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opening extract from

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Chapter 1

Missing, Believed Drowned

Marshall Dwight Anthony Covington Jr was unfortunate enough to have his birthday on December 31st.

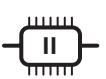
This was not quite as bad as having a birthday on Christmas Day, but even so it always seemed to get overshadowed by all the preparations for New Year's Eve. Not so this year. His mother, Mary, had planned a big party to celebrate Marshall's fifteenth birthday and his inheritance of $5,000,000 from the estate of his late grandmother. Even Marshall's father had promised to be there – a rare event in the Covington household, as the head of the family, an international finance analyst, was nearly always away on business.

Marshall was looking forward to seeing his dad again. It had been another incomplete Christmas without him.

Not that any of these thoughts were occupying Marshall's mind at this very moment. The big event was still some days away and he was out at sea, five kilometres off the coast of San Diego, listening for the song of the orca. Mary Covington was a scientist working for the Californian Institute of Oceanography and Marshall often accompanied her on these research trips, recording the sounds made by the pods of black-and-white killer whales passing through the bay. So far, despite years of study, Marshall's mother had not succeeded in unlocking the key to the orcas' eerie underwater language. It was far too advanced and complex.

Even though it was midwinter, the warm climate of the south-western United States meant that it was a bright, sunny day – or it had been when they set out in the Institute's power launch, *Snoopy*. Now, though, Marshall felt a chill wind rippling his shirt and there were worrying dark clouds approaching rapidly over the horizon.

'Mom, there's a storm coming!' he called.



'Nonsense, darling,' replied his mother, waddling past in her flippers and wetsuit, lugging her high-tech recording equipment. 'The weather forecast is fine for today.'

'There IS!' argued Marshall, pointing at the sky. 'Look over there, Mom.'

SPLASH! Mrs Covington's reply was to make a slow backwards somersault into the sea. Soon, she was just a trail of bubbles passing under the boat. Suddenly, Marshall felt very alone out on the vast, heaving ocean. Why did his mother have to be so passionate about her work?

Marshall disappeared into the cabin in search of a drink and some cookies, unaware that his every move was being carefully watched through a pair of powerful binoculars belonging to his Uncle Edward, known in the family as Ted. Whereas Marshall's father, David Covington, was a highly paid and well respected public figure whose success had come from endless hard work, his younger brother was a gambler and a cheat who was permanently in debt.

With his creditors rapidly losing patience with his lies and time wasting, Ted had hit on a desperate plan to solve all his financial problems in one go. He would kidnap his nephew and demand a massive ransom!

To this end, Ted and his two criminal associates, Sonny Barker and Thomas 'Pencil' Eddington, were lurking behind an outcrop of rock in their powerful speedboat, its engine idling like a throbbing toothache. In some ways, the two henchmen resembled a comedy double act that you would see on TV – but there was nothing remotely funny about them. Barker, the tubby one, was an ex-con with a very short fuse and a habit of lashing out with his fists. Pencil, as his nickname suggested, was tall and thin … and coldly calculating, like an urban fox.

'What are we waiting for, Boss?' demanded Barker. 'The kid's on his own.'

'Gotta wait for Mommy to get clear, stupid,' snapped Pencil. 'Don't want our propeller chopping her head off, do we?'

'Shut up, you two,' snapped Ted. ' I run this show and we go when I say!'

Meanwhile, on board *Snoopy*, Marshall came back out on deck to find the dark clouds that had previously been half a mile away, were rapidly closing in on him, accompanied by lashing rain and strong winds. The sea began to churn and suddenly, when Marshall was not holding onto the handrail, the first surge struck the little cabin cruiser amidships, almost turning it over. The teenager was thrown overboard like a doll being tossed out of a baby's pram. Without even having time to yell, Marshall plunged into the heaving water and was immediately swept under by the current. It felt like speeding down the giant water slide at the theme park he visited so often when he was younger, but there would be no big splash and laughter at the end of this ride. He was going to drown!

The freak storm stung the crooks into action.

'Can't afford to wait any longer,' shouted Ted, pushing the throttle forwards and sending the craft

surging through the foaming waves like a snarling sea monster. It reached *Snoopy* in a couple of minutes.

'The kid's not here,' yelled Pencil, scrambling from one deck to the other with the rain lashing in his face.

'Waddayamean? Look in the cabin!' retorted Ted crossly.

'Pencil's right. He ain't here!' confirmed Barker, following his companion with a great deal more difficulty.

'But he must be!' howled Ted.

'See for yourself then, mister know-it-all,' snarled Pencil, indicating the empty cruiser with a sweep of his hand.

At that moment, Marshall's mother emerged from the sea and heaved herself onto the rolling deck, seaweed clinging to her sound recorder.

'I got some great sounds,' she enthused. 'A baby was learning to hunt on its own and the mother was calling to it all the time … Hey! What's going on? What are you doing here, Ted?'

'A storm is sweeping across the bay,' he replied, smoothly. 'We saw your boat in the distance and came over to see if you were okay.'

'I'm fine, thanks,' said Mary Covington, quickly. 'Where's Marshall?'

'Marshall?' echoed Ted. 'Was he out here with you?'

'Of course he was out here with me!' snapped the woman, a rising note of panic in her voice. 'I never go diving alone. Marshall! MAR-SHALL! Where are you?'

The thugs pretended to search the launch, returning with grim faces and shakes of the head.

'Oh my God!' shrieked Mary. 'He's fallen overboard!'

Everything moved very fast after that. The villains took their leave, pretending to go and look for the missing boy.

'Thanks for your help, Ted,' called Marshall's distraught mother. 'It's lucky you were here.'

'What are families for?' replied the crook,

making Barker choke on the drink he was swigging and even bringing a smile to Pencil's normally scowling face.

Marshall's mother immediately alerted the coastguard and a well-drilled search-and-rescue operation swung into action, involving patrol boats, helicopters and even a passing minesweeper from the San Diego US Naval base. The search went on all day, backwards and forwards across the bay and further out to sea where any number of known currents could have taken Marshall. The search was not called off until darkness had completely fallen and there was no possible hope of finding Marshall alive. He was pronounced 'Missing, believed drowned.'

Yet Marshall was alive! He woke up, lying on a small deserted beach under some steep cliffs several kilometres north of the city. He was spotted by an old lady out walking her dog who, despite her years, scrambled down the steep cliff to reach the half-conscious boy. Shouting and waving to attract

attention, she got a passing fisherman to radio for help, and within a very short space of time Marshall found himself in the local hospital with his deliriously happy mother clasping his hand and repeating over and over again: 'I can't believe it. I just can't believe it!'

The next morning, news of Marshall's miraculous escape was on every TV channel and in every newspaper right across the country. Reporters and television crews gathered in a noisy crowd outside the hospital, clamouring for an interview, but Marshall refused to speak to them.

'It's a waste of time, Mom,' he pleaded. 'I don't remember anything that happened.'

This was almost true, but not quite. Marshall did have one clear memory of an enormous dorsal fin scything towards him through the surf … and a vague recollection of some rubbery, black-and-white shapes carrying him along very gently like a baby (though the latter part of the memory felt more like a dream).

The following day, to everyone's amazement, Marshall had fully recovered and was allowed to go home. The press had already disappeared – he was yesterday's news – so the young man was looking forward to a quiet day listening to his iPod … but it was not to be. As his mother was driving him along the coast road to their big house above the bay, she received a call from the Institute of Oceanography.

'Sorry, Bubs,' (Mary Covington's baby name for Marshall and one that caused him acute embarrassment), she said, jerking the wheel and changing direction like a stunt driver in a car chase, 'there's an orca stuck on Pacific Beach. Gotta go and see if we can get it back in the water!'

The stranded whale was a young adult male – a teenager just like Marshall. It lay on the sand, facing the sea, staring fixedly at him through its half-open eye. Marshall was glad he was there to help the stricken animal.

Then his mother came running up and thrust her underwater recording equipment into

his hands.

'Go and dip this into the sea for me, honey,' she urged, excitedly. 'The pod's calling to its lost family member. I wanna record their cries and then listen to what happens when they get him back.'

Marshall took off his shoes and waded out far enough to submerge his mother's equipment in the water. Having nothing else to do, and knowing it would take until high tide before the beached whale could be refloated, he put the headphones on to listen to the orcas' cries. Next moment, his eyes opened wide with amazement as if he had received an electric shock. The shrieks and squeals of the whales' language were making sense to him!

Suddenly, the memory of what had happened to him the day before came flooding back. After he fell overboard, he was dragged down into the depths by the current and only just managed to struggle to the surface, spluttering and gasping for air. Then he had been rescued by a pod of orca! A fully-grown female located him and then a group of young males

carried him ashore and deposited him on the beach, withdrawing backwards into the surf as they do when they hunt seals and penguins.

'Are you listening to us, Marshall?' echoed the orcas' collective song.

'Yes, I'm listening,' replied the boy, speaking out loud.

'Our pod and some human beings are helping each other to survive. Now we must do this on a global scale or humankind will be wiped out completely.'

With that, Marshall fainted!