

## Chapter 29

Endless oily gray waves rolled westward, slowing the *Spray* as if it dragged a sea anchor, yet offering a boost when it passed over the crest. For a few moments, each wave restored life to a yacht almost becalmed in the stifling air. Six hundred miles south of the Equator, the heat was intolerable—the deck too hot for bare feet, the glare from the sails agonizing without dark sunglasses, clothing clinging with sweat. I dozed, stretched out on the cockpit seat, my New York Yankees cap pulled down to block out the blistering sun, waiting for a breeze to arrive.

He came on deck ten minutes before noon to check on his crew. He looked around, prepared to find fault, the sails not set properly, navigation incomplete, the cockpit untidy. “It’s still there,” he observed after a while.

A boat had been on the horizon since we’d left São Luis two weeks ago. Only fishing trawlers and yachts traveled that slowly, and almost none of the latter. People who wanted to go south from the Caribbean first headed east to the Canary Islands near Africa to avoid the current racing up the South American coast. Only my father, or a fool would sail the course we were on.

He brought out his binoculars and focused on the tiny speck off the stern, almost lost among undulating waves. It was too far away to determine more than it didn’t have sails. Then, he checked the compass heading and made a note in his log before he nudged my leg.

“I’ll take the rest of your watch,” he said. “I made tuna fish sandwiches.”

The tuna was fresh, caught from the stern with a trailing line and a silver lure, 60 pounds of iridescent green fish as tall as my sister. All of a sudden, I was hungry.

“Put on Tchaikovsky,” he called after me.

I stopped in the companionway. “I’m tired of Tchaikovsky.”

“Then pick one you like. I haven’t heard Stravinsky’s *Firebird* in a while.”

“Anything as long as it’s by a Commie composer.”

“How many times do I have to tell you to stop muttering? Anyway, it’s pre-revolution Russian.”

I inspected his long rows of CDs, avoiding Stravinsky and works by Tchaikovsky that I’d heard so often I could hum with the orchestra, finally selecting one of my father’s homemade recordings. He’d labeled it ‘A B, New York 1995.’

“Your watch doesn’t end for another ten minutes.” Ben didn’t look up from his encyclopedia. Despite leaving the vast mouth of the Amazon River astern three weeks ago, he still read about its plant, animal and fish species, from waking up until falling asleep.

He looked like a bad-tempered smurf, his hair greasy and disheveled, still tinted purple from when we crossed the Equator. At the time, we were stuck in the Intertropical Convergence Zone, hot and no wind, yet tradition demanded we celebrate with bizarre rituals. I counted myself lucky—there was no one to see my blond hair was dyed blue.

I yawned and gnawed on a sandwich, stale homemade bread with a slab of tuna, not paying attention to him going over the mating habits of piranha, or my sister’s chatter in the aft cabin. As far as I was concerned, the southern hemisphere differed only by latitude and opposite seasons, and my choice from my father’s music library. Although I hadn’t heard the CD before, it was

familiar, a piano and violin, a melody like an old friend who appeared out of nowhere.

Suddenly, my father stomped down the companionway. “I didn’t tell you to put that on.” He stabbed his finger on the eject button. Flamboyant, African-inspired music blared from the radio.

“You told me to pick one. It sounds like Tchaikovsky.” It reminded me of his *First Piano Concerto*—a little awkward, yet ingenious.

My father stared past me, at Slocum’s photograph on the bulkhead over my head. He was a shadow from a century ago, with a lot in common with my father, not the least being single-mindedness and a need to control. Their physical similarity ended with their goatees. Captain Slocum was very nearly bald, while my father’s hair was like mine—sun-bleached disobedience, only much darker.

“There’s no harm in listening to it, John,” my mother said from behind him.

“It’s not something I want to discuss.” He’d been in a bad mood since we entered the North Brazil Current. It pushed us backwards whenever the wind eased.

“At least tell him why.”

“I don’t have the time. Please don’t play it again.” He started back up the companionway. “Get some sleep, Victor. There’s a storm on the way. A bad one,” he added over his shoulder.

I wanted to ask ‘how bad.’ Instead, I glared at his back.

“We’ll head out to sea,” he added.

Staying close to the coast offered less current and safe harbors, the nearest 60 miles behind us; however, no one dared question our captain’s decision.

What little wind there was, soon disappeared. The *Spray* wallowed, the engine pushing us towards the oncoming storm, halyards wearily slapping the mast. The sea, like the sky, was the color of lead in every direction. It made me uneasy until I fell asleep. When I woke up, the wind was back, blustery gusts that turned the sea even darker.

My father kept a list of things that we needed to do in case of a storm. Down below, we put things away, prepared food, and tied down anything that could come loose; while he strapped the dinghy to the deck and tied down the sails. He came down to lock the hatches and portholes. Satisfied that we'd secured everything, he took me aside.

"I'll need you on deck. Everyone else will be throwing up."

While he dragged the storm sails from the bow locker, I pulled on my plastic trousers and jacket. Bright yellow was supposedly safer in foul weather. My boots came to my knees. I tightened my life-jacket and safety harness and followed him up the stairs. The sky was dark with billowing smoky trails under the clouds.

"The wind's swinging around. It won't be long now," he said as we raised the storm sails. They were tiny but tough, built to withstand winds that could rip other sails to shreds. When he was back in the cockpit, he turned to me. "Do you remember anything from when you were three?"

"I remember you building the *Spray*."

"You were four when I laid the keel. How about before we moved to Arcadia Park?" I shrugged a response. "Do you remember hearing that music before?"

"Should I?"

"When you were three, you stayed with my parents for the summer."

"Wasn't that when they died?"

“Maybe it’s better this way. Some things are best forgotten.”

“Like how I got these?” I asked, looking at the burn scars on my forearms. My father looked too, only for a moment before he turned away. “What were they like?”

He cocked his head. “You don’t remember them at all, do you?”

I shook my head. Suddenly, my skin crawled. It hurt to breath. My ears felt like they were going to explode. He opened his mouth to say something. No sound came out. The *Spray’s* masts and rigging hummed. When, I looked up, a vast, dark funnel blocked out the clouds.

“Microburst! Hold on!” my father screamed.

It plunged down, radiating out rather than swirling up like a tornado, getting louder until my head throbbed. With a roar, the wind heaved the *Spray* onto her side. The bow dipped deeply, the deck canting at a gravity-defying angle. I plummeted down, flung from the cockpit towards the sea. Only the lifelines saved me. My father hauled me back. I clung to him, my gut churning. The *Spray* spun around and lurched over a huge wave before slewing into the trough, the storm sails cracking like a 21 gun salute. It ended as abruptly as it began. Miraculously, nothing broke.

My heart thundered. I was certain we wouldn’t survive. As far as I could see, the sea boiled, whipped white, sweeping towards us. The roar grew louder, like an out-of-control locomotive bearing down, until blinding sheets of water crashed onto the *Spray*. I thought we’d roll over for sure. My father fought back, gripping the wheel with white knuckles and staring blindly ahead. I’d never been terrified, or as uncomfortable—the front of my jacket slapped my neck red. Sheets of spray cascaded over me, finding openings in the sleeves and under my hood, brine sloshing through my clothes, chafing cold, clammy skin. For hours, I rubbed salt from my eyes, making them itch even more.

The waves were more frightening in the dark, invisible until a wall of water loomed up before us, a battering ram that shoved the *Spray* out of the way. A sideways surge preceded each wave; the stronger the rolling motion, the bigger the wave. There was no way to avoid the waves—even the smallest were bigger than any wave I'd ever seen. The *Spray* rose up to greet them, as if stubbornness could make the waves get out of her way. As the bow lifted, hundreds of gallons of seawater gushed over the gunwales with a deafening thump, swamping the deck and flooding the cockpit ankle-deep. My father clung to the wheel, his safety harness bracing him against the torrents of water, conducting Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, which played over and over again.

The waves grew even larger into the night, white crests easily half the height of the mast, sometimes breaking like surf. Fearing his boat would capsize, my father hove to, his tiny storm trysail sheeted tightly and the rudder locked in the opposite position. We waited out the storm with the bow pointing towards the wind, the *Spray* rolling and bucking incessantly.

After one wave lifted the *Spray* so high it seemed we'd never get over it, he laughed maniacally. "I wish Sarah was here to see this," he shouted after the crest passed. The *Spray* charged wildly down the other side.

I cowered in the corner of the cockpit, fighting seasickness and a persistent fear that the masts would break, that the next wave would shatter a hatch and we'd sink. "This is crazy. We should head for shore," I shouted back.

"We're safer at sea than entering a strange port in a storm, especially at night."

"At least they'll find our bodies washed up on the beach."

"These waves are nothing to worry about. I built her to sail through a hurricane."

Another gigantic wave slammed into the bow, shaking the *Spray* violently. Water streamed down his front. Like Joshua Slocum, my father was unyielding.

+ + +

In the middle of the night, the wind slowly lessened. We took turns keeping watch, drifting in and out of restless sleep. The storm blew itself out the next day, leaving a long, rolling swell and a steady breeze that pushed us towards Rio de Janeiro.