

opening extract from

flush

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ONE

The deputy told me to empty my pockets: two quarters, a penny, a stick of bubble gum, and a roll of grip tape for my skateboard. It was pitiful.

'Go on inside. He's waiting for you,' the deputy said.

My dad was sitting alone at a bare metal table. He looked pretty good, all things considered. He wasn't even handcuffed.

'Happy Father's Day,' I said.

He stood up and gave me a hug. 'Thanks, Noah,' he said.

In the room there was another deputy – a broad, jowly bear standing next to the door that led to the jail cells. I guess his job was to make sure I wasn't smuggling a hacksaw to my father so that he could break out.

'It's good they let you keep your own clothes,' I said to Dad. 'I figured they'd make you put on one of those dorky uniforms.'

'I'm sure they will, sooner or later.' He shrugged. 'You doing OK?'

'How come you won't let Mom bail you out?' I asked.

'Because it's important for me to be here right now.'

'Important how? She says you'll lose your job if you stay locked up.'

'She's probably right,' my dad admitted.

He'd been driving a taxi for the past year and a half. Before that he was a fishing guide – a good one, too, until the coast guard took away his captain's licence.

He said, 'Noah, it's not like I robbed a bank or something.'

'I know, Dad.'

'Did you go see what I did?'

'Not yet,' I said.

He gave me a wink. 'It's impressive.'

'Yeah, I bet.'

He was in a surprisingly good mood. I'd never been to a jail before, though honestly it wasn't much of a jail. Two holding cells, my dad told me. The main county lockup was miles away in Key West.

'Mom wants to know if she should call the lawyer,' I said.

'I suppose.'

'The same one from last time? She wasn't sure.'

'Yeah, he's all right,' my father said.

His clothes were rumpled and he looked tired, but

he said the food was decent and the police were treating him fine.

'Dad, what if you just said you're sorry and offered to pay for what you did?'

'But I'm *not* sorry for what I did, Noah. The only thing I'm sorry about is that you've got to see me locked up like an axe murderer.'

The other times my dad had gotten in trouble, they wouldn't let me come to the jail because I was too young.

'I'm not a common criminal.' Dad reached across and put a hand on my arm. 'I know right from wrong. Good from bad. Sometimes I just get carried away.'

'Nobody thinks you're a criminal.'

'Dusty Muleman sure does.'

'That's because you sunk his boat,' I pointed out. 'If you just paid to get it fixed, maybe then—'

'That's a seventy-three-footer,' my dad cut in. 'You've got to know what you're doing to sink one of those pigs. You ought to go have a look.'

'Maybe later,' I said.

The deputy standing by the door made a grunting noise and held up five chubby fingers, which was the number of minutes left before he took my father back to the cell.

'Is your mom still ticked off at me?' Dad asked.

'What do you think?'

'I tried to explain it to her, but she wouldn't listen.'

'Then maybe you can explain it to me,' I said. 'I'm old enough to understand.'

Dad smiled. 'I believe you are, Noah.'

My father was born and raised here in Florida, so he grew up on the water. His dad – my Grandpa Bobby – ran a charter boat out of Haulover Marina on Miami Beach. Grandpa Bobby passed away when I was little, so I honestly didn't remember him. We'd heard different stories about what happened – one was that his appendix burst; another was that he got hurt real bad in a bar fight. All we knew for sure is that he took his fishing boat down to South America on some sort of job, and he never came back.

One day a man from the US State Department showed up at our house and told my parents that Grandpa Bobby was dead and buried near some little village in Colombia. For some weird reason they couldn't bring his body home for a funeral – I knew this because I'd seen the paperwork. My dad kept a file, and at least four or five times a year he would write to Washington, DC, asking someone to please help get his father's coffin back to Florida. This is, like, ten years later. Mom worked with my dad on the letters – she's a legal secretary, and she gets straight to the point.

My mom and dad first met while they were standing in line to pay speeding tickets at the Dade County Courthouse, and they got married six weeks later. I know this for a fact because Mom put the speeding tickets in a scrapbook, along with their wedding pictures and stuff like that. The ticket my mother got was for driving forty-four miles an hour in a thirty-five-mile-per-hour zone. My father's ticket was much worse – he was doing ninety-three on the turnpike. In the album Dad's ticket looks sort of lumpy and wrinkled because he'd crumpled it into a ball when the state trooper handed it to him. My mother said she used a laundry iron to flatten it out before pasting it next to hers in the scrapbook.

About a year after they got married, my parents moved down to the Keys. I'm sure this was Dad's idea, because he'd been coming here ever since he was a kid and he hated the big city. I was actually born in a 1989 Chevrolet Caprice on US Highway One, my dad racing up the eighteen-mile stretch from Key Largo to the mainland. He was trying to get my mother to the hospital in Homestead. She was lying in the back seat of the car, and that's where I was born. Mom did it all by herself – she didn't tell my dad to pull over and stop because she didn't want him interfering. They still argue about this. (She says he's got a tendency to get overexcited, which is the understatement



of the century.) He didn't even realize I was born until they got to Florida City and I started bawling.

Abbey came along three years later. Dad talked my mom into naming her after one of his favourite writers, some weird old bird who's buried out West in the middle of a desert.

Most of my friends aren't crazy about their sisters, but Abbey's all right. Maybe it's not cool to say so, but the truth is the truth. She's funny and tough and not nearly as irritating as most of the girls at school. Over the years Abbey and I developed a pretty good system: she keeps an eye on Mom, and I keep an eye on Dad. Sometimes, though, I need extra help.

'So, what's the deal?' Abbey asked after I got back from the jail.

We were sitting at the kitchen table. For lunch Mom had fixed us the usual, ham-and-cheese sandwiches.

'He says he got carried away again,' I said.

Abbey raised her eyebrows and snorted. 'No duh.'

Mom set two glasses of milk on the table. 'Noah, why does he insist on staying in jail? It's Father's Day, for heaven's sake.'

'I guess he's trying to make a point.'

'All he's making,' my sister said, 'is a jackass of himself.'

'Hush, Abbey,' Mom told her.

'He said it's OK to call the lawyer,' I added.

'He's not pleading guilty?' Abbey asked. 'How can he *not* plead guilty? He did it, didn't he?'

'It's still smart to have an attorney,' said my mother. She seemed much calmer now. When the police first called, she'd gotten real mad and said some pretty harsh things about Dad. Honestly, I couldn't blame her. Even for him this was a major screw-up.

'Noah, how are you doing?' she asked.

I knew she was worried that the jailhouse visit had shaken me up, so I told her I was fine.

She said, 'I'm sure it wasn't easy seeing your father behind bars.'

'They brought him to a private room,' I said. 'He wasn't even wearing handcuffs.'

My mother frowned slightly. 'Still, it's not a happy picture.'

Abbey said, 'Maybe he ought to plead insanity.'

Mom ignored her. 'Your father has many good qualities,' she said to me, 'but he's not the most stable role model for a young man like yourself. He'd be the first to admit it, Noah.'

Whenever I get this speech, I listen patiently and don't say a word. She won't come right out and say so, but Mom worries that I'm too much like my dad.

'Drink your milk,' she said, and went to the den to call our lawyer, a man named Mr Shine.

As soon as we were alone, Abbey reached over and twisted the hair on my arm. 'Tell me everything,' she said.

'Not now.' I jerked my head toward the doorway. 'Not with Mom around.'

Abbey said, 'It's all right. She's on the phone.'

I shook my head firmly and took a bite of my sandwich.

'Noah, are you holding out on me?' my sister asked.

'Finish your lunch,' I said, 'then we'll go for a ride.'

The *Coral Queen* had gone down stern first in twelve feet of water. Her hull had settled on the marly bottom at a slight angle with the bow aiming upward.

She was a big one, too. Even at high tide the top two decks were above the water line. It was like a big ugly apartment building had fallen out of the sky and landed in the basin.

Abbey hopped off my handlebars and walked to the water's edge. She planted her hands on her hips and stared at the crime scene.

'Whoa,' she said. 'He really did it this time.'

'It's bad,' I agreed.

The *Coral Queen* was one of those gambling boats where passengers line up to play blackjack and electronic poker, and to stuff their faces at the all-you-can-eat buffet. It didn't sound like a ton of fun to me,

but the *Coral Queen* was packed to the rafters every night.

There was one major difference between Dusty Muleman's operation and the gambling cruises up in Miami: the *Coral Queen* didn't actually go anywhere. That's one reason it was so popular.

By Florida law, gambling boats are supposed to travel at least three miles offshore – beyond the state boundaries – before anyone is allowed to start betting. Rough weather is real bad for business because lots of customers get seasick. As soon as they start throwing up, they quit spending money.

According to my father, Dusty Muleman's dream was to open a gambling boat that never left the calm and safety of its harbour. That way the passengers would never get too queasy to party.

Only Indian tribes are allowed to run casino operations in Florida, so Dusty somehow persuaded a couple of rich Miccosukees from Miami to buy the marina and make it part of their reservation. Dad said the government raised a stink but later backed off because the Indians had better lawyers.

Anyway, Dusty got his gambling boat – and he got rich.

My dad had waited until three in the morning, when the last of the crew had gone, to sneak aboard. He'd untied the ropes and started one of the engines

and idled out to the mouth of the basin, where he'd opened the seacocks and cut the hoses and disconnected the bilge pumps and then dived overboard.

The *Coral Queen* had gone down crosswise in the channel, which meant that no other vessels could get in or out of the basin. In other words, Dusty Muleman wasn't the only captain in town who wanted to strangle my dad on Father's Day.

I locked my bike to a buttonwood tree and walked down to the charter docks, Abbey trailing behind. Two small skiffs and a coast guard inflatable were nosing around the *Coral Queen*. We could hear the men in the skiffs talking about what had to be done to float the boat. It was a major project.

'He's lost his marbles,' Abbey muttered.

'Who – Dad? No way,' I said.

'Then why did he do it?'

'Because Dusty Muleman has been dumping his holding tank into the water,' I said.

Abbey grimaced. 'Yuck. From the toilets?'

'Yep. In the middle of the night, when there's nobody around.'

'That is so gross.'

'And totally illegal,' I said. 'He only does it to save money.'

According to my father, Dusty Muleman was such a pathetic cheapskate that he wouldn't pay to have

the *Coral Queen*'s sewage hauled away. Instead his crew had standing orders to flush the waste into the basin, which was already murky. The tide later carried most of the filth out to open water.

'But why didn't Dad just call the coast guard?' my sister asked. 'Wouldn't that have been the grown-up thing to do?'

'He told me he tried. He said he called everybody he could think of, but they could never catch Dusty in the act,' I said. 'Dad thinks somebody's tipping him off.'

'Oh, please,' Abbey groaned.

Now she was starting to annoy me.

'When the wind and the current are right, the poop from the gambling boat floats out of the basin and down the shoreline,' I said, 'straight to Thunder Beach.'

Abbey made a pukey face. 'Ugh. So that's why they close the park sometimes.'

'You know how many kids go swimming there? What Dusty's doing can make you real sick at both ends. Hospital-sick, Dad says. So it's not only disgusting, it's dangerous.'

'Yeah, but—'

'I didn't say it was right, Abbey, what Dad did. I'm only telling you why.'

My father hadn't even tried to get away. After swimming back to the dock, he'd sat down in a folding chair, opened a can of root beer, and watched the

Coral Queen go down. He was still there at dawn, sleeping, when the police arrived.

'So what now?' Abbey asked.

A dark bluish slick surrounded the boat, and the men in the coast guard inflatable were laying out yellow floating bumpers, to keep the oil and grease from spreading. By sinking the *Coral Queen*, my father himself had managed to make quite a mess.

I said, 'Dad asked me to help him.'

Abbey made a face. 'Help him what – break out of jail?'

'Get serious.'

'Then what, Noah? Tell me.'

I knew she wasn't going to like it. 'He wants me to help him nail Dusty Muleman,' I said.

A long silence followed, so I figured Abbey was thinking up something snarky to say. But it turned out that she wasn't.

'I didn't give Dad an answer yet,' I said.

'I already know your answer,' said my sister.

'His heart's in the right place, Abbey. It really is.'

'It's not his heart I'm worried about, it's his brain,' she said. 'You'd better be careful, Noah.'

'Are you going to tell Mom?'

'I haven't decided.' She gave me a sideways look that told me she probably wouldn't.

Like I said, my sister's all right.