaxed. And when I did-

The Kidnapping of Mary

expecting to be kissed—he lifted me right into the air instead. The feeling of being whisked off your feet when you're already nearly flying was so startling I reacted without thinking.

I was so sure I was going overboard, I lost whatever composure I had and threw my arms around his neck, holding on for life, and feeling for one split second like we were both going over. Then he laughed with the sheer pleasure of catching me by surprise.

"Put me down!" It came out louder than I expected, and more like a cry for help than a demand.

"Shhh—you'll get me in trouble hollering like that." He lowered me down slowly, but I don't remember getting there.

Before my feet even touched down, he kissed me.

25

I heard Joe coming before he actually climbed up on deck. I knew it was Joe because he had the next watch and was sitting down in the galley, drinking coffee and reading. Martin wasn't on until midnight and still asleep.

Moving away from Daniel was like trying to free myself from some magnetic force—all I wanted to do was be next to him. For the rest of my life. I don't know what came over me, but whatever it was...it was electric.

I wondered if he felt like that.

Joe tucked a thermos of coffee he brought with him into its place beneath the stern-seat, and turned to us as we came back to the cockpit to join him.

"You just missed seeing a whale," I said. "Did you hear it? It was like air pouring out of a giant hose when he took a breath."

"I heard him. But why do I feel the power of the moon so strong out here?" He directed the question more to Daniel than me, so I just stood there. "There's magic sparking all over the place—am I right, Hot Shot?"

"It's a great night," Daniel picked up the sextant where he had left it. "I was trying to get a fix on Venus."

"What did you get?"

"I didn't read it yet. We got interrupted."

"Time for bed, Ellie," Joe said.

"I'm not tired," I answered. "Can't I stay out here with you and Daniel?"

"No, not this time."

"Why not? Jeeze—you've never sent me to bed before. What did I do—revert from fifteen to twelve?"

He didn't say anything—neither of them did. But the way Joe was acting, I had a feeling he heard a lot more than the whale. "It's not like we were doing anything wrong," I reasoned. "How could we? I don't know what there is to worry about."

"Do I have anything to worry about, Martin?" Joe turned to Daniel again. That was the first time I ever heard him call Daniel by his last name, and the way Daniel responded, I knew it was an "I mean business" type thing.

"I...guess so, sir," Daniel finally answered.

"That's what I thought. Say good night, Ellie."

"Good night, Joe," I teased.

But the way he put a hand on my shoulder and steered me toward the cabin-way, I could tell he wasn't in the mood for teasing. We were down the ladder and halfway back to my room when I stopped and said, "What are you making such a big deal out of this for? You like Daniel, love him like a son, you told me—so, what have you got against me liking him, too?"

"I don't have anything against you liking him. You can talk with him, fish with him...when we get to Hawaii I'll even let him whirl you around the dance floor a few times on your sixteenth birthday. If you want, you can write letters to him when he goes back to the Academy."

"You mean I can't date him?"

"As long as your idea of a date fits in to the kind of

things I just said. Sure, you can date him."

"What are you, one of those old-fashioned types?"

We were at a standoff there in the tiny hallway. Because of the slant, he leaned back against the curve of the lower wall and propped a foot up against the higher one to make himself more comfortable. "Ellie…" He sighed and was quiet for a moment. Like he was thinking of the best way to tell me I had to be locked in a closet or something, until I was thirty.

I put my hands in the pockets of my jeans and sighed too, because I had heard this speech before. And deep down, I guess I was hoping Joe would be different than Mom and everyone else I'd heard it from. Just because he had been so open and honest about everything. Let's face it, he had a pretty exciting lifestyle, what I'd seen so far, and I hoped his attitudes about having fun were a little more free than most people. That's the way it is in the movies, anyway.

What a disappointment.

"Ellie, do you remember when you were about three, and you tried to touch the flame of a candle because it was pretty?"

"I remember I burned myself," I answered. I wasn't up to any object lessons.

"I didn't tell you never to touch fire again. I just said it was hot. That it was pretty, but it was dangerous, too. So, you'd have to wait until you were older before you could handle it."

"Are you trying to say I can't handle my feelings for Daniel?"

"I'm saying you can't handle whatever it was that was going on between you two out there. It's too hot, Ellie. And you're just not old enough yet."

"If I'm not old enough for those kind of feelings, then why do I get them?" I challenged. "I'll bet you couldn't ignore them when you were my age."

"I've been paying half my life for playing with fire, baby. When I was just about your age. The last thing I want is for the same thing to happen to you."

"You can't just turn off liking someone, you know."

"Like him all you want, just don't play with the hot stuff. You know what I mean by hot stuff, kid? Or do I have to spell it out for you."

"I know what it means. But it's not like I haven't been around, you know. I think Daniel is probably the nicest guy I've ever known. So, how can you expect me to make any guarantees?"

"You let me make the guarantees."

"What are you gonna do? Keep an eye on us all the time from now on? Lay down the rules and draw the lines, or even make him behave, like you did out there? I'll feel like I'm in prison."

"Then you better get used to it."

"I never had a chaperone before."

"Well, you have one now. So, if Daniel wants to spend time with you, he's going to have to clear it with me from now on. And he's going to have to tow the line and treat you like the princess you are, or you don't give him the time of day. You got that?"

I've never liked being told what to do. It's like petting a cat's fur backwards to me—and I was going to tell him that. Only a whole new feeling came over me then. It was deeper down than the one we were talking about, and it must have been a whole lot stronger at the moment. Because it overrode the other one like a flood.

No one had ever called me a princess before.

Or cared if I was spoiled. If I was hurt or cheated, it was my own problem for letting myself get into the situation. What I got was an I-told-you-so from Mom and it serves you right for being so wild in the first place. "Have a little pride" was her answer to everything. I would, if I could figure out just exactly what "pride" was. Or what it had to do with anything.

I was nobody's princess.

But being called one did something to me.

Being called a princess and having someone say they wanted to take care of you...in those times when you couldn't take care of yourself...and protect you...sort of washed over me like a cool breeze. I wanted to be treated like that.

Jeeze, doesn't everybody?

So, instead of snapping back, I was quiet for awhile. I was trying to think of a way to tell Joe what it meant to me that he really cared. Because that's what all this boiled down to. How he cared about being a dad to me—now not just because I was something that happened in his life fifteen years ago. The truth was, I loved him for that. And all of a sudden it seemed like the most important thing in the world to tell him.

But I just stood there.

I guess that made him think he'd been a little too hard on me, talking that way, and I was upset about it. Because he put a hand under my chin and said, "Sorry kid, but that's the way it has to be." Like he didn't like having to upset me, but he would if he had to.

And that made me feel good, too. Sort of safe. Maybe

even special.

"I'll tell you something," he went on, like he was still trying to make up for it. "When the time comes that you can handle that kind of fire...if Daniel's still around...then it'll be fine with me. Now, can you live with that?"

Live with it—how had I lived this long without it? How had I made it this far without Joe? Just thinking about it sort of choked me up.

"I think..." I just had to tell him, no matter how hard it was. "I think..."

But that was as far as I got. Finally, I just threw my arms around his neck and blurted out, "Oh, Daddy, Daddy, I think you're the absolute greatest!" Which wasn't exactly what I meant to say, either.

But it was a start.

ABOUT COUSIN SUMMERS

Cousin Summers is a rather mysterious person who lives on a remote island and writes books. Because of this, a lot of rumors have sprung up. Things like how one person can write so many different kinds of stories, or even whether this person is a man, or a woman. Or possibly just a whole lot of cousins. But we all know where rumors come from. The thing is, when you don't have much contact with the rest of the world, it is sometimes best to have an assistant.

Except that not many people would consider living on a remote island and working in a lighthouse (really?) just to help out some mysterious writer who would rather not go anywhere. Most especially if the job actually required two people. Which isn't so unusual since most jobs do. If you have done any amount of work, yourself, you will know that, already. This one happens to include housekeeping and general care and upkeep of an old lighthouse. What kind of people would do that sort of thing?

Well, I'll tell you, right now, it's the kind of people who have adventure in their blood.

Which is exactly how I, Lilly Maytree (or, Miss Lilly, as they call me around there), and my adventuring Captain husband, came to connect up with such a mysterious person. I like writing books, myself, and I definitely like adventure. There was only one thing I didn't like and that was the housework. But an agreement was reached (one can always come to an agreement if you talk long enough) where I would only be required to do light housekeeping (job description changed to Light Housekeeper) as long as I did the cooking, too. Something that worked out fine all the way around because I love to cook.

There are some others who live on this island, as well. But the most important thing for now is that if you want to know anything more about Cousin Summers (the Mysterious), you will have to ask me. Sometimes I can be talked into sharing a bit more than you've learned here... and sometimes I can't. Meanwhile, you are welcome to try. Simply write to:

MissLilly @SummersIslandPress.com

It never hurts to ask.

Lilly Maytree

Summers Island Fall, 2018

Also by COUSIN SUMMERS

The Young Heroics Book One KNIGHTS OF THE EMPIRE (middle grade)

> The Young Heroics Book Two SPIES FOR LIFE (middle grade)

The Young Scientifics Book One RETURN TO THE DINOSAUR PLANET (middle grade)

A Note to Readers...

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