

HUNTER CRISPIAN

&

The Little Brother of War

Chapter One

Fast Break

I was streaking down the field in Meadowlands Stadium, cradling the ball in my lacrosse stick, dodging defensemen left and right. Sudden death overtime. The next team to score would win the New York State High School Championship and by some miracle, I had the ball.

Adrenaline surged through my body as I flew downfield, my feet barely touching the ground. Over twenty thousand spectators filled the stands—a record audience for a lacrosse game, according to the announcer. But I was only vaguely aware of the roar of the crowd as I sprinted, my heart pounding in my ears, senses on high alert.

Frantic footsteps closed in behind me and I felt the rush of air as a long pole desperately swiped at my arm, missing by inches.

Faster, I thought, urging my legs forward, not daring to steal a glance at my pursuer. One hundred yards ahead, the goalie crouched in the net, alone and defenseless. Frozen, unsure of which way to move. I sprinted straight at him, watching his shoulders hunch as he tried to anticipate the direction of my shot.

And then he shifted, almost imperceptibly. A slight movement to his right. I guess he didn't know that I was left-handed. How could he? I was only a freshman and had never faced him before.

I made my move, faking right in a hitch-step, before pivoting left and streaking across the crease. The goalie's head whipped around, looking back over his shoulder as

he realized his mistake. But it was too late; I'd already launched myself into the air, firing a side-arm shot to the goalie's blind side as I dove to the ground.

As my left shoulder slammed the turf, I looked up to follow the shot. And that's when everything began to move in slow motion, like in an instant replay on TV. The ball floated like a bubble toward the goal, revolving in slow turns on its perfect path as the world around me came into sharp focus. With the eyes of a hawk, I spotted every detail. The smudge of dirt on the spinning ball, the goalie's stunned face as he lunged, and the wave that swept through the stadium as the fans rose to their feet.

So this is what it's like to be in the zone, I thought as I lay on the ground, holding my breath in anticipation. And just as the ball was about to bounce into the net, POOF—it disappeared.

The loud thrumming of a helicopter rotor blade woke me with a start. My eyes flew open and I sat up, whacking my head on the bunk above me.

"Ouch!" I shouted, rubbing at the knot that had already begun to form on my forehead.

Just a dream, I realized, my heart sinking. *It had seemed so real.*

My bed started rocking as water sloshed loudly against the hull.

"Why can't we live in an apartment like normal people?" I moaned, flopping down onto my pillow as the boat lurched again, sending my textbooks toppling to the floor of my little cabin. I glanced at the shelf that was hinged to the wall. The digital clock sat there alone; it didn't slide anymore. Not since I'd battened it down with Velcro.

We'd been living aboard our sailboat in the 79th Street Boat Basin for close to three years but I still missed our old apartment—it didn't rock like a seesaw in the wind and dump me out of bed like a sack of potatoes.

"Six thirty. So *early*. And it's Saturday!" I groaned, pulling a pillow over my head.

But the deafening WHOMP-WHOMP-WHOMPING of the rotor blades continued to grow louder.

"What the...?" I asked aloud to no one in particular.

"It's a news helicopter, Hunter," my ten-year-old sister Tilly explained, suddenly appearing in my doorway, her hands gripping the doorframe to keep from falling as the boat wobbled again.

I sat up, more carefully this time, and peered out the little porthole above my bed. The helicopter was hovering perilously low above the surface of the Hudson River, just off our bow. Only a few yards separated the whirling rotor blades from our seventy-foot mast. One false move and the spinning blades would clip our mast, plunging the chopper into the river. Squinting through my porthole, I could see the pilot struggling at the controls as a cameraman leaned out the open door, snapping pictures.

"What's happening? Why are they taking pictures of *Lost Horizon*?" I asked, whipping around to look at Tilly.

My dad had named our boat *Lost Horizon* after his favorite book--the story about a guy who had dropped out of society on his quest to find a hidden utopia called Shangri-La. A boat's name can tell you a lot about a person.

“Read this,” Tilly said, thrusting her brand new iPad toward me. As usual, my genius baby sister was way ahead of me. I glanced down at the screen and saw the cover of the *New York Post*.

Ever since my dad had the brilliant idea of moving our family onto a sailboat in the middle of the Hudson River, he had to arrange to have the morning papers delivered electronically. Unfortunately for me, they still hadn’t figured out how to deliver pizza that way.

“HEDGE HOGS” blazed the headline above a full-page photo of Chadwick Alistair Pembroke, my dad’s boss at a hedge fund called C.A.P. Investors.

My eyes bulged as I studied the front page

“Billionaire hedge fund manager Chadwick Pembroke, pictured here at his 40th birthday party at the Taj Mahal, is under investigation for siphoning investors’ funds for personal use. Recent purchases under investigation include: a custom-built 200-foot yacht named ‘Dividends,’ a brand new Gulfstream G-IV jet, a chateau in Provence, and a private island in the Seychelles,” I read aloud in disbelief.

“Not exactly subtle,” Tilly observed as I groaned, remembering that party at the Taj

Mahal. My folks had gushed about it for weeks.

“Look closely at the picture,” Tilly urged. I touched the screen to zoom in, catching my breath as my parents’ faces came into focus. The camera had captured them both, dancing and laughing, just behind Pembroke and some Oscar-winning actress.

My heart skipped a beat. It obviously hadn’t taken the press long to figure out my parents’ identities.

“They’re assuming that Dad was in on Pembroke’s scheme,” I moaned. “And now the whole world is going to believe it, too.”

“That’s crazy!” Tilly said. “Dad would never steal.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” I agreed, shaking my head.

Would he? An ominous feeling gripped my heart as I remembered the sailing trip.

Just six months earlier, my dad had dropped that bombshell on Tilly and me during dinner. I should have known that something was up when I saw that Mom was serving lobster. We only ate lobster on special occasions. As I wrestled with a claw, my dad tapped his fork on his wine glass.

“Tonight I have a very special announcement,” he began. “Starting this June, once school gets out, I will be taking a one year sabbatical from work.”

Tilly and I froze, staring at him, our shell-crackers poised in mid-air.

“And you kids will be taking a year off from school, too,” he added.

Tilly’s fork clattered to her plate and her lower lip began to quiver. She was one of those absurdly smart kids who attended Hasting’s Academy for the gifted. And she absolutely *loved* that school. But my dad didn’t seem to notice Tilly’s distress. Like a little kid with a secret, he couldn’t wait to share his big news.

“Remember that year-long sailing trip Mom and I have talked about for so long?” he asked, raising his glass and clinking it against my mom’s. “We are finally going to take it!”

“A year? Living on the boat at sea?” I cried.

It was my turn to drop a fork. And I had thought that living on a boat in New York City had been bad. But in New York I had a life. A good one. I could get around

town just fine on my skateboard. I played lacrosse for Brinkley, the private school league's number one school. I had a best friend *and* a girlfriend. On weekends we went to dinner and a movie. There were great concerts at the Beacon Theater, just around the corner. Bands played live music at the neighborhood cafes. There was always *something* to do in the city that never slept.

"It's a prison sentence," I stammered, staring across the table at my father.

"Geez, how about a little enthusiasm, guys?" he asked, shaking his head. "You know most people would give their left arms to have this opportunity. This is going to be the adventure of a lifetime. I promise."

But I wasn't listening. My mind was racing, trying to think of a way out.

"I can live with Chase for the year. I'm sure his family wouldn't mind," I pleaded.

My father shook his head.

"How 'bout Grandma?"

"She's not well. It'd be too much for her," he shot back.

"Send me to boarding school, then!" I cried, throwing up my hands. "Just don't make me go!"

But it turned out that what I wanted didn't really matter. I was going on this trip whether I liked it or not. To make peace, my parents allowed me to invite Chase along. For the whole summer. Thank God his parents had given their consent. They'd been friends with my parents for years, had sailed with us on occasion and had the utmost confidence in my parents' sailing ability. I just prayed they didn't change their minds after they'd read the morning papers.

Was the timing of this trip really just a coincidence, or was my father running from something? Running scared?

I looked up from the iPad, raising my eyebrows in Tilly's direction.

"What? No way!" she insisted vehemently, tossing her blond curls. "Daddy may be eccentric, but he's not a crook!"

I shook my head, wishing I could have shared her conviction. As smart as she was, Tilly was still only ten. She still drank that little kid Kool-Aid—the one that convinced kids that their parents were infallible.

I combed my fingers through my hair, trying to make sense of it all.

"You're probably right, Tills," I finally replied, pulling a Brine lacrosse tee shirt over my head and trying to push aside the doubt that continued to claw at me. "Just because Dad went to that party doesn't prove he's guilty. And spending a year on a sailboat may be crazy, but it's certainly not extravagant," I added. "After all, Lost Horizon isn't exactly a mega yacht."

"Come on," I said, tousling her hair. "Race you up top."

As I dashed up the companionway stairs and emerged on deck, I spotted my parents standing on the bow.

My mom clutched at her nightgown with one hand while gripping the bow rail with the other, steadying herself as Lost Horizon pitched and rolled. Her long, brown hair danced around her face in the blustery wake of the whirling blades. Dressed only in boxers, my dad stared up at the chopper, waving his arms angrily, his shouts drowned by the rotor's deafening roar. I couldn't help but think how vulnerable and defenseless they both looked, trying in vain to ward off the looming invaders.

Since they had their backs to us, neither of them noticed when Tilly and I arrived on deck. But apparently the cameraman did. He suddenly swiveled around, training his giant zoom lens on Tilly and me.

“Noooo!” my mom shouted, swinging around as she spotted us, her face freezing in an anguished mask.

But it was too late. The reporters had gotten what they’d come for. The cameraman grinned slyly, waving the fingers on one hand as the helicopter banked and veered away.

For the next two hours, my parents huddled in their cabin, whispering. I could hear my dad’s voice rising, followed by my mom’s anxious shushing.

When I couldn’t stand it anymore, I turned on my computer and watched lacrosse videos on YouTube. But unable to contain her curiosity, Tilly continued to eavesdrop, pinning her ear to the master cabin door.

When the door swung opened, Tilly scrambled down the hallway, escaping in the nick of time. My parents emerged, looking grim but determined.

“Do me a favor, Hunter. Mom and I have to go to a meeting. Will you stay here with Tilly while we’re gone? Keep an eye on things?” my dad asked, pausing in my doorway.

Only it wasn’t really a question. I could tell from the strained expression on his face that I’d better not argue. Although he would never admit it, I knew that my dad was worried about leaving us alone at a mooring ball in the middle of the Hudson River.

Lots of things can go wrong on a boat. It’s nothing at all like living in a house. For one thing, houses don’t sink when they leak. And, if a house happens to burst into

flames, at least the occupants don't have to jump overboard and swim for shore. I also don't think that people living in houses spend much time worrying about getting rammed by things like supertankers and mega yachts.

Why couldn't we just dock at the marina, like normal people, I wondered.

If we were located at the marina and something happened, we could just step off the boat onto the safety of the dock. But, no, that would have been too easy. Too conventional. My dad hated conventional.

Great, I thought miserably. I had plans to meet Heather for a movie.

My dad cleared his throat, raising his eyebrows to remind me that I still hadn't answered his question.

"Yes, sir," I mumbled miserably. "When will you be back?" I added, not caring if he heard the disappointment in my voice.

My dad shot me a withering look and I felt the blood rush to my face.

"When we're done."

I'd never seen my dad like this. Stressed out, angry. I hung my head and decided against mentioning that I had plans of my own.

"I'm going to tune the radio to 72, in case you need me," he said, turning to climb the companionway stairs. "Now come up top and help us shove off."

Ten minutes later, after my parents were safely seated in the inflatable rubber dinghy that bounced and bobbed off Lost Horizon's stern, Tilly and I waved goodbye.

My dad looked up at me and nodded. I guess he'd decided that I was ready. That he no longer needed to review the emergency procedure checklist with me for the millionth time. That he'd trained me well.

He'd already put me through countless, exhausting hours of exercises and dry runs. Emergency simulations and drills. We'd rehearsed them until my reactions had become second nature. Automatic. So that if an emergency occurred and panic started to overtake me, I could still perform. Without having to think.

I already knew how to hail the Coast Guard on the VHF radio emergency frequency and how to engage the emergency life raft. I could also launch a rocket flare, save a drowning victim, dress a wound, set a splint, and administer CPR. I could swim a mile in the ocean, hike five miles up a mountain and survive for a weekend while camping in the woods. Alone. I even knew where dad hid the loaded shotgun, on a shelf in his cabin. And I was trained to use it, if necessary. My dad called all of this training "necessary preparation." I just called it ridiculous.

So when I watched my parents putter off in the little dinghy, leaving us alone at anchor, I wasn't the least bit nervous. I was just pissed.

"A news helicopter? Awesome!" Chase shouted excitedly when I finally reached him on Skype. "Your picture could be in tomorrow's paper!"

"Oh, great," I moaned. "I can see it now...the headline will read: SON OF A SWINDLER! How am I ever going to show my face at school on Monday?"

I stared at my computer screen, watching Chase squirm on the webcam as he struggled to think of something to say.

"Well, only one more month 'til we leave," he offered brightly. "By the time you get back next year, this will be old news."

I couldn't help but smile. Leave it to Chase to find the bright side of the worst possible situation. It helped a little knowing that he'd be there for me on Monday, when

all the other guys at school avoided me like the plague. Since we'd first met, back in kindergarten, Chase had always been there, sticking up for me, watching my back.

After we'd made a plan to meet up in Riverside Park to throw the lax ball around later that day, Chase and I signed off.

Then I picked up the phone to call Heather and my heart began to race.

What if she'd heard the news? Won't take my call? Wants to break up?

Not that I could blame her. Who'd want date the son of a suspected felon, anyway?

I took a deep breath as the phone began to ring. One, two, three rings...

My heart felt like it would explode. I resisted the impulse to hit the "end" button, to call back when the dust had settled. Only I couldn't hang up because I knew that Heather's phone would betray me—it would list my number under incoming calls. She would know that I'd called and hung up. Like a chicken. A loser.

"Hi!" Heather answered cheerfully. She sounded breathless, as if she'd been running to the phone.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Her voice sounded normal, happy. And I knew that she wasn't just being polite, either. Heather wasn't like other girls. She didn't have a phony bone in her body. "Real" is the word that Tilly used to describe her. Chase, on the other hand, just called her "smokin' hot."

"How *are* you?" she asked in a concerned voice. Then she listened sympathetically as I recounted our incident with the reporters, agreeing emphatically when I professed my dad's innocence. When I told her I was stuck on the boat, that I had

to break our date, I could hear the twinge of disappointment in her voice. But she quickly covered it up, probably realizing that my day had already been bad enough.

“Catch that movie tomorrow? And maybe some frozen hot chocolate at Serendipity?”

I asked, trying not to sound too eager. I wanted to squeeze in as much time as I could with her. After all, we only had twenty-seven days left.

Even though Heather had promised to wait for me over the year I’d be gone, I knew the chances were pretty good she’d have a new boyfriend by the time I returned. I wasn’t *stupid*. Heather was the kind of girl who could have just about any guy she wanted. In fact I was still trying to figure out what in the world she was doing with *me*.

It was after nine p.m. when I finally heard the putter of the dinghy engine approaching. Tilly’s feet padded halfway down the companionway stairs, her binoculars hanging from her neck. She never went anywhere without those binoculars. It was part of her CIA operative training, she claimed.

“Check out Riverside Park!” she cried. “There are reporters and cameras and lights everywhere! You should have seen Daddy! The reporters were all over him like a swarm of mosquitoes.”

I dashed up the stairs after Tilly and stepped onto the deck, shivering in the chilly night air. My dad had just finished raising the dinghy out of the water with the little crane-like davit mounted on our stern. He did not look happy.

“We can’t stay here,” he announced, brushing by me and jumping down into the dug-out area of the cockpit. I watched as he tore the protective plastic covers off the GPS and weather computer screens and switched the machines on.

“What’s going on?” Tilly cried, rushing after him.

“These reporters are going to hound us 24/7. They’re relentless. And I am *not* about to hide out here, like a criminal. A prisoner on my own boat.”

“So what are we going to do?” I asked tentatively, my heart starting to trip.

My dad tore his eyes off the weather computer screen to look at me.

“Listen, I know that it is sudden, but we’re leaving New York. Tonight.”

The sky seemed to reel above my head.

“Tonight? What about school? Exams? The playoffs? I can’t leave *tonight!*” I protested, my voice rising.

“Lower your voice,” my dad hissed. Voices can carry long distances over water and he probably assumed that the reporters were listening.

“I have already spoken to Mr. Weatherly about your exams,” my dad explained, lowering his voice. “He was kind enough to agree that you and Chase can take your finals on the boat, with Mom acting as proctor. And I’ve cleared everything with his folks, too. Unless you don’t want Chase to come along anymore...”

My blood began to boil but I didn’t dare utter another word. My dad never made idle threats.

“We’re leaving at midnight. First stop: Sandy Hook, New Jersey,” he said. “We’ll find a grocery store along the way to stock up on provisions. I’m going down below now, to plot our course.”

And just like that, he’d changed the plan. For everyone. Without even the courtesy of a discussion. Or a family vote.

I bolted down the stairs and flew into my cabin, slamming the door. Then I flopped down on my bed and punched my pillow. Angry, hateful thoughts exploded like fireworks in my head.

He's ruining my life and he doesn't even care! No more friends, no more lacrosse, no more girlfriend. Making us sneak off in the dead of night--like fugitives. Without a chance to explain. Or to say goodbye...

The pit in my stomach grew heavier, welling up in an angry ball.

I wish he would just sail off by himself. Leave me alone....

I clenched my jaw, stubbornly refusing to cry as I thought about the farewell dinner I'd planned at Heather's favorite restaurant, Philippe. How I'd even bought her a present with the money I'd saved from my tutoring job. An iPad. So we could Skype while I was away.

What do I do now? Text her goodbye? Send her a postcard from the Bahamas?

I rolled over and groaned.

I thought about sneaking off the boat and going to Heather's apartment, but I knew that would be impossible. The reporters were studying our every move.

I heard three light raps on my door, a pause followed by a fourth. Tilly's secret knock.

Ugh! I thought. I had no interest in hearing about the stupid reporters.

The door cracked open and Tilly's head appeared.

"I think they must be changing shifts or else they are giving up because most of the trucks and reporters are leaving," she said.

"Really?" I asked, sitting up.

Tilly had given me an idea. I grabbed my phone, my fingers madly tapping the keys. Then I flew around my cabin, digging under a pile of dirty clothes as I searched for my flashlight and sweatshirt.

“What are you doing?” Tilly asked.

“I’m going to see Heather.”

“Mom and Dad will never let you,” she fired back.

“I don’t really care what Mom and Dad think,” I replied.

Tilly hung her head, looking stung. That wounded, puppy-dog face of hers killed me every time.

“Aw, come on, Tills, they’re busy plotting courses,” I argued, my voice softer.

“They won’t even know I’m gone.”

“Duh, they’ll hear the engine start,” she replied with uncharacteristic sarcasm.

“Duh, I’m not taking the dinghy,” I shot back, mimicking her little girl voice.

Tilly stared at me in disbelief. “You can’t take the kayak--it doesn’t have any lights,” she argued, pinning her fists to her hips.

I waved my flashlight in her face.

“But the current is too strong. It’s too dangerous!” Tilly cried. Her face was wild-eyed and desperate.

“Please Tilly?” I pleaded, grabbing both her shoulders and staring into her eyes.

“Heather is going to meet me on Riverside Drive.”

Tilly sighed and I knew I had her. She’d always liked Heather. The big sister she had always wanted.

“C’mon, Tills,” I begged, my voice sugary. “I’ve got to say goodbye to her. I’ll only be gone one hour, I promise.”

Tilly’s eyes narrowed as she considered my plea.

“You can sit up on deck and watch for me with your Night Vision glasses,” I suggested.

Tilly exhaled loudly, shaking her head in dismay as she relented.

“It’s a very bad idea, you know, Hunt,” she said.

“Thanks, Tills, I owe you one,” I said, smiling as I gave her shoulders a final squeeze.

My parents had their faces buried in nautical charts, so they didn’t notice as we stole down the hallway and tiptoed up the stairs. Tilly watched as I climbed down the little swim ladder and stepped carefully into the kayak that still bobbed in the water off Lost Horizon’s stern.

I shivered as I fumbled to untie the line that tethered the kayak to sailboat. Then I smothered a gasp as my butt hit the layer of frigid water that had pooled in the kayak’s dugout seat. I’d forgotten just how cold the Hudson River was in May.

What if I capsized? How long could I survive in sixty-degree water? I should have worn my wetsuit. Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea...

“One hour,” Tilly threatened in a hoarse whisper, handing me a life vest. “If you’re not back, I’m telling Mom and Dad.”

“Fine!” I hissed as the kayak slid away from Lost Horizon’s hull and caught the racing current.

I didn't know if my heart was pounding more from the anticipation of seeing Heather or from the risk of crossing the Hudson. At night. In a crummy kayak. My Dad didn't even let us run the inflatable *dinghy* alone after dark. And the dinghy had running lights and a horn. Not to mention an engine.

Darkness fell over me like a blanket. I could barely see my hand in front of my face. I prayed that I would make it to shore before any high-speed ferries came along. Or one of those late-night party boats like the Circle Line Tour. A giant boat like that would crush the kayak like a bug. And there would be no way to escape its path armed with only a paddle.

But it was too late; there was no turning back. The racing current was like a high-speed conveyor belt, dragging the kayak north. Within seconds, I was one hundred yards upriver.

Grunting from the effort, I dug my paddle into the rushing water, pulling and digging as I struggled to cut across current and steer the kayak toward the shore before I drifted too far north.

The white lights of the George Washington Bridge twinkled in the distance and my heart skipped a beat. The bridge was looming larger by the second.

Have. To. Turn, I thought, resisting the urge to rest my aching neck and shoulders. *Can't land north of West 86th Street. Crap, I should have brought my wallet. In case I wind up in The Bronx and need to hail a cab.*

After a good amount of grunting and straining, I finally managed to angle the kayak toward the shore. Ten minutes later, when the hull finally skidded aground, I

scrambled out, dragging the kayak out of the water and dropping it in a clump of grass near a big rock.

I glanced at my watch—9:45. The trip over had taken me fifteen minutes. If I gave myself twenty-five minutes for the return trip, to account for the extra time it would take me to paddle against the current, that left me only twenty minutes to see Heather.

I sprinted across the desolate park, passing the quiet playground and empty basketball courts, making a beeline toward Riverside Drive.

Sure hope there are no muggers around, I thought, gulping as I kicked up my pace a bit.

Venturing into parks at night in New York City was something *I never* did.

Stupid idea Number Two, I realized. *What was I thinking?*

By the time I'd dashed up the forty steps that led from the park to the intersection of West 86th Street and Riverside Drive, I was huffing and puffing. I glanced up and down the sidewalk but saw no sign of Heather.

But when a black sedan crept up next to me and stopped, I turned around. The front passenger-side window slid down as the back door opened.

"Thanks, Henry," Heather said to the driver, who glared at me for a long second through the window before raising it again and slowly driving away.

The next thing I knew, Heather's arms were around my neck and my face was buried in her silky hair.

Okay, so maybe it was worth the death-defying trip, I thought, breathing in the scent of her new perfume that smelled like the ocean.

All I can say is that those twenty minutes were the best, and fastest, twenty minutes of my entire life. When it was time to finally say goodbye, Heather started to cry, which really killed me. Her big blue eyes overflowed, staining her face with black mascara streaks.

“You’ll probably meet lots of...*sniff*...exotic, you know...people, sailing around the world for a year,” she stammered, stumbling slightly over the word “people” as if she really meant to say “girls” instead. I hate to admit it, but it thrilled me to the bone that she was actually jealous.

“I almost forgot,” I said, reaching into my backpack and pulling out the iPad. “This way we can still, you know, see each other. If you want, that is...”

Heather smiled through her tears. Then she wrapped her arms around my neck one last time before releasing me to call Henry.

“Promise you won’t forget me?” she asked, her voice quivering as she climbed into the back of the sedan.

“Not a chance.

My cell phone rang as I watched the car pull away, Heather’s teary face looking back at me through the rear window.

“Tick tock,” Tilly said. I think she just wanted to hear my voice, to make sure that I was okay.

“On my way,” I assured her.

“Good, cause Chase is, too,” she said.

I clicked off the phone and sprinted back down the steps to the park.

As it turned out, I had totally underestimated how long it would take me to paddle back against the rushing current. Each time I lifted the paddle to take a stroke, the kayak slipped backwards in the current.

Faster! I thought, digging the paddle into the water again and again. The muscles in my neck and shoulders began to scream.

Not moving...

Looking up, I spotted Lost Horizon's anchor light, shining like a beacon atop of her mast. She was still half a mile away.

That's when I heard a buzzing sound.

A boat engine, I realized, my head whipping around in alarm. *Where is it coming from?*

"Those stupid reporters!" I groaned aloud, watching as the red and green running lights of a little boat approached. I had no choice but to wave my flashlight in the darkness, signaling my location so I didn't get run over.

Dad is going to kill me, I thought miserably.

The beam of a spotlight, mounted on top of a center console, bounced over the water, freezing when it found me. I squinted and turned away from its blinding glare.

"Hunter!" I heard Chase's voice call out.

"*Chase?*" I cried, a wave of relief washing over me. "How did you know where I was?"

"Tilly called me," he replied, tossing me a line. "Vic, here, was ferrying me out to Lost Horizon when she called. So we took a detour to come and look for you."

“Hey, Vic,” I said, nodding somewhat sheepishly. Vic was the 79th Street Boat Basin Dock Master and I knew him well. He was a friend of my dad’s and a good guy. He even let me borrow his boat once in a while, so I could take Heather for a sunset cruise. But he was a stickler for boating safety so I had a pretty good idea of what was coming next.

Vic was shaking his head and making a clucking noise.

“Not your brightest idea, now, was it, Hunter?” he scolded as he attached a towing line to a cleat at his stern.

“Yeah, sorry,” I mumbled as we puttered back to Lost Horizon.

My parents were waiting in the stern with Tilly. When I caught a glimpse of my dad’s face, my heart skipped a beat.

“What were you *thinking*?” he shouted, his neck muscles straining. “That was totally reckless. And STUPID!”

My mom touched his shoulder and whispered something to calm him down, but he didn’t seem to hear her. My dad didn’t get angry often, but when he did, his anger rose quickly, swelling like a geyser that threatened to explode.

“Yes, sir,” I croaked, hanging my head like a scolded dog. “Sorry...”

As much as I wanted to justify my actions, to fight back, I just bit my lip and listened. After all, it had been a pretty dangerous thing to do, even if it *had* turned out okay in the end.

“He went to say goodbye to Heather, Daddy,” Tilly offered quietly.

“What?” he asked, swinging around to look at Tilly as the fog in his eyes slowly cleared. The sound of Tilly’s voice had somehow seemed to penetrate the cloud of anger

that surrounded him. My dad hesitated for a moment, as if unsure of how to react. He had always liked Heather. She talked baseball with him. And politics. Plus she knew how to make him laugh.

My mom looked at my dad, her eyebrows raised.

“Remember that time we...”

But my dad quickly cut her off.

“You could have gotten killed out there, Romeo,” he reminded me.

Vic shifted his weight, obviously uncomfortable to be caught in the middle of a family drama. Then he cleared his throat and thrust a foil-covered bottle towards my parents.

“A little bon voyage gift for you.”

My dad clapped Vic on the back and pulled him into a firm embrace.

“Let’s have a toast before we shove off,” my mom suggested, pointing down below.

“This is packing *light*?” I asked as I helped Chase haul his thousand pound duffle bag down to my cabin.

Chase shrugged as I handed him some hangers and helped him cram his clothes into my tiny hanging locker.

Thirty minutes later, we all said goodbye to Vic and thanked him again.

“Be careful, tonight,” he warned. “I’ll monitor Channel 71 on the radio, if you need any help.”

Once Vic had climbed onto his boat and motored off, my dad set to work on his pre-departure routine. Just like a pilot doing a pre-flight instrument check, my dad had his

own safety checklist to perform. He switched on the VHF radio, the chart plotter, and the radar. He checked the running lights, the generator and the engine. The batteries and fuel. And finally, he would check the satellite weather computer, buoy wave readings and the Beaufort Wind Scale, so he would know what weather to expect. When he was totally satisfied that everything was in order for our departure, he began plugging waypoints into the GPS.

“What’s that for?” Chase asked, leaning over my dad’s shoulder to watch.

“Location markers that lead to our destination. The GPS tracks them, enabling Lost Horizon to steer herself.”

“Cool,” Chase said, nodding.

“I’m going down below, to Skype Heather,” I whispered in a voice loud enough for just Chase to hear. Then I bolted down the stairs.

Ten minutes later, I heard my dad’s voice calling from the companionway hatch.

“Anchor’s away! Time to untie the mooring ball.”

I rolled my eyes at the camera.

“Gotta go,” I explained.

“Have fun,” Heather sniffed, dabbing her tears with a tissue. “I’ll miss you.”

I trudged up the stairs, cursing under my breath.

“Aw, come on, this is going to be an awesome trip,” Chase said, following me around the bow as I leaned over the railing and tried to snag the mooring ball with a boat hook.

Just then, the engine roared to life.

As we slid down river, Tilly trained her Night Vision glasses on the skeleton crew of reporters that remained on the shore in their quasi-stake out.

The night shift, I thought. I guess they figured that if they waited long enough, we would have to eventually come ashore. Like when our food ran out.

When one of the reporters finally looked up and noticed that the Lost Horizon was moving, all hell broke loose. All at once, the reporters began scurrying around in frenzied circles, like dogs chasing their tails. Searching for cameras, shouting into cell phones, probably cursing.

“I guess nobody thought about renting a boat of their own,” Chase observed, grinning as we watched a few of the more determined reporters snatch up their cameras and race along the bike path that bordered the marina, snapping photos as Lost Horizon slid past.

One by one they gave up, stomping angry feet on the ground in frustration and waving their fists in the air.

“Sayonora, suckers!” Tilly shouted gleefully, watching them shrink in the distance.

Everyone was quiet after that, knowing that it would be a long time before we saw the familiar skyline of Manhattan again. We stared up in awe at the Statue of Liberty, gave a silent nod to Ellis Island and glanced back to take one long, last look at the skyscrapers that were crammed together in the Financial District, on the island’s southernmost tip.

“Say goodbye to New York!” my dad shouted cheerfully.

“Say goodbye to my life,” I mumbled under my breath.

