

IN A BLAST OF BUBBLY GROWLS, THE FERRY'S big engines fired up. The boat moved as slow as a turtle through the Intracoastal Waterway, past Isle of Palms where big white motorboats and Jet Skis waited at docks in front of enormous mansions.

The farther we got from all the docks, the farther away I felt from the world I knew. I wondered what my friends in New Jersey were doing right now on their first day of summer break. I pulled out my phone and texted: *Hey guys, what's up? Check out this selfie of me heading out to no-man's-land.*

I backed out of the text screen and looked at the surrounding landscape. I sure wasn't in New Jersey anymore. All around me, the blue water spread out as far as I could see. Acres of bright green marsh grass waved in the breeze along the shore. I spied a long line of brown pelicans flying low over the marsh in tight formation, their six-foot wingspans almost touching the water. My dad called them "bombardiers on patrol."

The clanging of footsteps on the metal stairs caught my attention. Turning my head, I saw a boy standing at the top of the stairs. He looked like he was my age, with short cropped hair and brown skin. I felt a shot of hope that there were other kids on the island. The boy was wearing gold-colored wireless headphones and blue Nikes. My parents would never buy me shoes that expensive. I wiggled my toes inside my sneakers, an old gray pair I'd had since Christmas.

I caught his eye and nodded at him, but the boy acted like he didn't see me as he walked to the bench farthest away from me, gripping the boat railing.

Suddenly the captain went full throttle. The big engine churned and the boat took off so fast, my ball cap lifted off my head. I lurched after it. My phone slipped from my hand to the

floor. I watched, frozen in horror, as it slid across the deck and disappeared over the edge into the white-capped waves that churned below.

“Noooooo!” I yelled.

I gripped the railing and leaned over, staring in shock and disbelief as sprinkles of salty water splashed my face. A white, foamy boat trail faded away into the deep blue. My last connection to home was gone. I swallowed hard and glanced over at the other kid. His hands were locked on the railing like his life depended on it. He cast me a quick glance and shrugged in commiseration.

I plopped down on the bench, my elbows on my knees, my hands feeling empty. The next fifteen minutes were a blur as we raced across the waterway.

When the ferry engines slowed to a gurgle, I looked up. We were approaching the island. I saw a dome of dense green trees and shrubs, like the island was a lost world, shrouded in mystery. I almost expected to see a dinosaur rush out. I stood and returned to the railing and watched as the ferry approached a long wooden dock.

I squinted in the glare of the sunlight and spotted my grandmother standing beneath a wooden sign that said DEWEES ISLAND, SC. WELCOME. Honey was smiling and waving both hands above her head like she'd been shipwrecked and I was coming to save her.

At last the boat stopped. In a whir, the boy in the Nike shoes raced past me down the stairs. I hoisted my backpack and followed him off the ferry and up the dock, our footsteps pounding the wood.

“Jake! My boy!” Honey cried as she wrapped her arms around me in a tight embrace.

“Child, look at how you’ve grown. You might be taller than me now.”

“That’s not hard to do. Everyone’s taller than you, Honey,” I said.

It had been almost a year since I last saw Honey. She came to stay with me when both of my parents were away on missions. But she looked much older. Her usually tan skin was pale, with a lot more wrinkles on her face than I remembered.

“Let’s get you to the house. You must be starving after that long trip. My cart is parked just over there,” she said, pointing to the long line of golf carts parked near the dock. There were no cars on the island, so everyone drove a golf cart.

The boat captain pushed a cart with my duffel bag to our side and greeted my grandmother. “Ms. Helen, aren’t you a sight to see! Sure is nice to see your bright smile out and about again.”

“I have the best reason to be out today. My grandson arrived. He’ll be staying all summer,” she said. “Come along, Jake. Let’s get you to the house.”

I followed Honey down the walkway to her golf cart. There were some nice ones all decked out. There were plain ones, mostly tan or gray. Then there was Honey’s cart. It looked like it was the oldest one in the lot, and worse, it was covered in sand and dirt. A small green flag with the words TURTLE TEAM was duct-taped to the back corner of the cart’s roof.

“Hop on.” Honey slipped on sunglasses.

I tossed my duffel bag and backpack onto the back seat of the cart and climbed in next to Honey. The sound of an approaching boat caught my attention. I swung my head around and did

a double take. The driver of the single-engine motorboat was a girl. She was about my age—and she was alone.

“Honey, there’s a kid driving a boat. By herself!”

Honey looked over her shoulder. “Oh, that’s Lovie Legare.” She didn’t seem the least bit surprised.

“But . . . how can she drive a boat . . . by herself? I can’t even drive a golf cart.”

Honey chuckled. “Actually, I can get you permission to drive a golf cart on the island. You just got to pass my driving test. As for the boat, you can learn to do that, too.”

My mouth slipped open. I turned to watch in awe as Lovie tied up her boat and leaped onto the dock with the ease of a sailor. She had a long blond braid that hung down her back like the rope in her hands. When she lifted her gaze toward us, I quickly looked away.

The cart made a high beeping sound as Honey backed out of her parking spot. She stopped and turned the wheel.

“Lovie comes to Dewees from the Isle of Palms almost every day during the summer to stay with her Aunt Sissy while her mama’s at work.” She flipped a switch from reverse to forward. Before she turned her gaze back to the road, she told me, “Close your mouth, son. You’ll catch flies.”

As Honey sent the cart lurching forward, I shut my mouth in a big grin. “Can I really learn to drive a cart this summer? Even a boat?”

“Why not?” she asked as she drove out of the parking lot. We headed into the deep shade of the trees. Honey glanced at me appraisingly. “You’re not a little tyke any longer. You’re old enough to operate a cart. Even a boat. Course, you’ll need to pass a boater safety class.”

“I could do that,” I said, and imagined myself driving a boat on the water—fast.

Honey turned right onto a dirt road and took off in the golf cart. As we bumped along the shady path, the breeze ruffled my hair and cooled the sweat from my brow. The air smelled sweet, like flowers.

“Child, look around you,” Honey said, extending her arm. “Dewees is a very special place. There aren’t too many folks who live here. Mostly animals and birds and trees and all kind of wild.” She smiled. “The whole island is yours to explore.”

“Really?”

“Yep,” Honey said, and turned her head to wink at me. “It’s a Huck Finn life on the island.”

Suddenly I felt the first spark of happiness breaking through the gray of this terrible, dreadful day. Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst summer ever after all.