

CARL HIAASEN



A MISSING GIRL,
A HUNGRY GATOR,
ONLY ONE WAY OUT...

SKINK NO SURRENDER

CHAPTER SAMPLER

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NO
SURRENDER
CARL HIAASEN**



**ALFRED A. KNOPF
NEW YORK**

KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK . . .

ONE

I walked down to the beach and waited for Malley, but she didn't show up.

The moon was full and the ocean breeze felt warm. Two hours I sat there on the sand—no Malley. In the beginning it was just annoying, but after a while I began to worry that something was wrong.

My cousin, in spite of her issues, is a punctual person.

I kept calling her cell phone but it went straight to her voice mail, which was Malley chortling in a British accent: "I'm in the loo. Ring you back later!" I didn't leave a message, and I didn't text, either.

In case somebody else had her phone.

Somebody like her dad, who's my uncle. He takes away Malley's cell like twice a week as punishment for acting up, acting out, whatever. Still, even when she's in trouble at home, she always finds a way to sneak out to the beach.

A few turtle people were scouting the shoreline, wagging their flashlights. I walked north, as Malley and I usually did. We'd never seen a turtle actually laying her eggs,

but we'd found several nests. The first thing you notice is the flipper tracks leading up from the water's edge. Loggerheads, hawksbills and green turtles leave trenches like a mini-dune buggy when they drag their heavy shells across the sand.

After the mother turtle finishes depositing her eggs, she covers them with a loose, churned mound. Every time that Malley and I came across one, we'd call the state wildlife office and they would send an officer to mark it.

First, wooden stakes are tapped into the sand to create a rectangular perimeter outside the mound; then hot-pink ribbons are strung from one stake to the next. You can go to jail for messing with a turtle nest, so the officers put up a warning sign. Still, every so often some random idiot gets caught stealing the eggs, which are sold as a romantic ingredient in certain places.

Pathetic but true.

The phone chirped, but it wasn't a text from Malley; it was my mom asking where the heck I was. I texted her that I was still down by the water, and that no savage criminals had tried to snatch me. Afterwards I tried Malley's number once more, but she didn't pick up.

So I walked on alone until I came to a marked nest that I didn't remember seeing the last time Malley and I were there. The dig was new and soft. I picked a spot outside the warning ribbon and sat down holding my baseball bat, which Mom makes me carry for protection whenever I go to the beach after dark. It's an Easton aluminum

model left over from when I played Little League. I feel dorky carrying it, but Mom won't let me out of the house if I don't. Too many creeps in the world, she says.

The slanted moonlight made the waves look like curls of pink gold. I lay back, folded my arms behind my head and closed my eyes. The wind was easing, and I heard a train blow its horn to the west, on the mainland.

That wasn't all. I heard the sound of breathing, too, and it wasn't my own.

At first I thought: *Turtle*. The breaths were damp and shallow, like air being forced through a broken whistle.

I sat up and looked around: No sign of tracks. Maybe it was an old bobcat, watching me from the dunes. Or a raccoon—they like to dig up loggerhead nests and chow down the eggs. I slapped the Easton in the palm of my left hand, which stung. The noise was sharp enough to scare off most critters, but it didn't frighten whatever was breathing nearby.

Leaving seemed like a smart idea, but I got only fifty yards before I turned and went back. Whatever I'd heard couldn't be very large because otherwise I would have spotted it; there was really no place to hide on an empty beach under a full moon.

Approaching the turtle nest again, I put down the Easton and cupped my ears to muffle the sound of the waves. The mysterious breathing seemed to be coming from inside the rectangle of pink ribbons.

Could it be a crab? I wondered. *A crab with asthma?*

Because new turtle eggs don't make a peep. That I knew for a fact.

Carefully I stepped over the border of ribbons and crouched on top of the nest. In and out went the raspy noise, slow and even. I leaned closer and saw a striped soda straw sticking out of the sand. Through the exposed end I could feel a puff of warm air whenever the underground creature exhaled.

No more than three inches of the straw was exposed, but that was enough to pinch between my fingers. When I pulled it out of the mound, the in-and-out noise stopped.

I stood dead still on my heels, waiting for a reaction. Honestly I wasn't trying to suffocate the critter; I just wanted to make it crawl out so I could see what the heck it was. My thought was to take a picture with my phone and text it to Malley.

The world's sneakiest crab, right?

But then, as I was peering at the spot where the soda straw had been, the turtle nest basically exploded. A full-grown man shot upright in a spray of sand, and my heart must have stopped beating for ten seconds.

Built like a grizzly, he was coughing and swearing and spitting through a long, caked beard. On his chiseled block of a head he wore (I swear) a flowered plastic shower cap. Even weirder, his left eye and right eye were pointed in totally different directions.

I vaulted back over the ribbon and snatched up my baseball bat.

He said, "Get serious, boy."

After catching my breath, I asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Gagging, thanks to you."

I tried to apologize but I couldn't put the words together. I was too freaked.

"Let's have your name," the man said.

"R-R-Richard."

"They call you Rick?"

"No."

"Ricky? Richie?"

"Just Richard."

"Outstanding," he said. "I like your parents already."

"Dude, you can't sleep in a turtle nest!"

"What'd you do with my straw?" He brushed himself off. I'm guessing he stood six four, six five. Large, like I said. He wore a moldy old army jacket and camo pants, and he was clutching a dirty duffel bag.

"They'll put you in jail," I said.

"Yeah?" He wheeled in a full circle, kicking violently at the sand with his boots. I covered my eyes.

"See, Richard," he said when he was done, "it's not a real turtle nest."

One by one he yanked up the stakes and tied them together with the pink ribbons. He crammed the whole bundle into his duffel and said, "I was waiting on a man."

"While you're buried on a beach?"

"It's meant to be a surprise. His name is Dodge Olney."

Digs up turtle eggs and sells them on the black market for two bucks a pop. One night he's gonna dig up me."

"Then what?" I asked.

"He and I will have a chat."

"Why don't you just call the law?"

"Olney's been arrested three times for robbing loggerhead nests," the man explained. "The jailhouse experience has failed to rehabilitate him. I'll be taking a different approach."

There was no anger in his voice, but the slow way he said the words made me seriously glad not to be Mr. Olney.

"Tell me this, Richard. What are you doing out here?"

I don't have much experience with homeless persons, so I was sort of sketched out. But he was an old dude, probably the same age as my grandpa, and I decided there was no way he could catch me if I ran.

Looking up and down the shore, I saw that I was on my own. The nearest flashlight beams were a couple hundred yards away—more turtle people. There was a row of private houses on the other side of the dunes, so I figured I could take off in that direction, if necessary. Pound on somebody's door and yell for help.

"I've gotta get going," I said to the stranger.

"Excellent idea."

"If you see a girl out here about my age? That's my cousin." I wanted him to know, in case he got any crazy ideas. He was aware that in the moonlight I had a good look at his face, those weird eyeballs that didn't match.

“You want me to have her call you?” he asked.

“Don’t talk to her, please. She’ll get scared.”

“Understandably.”

“Maybe you should find somewhere else to crash,” I said.

He grinned—and I mean these were the whitest, brightest, straightest teeth I ever saw. Not what you expect on a grungy old guy who’d just popped out of a hole.

“Son, I’ve walked the whole way from Lauderdale on this hunt, sleeping every night on the beach. That’s a hundred and thirty-odd miles, and you’re the first person to make it an issue.”

“It’s not an issue,” I said. “Just, you know, a suggestion.”

“Well, I got one for you: Go home.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“So you can give it to the cops? No thanks.”

I promised not to call the police, which was true for the moment. The man wasn’t breaking any laws, sleeping underground with a straw for a breathing tube. Really he wasn’t bothering a soul, and then I came along and riled him up.

“The name’s Clint Tyree,” he told me, “although I haven’t answered to it in years. Good night, now.”

He walked away, along the water’s edge. I sat down beside the remains of his fake turtle nest, took out my cell and Googled the name he’d given me, just to make sure he wasn’t listed on some child-predator site. He wasn’t.

He was, however, famous for something else.

When I caught up to him, half a mile down the beach, I told him that Wikipedia said he was dead.

“Wiki who?” he said.

“It’s a community encyclopedia on the Internet.”

“You might as well be talking to a Martian.” He kept walking, the waves splashing over his boots.

I said, “Dude, I really want to hear your story.”

“First tell me about your cousin. You’re worried about her.”

“Not really.”

“That’s bull.”

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe a little worried. She was supposed to meet me here tonight, but she never came, which is weird.”

“You tried calling her?”

“Sure. Over and over.”

The man nodded. “Hold my eye,” he said, and plucked the left one out of his face.

I was home, in bed, when Malley finally texted: “Grounded again. Sorry I couldn’t sneak away.”

A perfectly believable excuse, except for one hitch. After leaving the beach, I’d jogged the seven blocks to her house and seen that the lights in her bedroom were turned off. Malley was a total night owl; she always stayed up way past midnight. It was only ten-thirty when I’d crouched

behind the oak tree in her front yard, watching her window. The room had been completely dark, which meant that Malley wasn't home.

Which meant she couldn't be grounded.

From my bed I texted back: "R u ok?"

"Fine. Call u 2morrow."

Of course I couldn't sleep after that, so I went out to the living room, where Trent was watching television—a cage-fighting match on pay-per-view. I'm serious.

"Your mom's snoring like a buffalo," he said.

"They snore, too? I thought they just snorted."

"Hey, champ, before you sit down? Grab me a cold one from the fridge."

Trent drinks more Mountain Dew than any mortal human on the planet. It's hard to watch, because he slurps the stuff so fast that it drips off his chin like green drool. We're talking *gallons* of sugary caffeine, every day.

I brought him a bottle anyway. Trent is my stepfather, and we're cool. He treats me like a kid brother, and I treat him the same way. He's harmless and good-natured, and dumb as a box of rocks.

"Is that ice cream?" he asked me.

No, Trent, it's a cheese ball with chocolate sauce.

"Want some?" I said.

"Maybe later, champ. You believe these two beasts?" Trent was addicted to cage fights. "Yo, see that? It's real blood," he said.

"Wow." That was the best I could do. The truth is

I'd rather sit through a documentary on Calvin Coolidge than watch two buzz-cut goons beating the crap out of each other in a supersized dog kennel.

Mom married Trent last December, not quite three years after my father had passed way. Dad was an awesome guy, and I miss him worse than anything. He was way smarter than Trent, but he died in a really stupid way. He'd be the first to admit it.

Here's what happened: He drank two beers, hopped on his skateboard and crashed full-speed into the rear of a parked UPS delivery truck. It was a large vehicle, but my father didn't see it in time. That's because he was too busy unwrapping a Butterfingers candy bar while he coasted down A1A.

No helmet, naturally. We're talking about a forty-five-year-old man with a master's degree in engineering from Georgia Tech. Unbelievable.

At the funeral one of his surfer buddies stood up and said, "At least Randy died doing something he truly loved."

What? I thought. *Bleeding from his eardrums?*

Afterwards Mom was a wreck, and she pretty much stayed that way until she met Trent, whose only known hobby is golf. He works as a real-estate agent here in Loggerhead Beach, but business is slow, so he's got an unhealthy amount of spare time. His second-favorite TV program is a cable reality show called *The Bigfoot Diaries*.

To yank Trent's chain, I told him I'd spotted a Skunk Ape on the beach.

“Get out,” he said.

“Well, he *smelled* like a Skunk Ape.”

“Just wait, champ. Someday they’ll catch one of those hairy monsters, and I can’t wait to see the look on your face.”

Trent is a true believer in Bigfoots, Sasquatches and Skunk Apes, which is what they’re called in Florida.

“The one I met had a glass eye,” I said matter-of-factly. “I dusted the sand off it for him.”

“That’s real hilarious, Richard.” He tipped the liter of Mountain Dew to his lips and chugged the backwash. “I heard they’re gonna start hunting ’em with drones, like they do with the Taliban. How cool is that?”

“Ultracool,” I said, and went back to bed.

I fell asleep listening to Willie Nelson, one of Dad’s favorites. When I woke up in the morning, there was a text from a girl named Beth, Malley’s best friend on the track team.

“She’s gone!” Beth said.

“Gone where?” I texted back.

“She won’t say! What do we do?”

TWO

My uncle looked surprised to see me. He had on his work clothes. His name's Dan, and he runs a bucket truck for Florida Power & Light.

"Is Malley around?" I asked.

"No, Richard, she left yesterday."

"For where?"

"School. She didn't tell you?"

"I thought her classes didn't start for a couple weeks."

"Come on in," Uncle Dan said. "I just got home from work." Hurricane season he works a night shift because the pay is better, and he's got seniority. "You want some breakfast? Sandy's still asleep."

He poured me a bowl of cornflakes and on top he sliced a banana that was so old and mushy that, honestly, a starving chimpanzee wouldn't have touched it.

"Yeah, Malley flew up for early orientation," he said.

I just nodded while I chewed my cereal, avoiding the funky brown slices.

"She forgot all about it," Uncle Dan said, "until two days ago when her dorm adviser called. But that's Malley."

“Classic,” I said.

Uncle Dan and Aunt Sandy were sending Malley to an all-girls boarding school called the Twigg Academy. Basically, they didn’t want to deal with her on a daily basis anymore. She’s a handful, no question.

Malley had told me the tuition at Twigg is thirty-nine grand a year, not including the meal plan. Add the cost of winter clothes plus airplane tickets back and forth to New Hampshire, and who knows how her parents planned to pay for that kind of an education. Malley suspected they were taking a second mortgage on their house, meaning they must’ve been semi-desperate.

“It’s weird she didn’t tell you she was leaving,” Uncle Dan remarked, “so you guys could say goodbye.”

“No big deal,” I said, a total lie.

Malley and I were born only nine days apart. Except for vacations, both of us have spent our whole lives in Loggerhead. I couldn’t picture her at a boarding school in a place so cold that car engines froze. Truthfully, I couldn’t picture her at a boarding school, period. Malley wearing a uniform to class? No way.

“Did she talk much to you about this move to Twigg?” Uncle Dan asked. “Because we got the impression she was sort of looking forward to it. I think all of us need a break.”

“She seemed okay with it,” I told him, which was true.

Malley had been incredibly calm and low-key when she told me the news. Where, if it had been me who was

getting shipped to some snotty private academy, I would've been highly pissed off.

New Hampshire? Seriously?

Still, I wasn't ready to swallow Malley's "early orientation" story.

To Uncle Dan I said: "She borrowed a book from me. You mind if I go get it?"

"Course not, Richard." He was attempting to make waffles with a digital waffle-maker that my mother had bought him for his birthday. Programming the thing was complicated enough to keep him distracted while I snooped through Malley's room.

Her One Direction poster was still on the wall. So were Bruno Mars and the Jimi Hendrix Experience—Malley was into all kinds of music. The closet wasn't as empty as I thought it would be, and right away I noticed that she hadn't taken her winter clothes to school. There was a heavy parka that had a hood lined with fake rabbit fur, and a red fleece with the L.L. Bean price tag still attached.

Okay, it was only August. Maybe she planned to come home for a visit and get her coat and fleece before the weather up north got cold, or maybe Sandy was going to pack everything and send it to her.

Or maybe Malley hadn't really flown to New Hampshire.

Her laptop was gone and her desk was cleaned out, except for one drawer. Inside was a white envelope that

had the initials T.C. printed on the front, above an address in Orlando.

T.C. was a guy named Talbo Chock, who was older than Malley. He lived near Disney World and supposedly was some hot club DJ. Malley had never met him in person, but she'd made friends with him online, which was beyond stupid. I'd told her so more than once.

Even though the envelope wasn't addressed to me, I opened it.

A note in Malley's handwriting said: "Talbo, please don't forget about me when I'm away at Twitt's 'boring' school. Try to land a gig in Manchester so we can finally get together!"

Included with the note was a wallet-sized photo. It was her class picture from last year, before she got her braces removed—a picture she didn't like, and one she would never have given to a guy she was trying to impress.

Malley always kept some cute selfies on her iPhone. She could easily have texted one to Talbo Chock; she could have texted him the note, too.

But the envelope wasn't really meant for T.C., and Malley hadn't simply forgotten to mail it. She'd left it inside her desk on purpose, for her parents to find. I put it back in the drawer.

As soon as I got home, I Googled that street address in Orlando, which turned out to be a motel near Sea World. I called the place, and—big shock—nobody named Talbo Chock was registered there.

Next I looked up the Twigg Academy and dialed the academic office.

“When does early orientation start for new students?” I asked the lady who answered the phone.

“We don’t do early orientation,” she said.

I called Beth right away to tell her. She wasn’t surprised. Her conversation with Malley that morning had lasted barely two minutes.

“She swore me to secrecy,” Beth said, “but she didn’t tell me enough to even call it a secret.”

“What about Talbo Chock?”

“All she said was, ‘Don’t worry, girlfriend, he’s a man of the world.’”

“So was Jack the Ripper.”

“I’m scared, too,” Beth admitted.

“Let me see what I can find out.”

The stranger who’d buried himself on the beach wasn’t just a regular homeless person, if there is such a thing. A long, long time ago he’d been governor of Florida—as in *the* governor.

According to Wikipedia, Clinton Tyree was a college football star before going to Vietnam and winning a bunch of army combat medals. After the war, some friends talked him into running for governor, even though he didn’t like politics. He campaigned on a promise to clean up all the corruption in Tallahassee, our state capital, and ap-

parently he tried hard. Frustration set in, then sadness, depression—and even, some said, insanity.

Then, one day halfway through his term of office, Clint Tyree flat-out disappeared from the governor’s mansion. Nobody kidnapped the man; he just bolted. The politicians who’d been fighting against him said it proved he was crazy, but his supporters said that maybe it proved just the opposite.

All kinds of wild rumors got started, and some of them turned out to be true. According to one Wikipedia entry, the ex-governor became a wandering hermit of the wilderness, and over the years he’d been a prime suspect in several “acts of eco-terrorism.” Interestingly, he’d never been arrested or charged with any serious crimes, and it seemed to me that the targets of his anger were total scumbags anyway.

The Web article included interviews with a few witnesses who’d supposedly encountered Clinton Tyree by chance. They said he’d lost an eye, and was going by the name of “Skink.” They had differing opinions about whether or not he was nuts. The most recent entry quoted the governor’s closest friend, a retired highway patrol trooper named Jim Tile, who said:

“Clint passed away last year in the Big Cypress Swamp after a coral snake bit him on the nose. I dug the grave myself. Now, please let him rest in peace.”

Except the man was still alive.

I found him only a mile or so up the beach from where

he'd been the night before. He'd constructed another fake turtle nest, though he hadn't yet concealed himself beneath the sand. He was kneeling outside the pink ribbons, calmly skinning a rabbit.

"Roadkill," he explained, when he caught me staring.

"There's a deli on the corner of Graham Street. I can get you a sub."

"I'm good, Richard." The shower cap was arranged on his head in the manner of a French beret. In the light of day I could see the color was baby blue.

"You didn't walk very far today," I said.

"Nope."

"How come?"

"Maybe I'm feeling too old and broken down."

He *was* old, but he looked solid and tough as nails, as Trent liked to say about the cage fighters on TV.

"They had your picture on the Internet," I said, "from like forty years ago."

"No doubt I've aged poorly."

"Even without the beard I could totally tell it's you."

It was some beard, too. The night before, in the moonlight, it had looked distinguished, like Dumbledore's. Now I could see how ungroomed and patchy it was. To the twisted tendrils Skink had attached what appeared to be broken seashells—until you got a closer look.

"Are those what I think they are?" I asked.

"Bird beaks."

"Okay, that's not funny."

“From turkey vultures, Richard.”

“But . . . why?”

“Kindred spirits,” he said.

In the sunlight I saw that his good eye was a deep forest green, and that the artificial one—the one I’d cleaned for him—was brown and shaped differently than the other.

“What’s the latest on your cousin?” he asked.

“Not good. I think she’s run off with some dude she met online.”

“Meaning, on the computer.”

“He’s older than her,” I said.

“How much older?”

“Old enough to drive, obviously.”

“That’s unsettling.” Skink wrapped the rabbit meat in a rag. The fur he carried up to the dunes and tossed into some sea grape trees. Afterwards he asked me what I planned to do about Malley.

“Go tell her parents, I guess. Today I texted her and called a bunch of times, but she’s not answering.”

“Is that like her?”

“Sometimes,” I said.

He sat down a few feet away. I told him how Malley had lied about going to early orientation. “The note she left was totally bogus, to fake out her mom and dad.”

“Tell me the name of her new boyfriend, Richard.”

“Talbo Chock.” I spelled it for him, though it was just a guess on my part.

“I’ll make a call,” he said.

“Want to borrow my phone?”

Skink smiled. “Thanks, but I’ve got my own. All incoming calls are blocked except one.”

“Hey, why did your friend Mr. Tile tell that reporter you were dead?”

“Because I asked him to. Come back in an hour or so.”

While the governor made his private call, I walked to a surf shop on Kirk Street. My father used to hang out there, so the owners know me. Dad bought all his boards there, and so do my brothers. Before going off to college, they used to surf every day. There’s no beach in Gainesville, so now they’re suffering.

I’m not a surfer, but I like board shorts and flip-flops; that’s basically my official summer uniform. I was looking through a rack of new Volcom shirts when my phone made a high moaning noise, which freaks people out until I tell them my ringtone is a humpback whale. I walked outside to answer the call.

“Sup, Richard?” It was Malley.

“Where *are* you?”

“Don’t be all mad or I’m hanging up.”

I said I wasn’t mad, just bummed.

“Sorry about the beach last night,” she said. “I forgot about this orientation thing—I must’ve blocked it out of my mind. Mom was totally pissed, but she got me on a late flight out of Orlando. It was, like, the last seat on the whole plane.”

“What luck,” I said drily.

“But still I almost didn’t make it because airport security found a bottle of vitaminwater in my backpack. Seriously! One of the TSA guys pulled me out of line and made me dump everything out—”

“Vitaminwater?” I had to laugh. Malley was on a roll.

“What’s so funny, Richard? Vitaminwater is the bomb.”

“Whatever. Why’d you text me that you were grounded at home?” I tried to keep my voice low because I was standing on the sidewalk in front of the surf shop, customers going in and out the door.

“I couldn’t call you at the time,” my cousin said, “and I didn’t want you to be mad that I left without saying goodbye.”

“So now you’re really up in New Hampshire?”

“Yeah. And this place? The armpit of all armpits, Richard.”

Very calmly I said: “Malley, there’s no such thing as early orientation at the Twigg Academy. I called and checked.”

“What? You. Did. Not!”

“You’re so busted,” I said. “Tell me where you really are.”

And she hung up, not exactly an earth-shattering surprise. Malley is legendary for hanging up on people. Usually she calls back in five minutes, ten max, but this time she didn’t.

A text popped up as I was heading to the beach: “If you go to my parents, I’ll never speak to you again!”

“Knock it off,” I texted back.

“I’ll tell your mom what happened in Saint Augustine! Swear to God, Richard.”

“You would NEVER.”

“Don’t push me,” my cousin texted back.

Suddenly I felt sick. Not barfy sick, just sick at heart.

The governor was collecting crabs when I returned to the beach. I told him that I’d finally heard from Malley, and that everything was fine.

He said, “No, son, it’s not.”

Then he told me something that made me feel even sicker.

THREE

Talbo Chock completed almost one full tour with the U.S. Marine Corps in Afghanistan. He'd been born in New Orleans and lived there until he was eleven, when his family moved to Fort Walton Beach, Florida. There, Talbo played first-string guard on his high school basketball team. His dad worked at a boatyard; his mother was a bookkeeper and secretary for an Episcopal church.

Talbo had just turned nineteen when the supply truck he was driving got blown to pieces by a roadside bomb in a place called Salim Aka, which Skink said was in the dangerous province of Kandahar. Two other Marines in the vehicle survived their injuries, but Talbo died three weeks later at a military hospital in Germany.

And now somebody had stolen his name, somebody who'd tricked my cousin Malley into running away with him.

"How'd you find out all this?" I asked Skink.

"Reliable source," he said. "The Pensacola paper ran a short story about Corporal Chock's death. It would have been a bigger story—*should* have been—except a hurricane

was clipping the Panhandle the same day. The corporal's first name was Earl and his middle name was Talbo, which is the one he went by."

Which explained why nothing popped up when I'd Googled "Talbo Chock," right after Malley befriended him online.

Now my brain was tumbling. "The guy who stole that soldier's name," I said, "he could be a total lowlife!"

"Odds are he is."

"But Malley doesn't know. Malley is—"

"In a bad situation," said Skink. "Now go tell her folks, Richard."

They say everybody keeps at least one secret, and maybe that's true. Mine was an ugly one. I didn't rob a bank or anything like that, but what I did was serious enough to crush my mother if she ever found out. And there was at least a fifty-fifty chance that Malley would narc on me, just like she'd threatened to do. She has a ferocious temper.

So, a selfish part of me didn't want to tell her parents that she'd run off with the Talbo Chock impostor, because I was afraid for myself, afraid of what my mother would do if Malley revealed what had happened in Saint Augustine.

I felt a hard stare from Skink's good eye, the one that actually moved. He said, "What're you waiting for, son?"

"You ever done something you were really ashamed of?"

"Oh, never once."

"I'm serious."

He chuckled. "I could write a whole encyclopedia of mistakes. Hell, I could write an opera."

"About a year ago I did something wrong—something against the law—and Malley saw the whole thing. She's gonna rat me out if I let her mom and dad know she's not really up at boarding school."

"Would you prefer they hear it from the cops," Skink said, "after they find her body?"

"God, don't say that!"

He put down the sack of crabs. "Listen up, Richard." It was the deepest voice I've ever heard, like the rumble of faraway thunder. "Whatever you did that you think is so terrible? It's nothing—I mean, *nada*—when weighed against the life of your cousin."

"Yeah, I know. You're right."

He put a hand on each of my shoulders, not a hard squeeze, but I could feel the strength. "Go," he said.

And I did.

Trent was playing golf, and Mom wasn't home from work yet. Our front door sticks in the humidity, so sometimes you have to give it a shoulder. I grabbed a cold Gatorade from the refrigerator and went to my room and pounded on the mattress with the baseball bat. What was my cousin thinking when she said yes to this jerk? Had she lost her mind?

I got a chance to ask her, because at that moment she called.

“His name isn’t really Talbo Chock!” I blurted.

“Duh.”

“Then who is he?”

“You didn’t tell anybody, right?” she said.

“Where *are* you?”

“Oh, Richard. You think I’m stupid or something?”

I was so happy to hear her voice that I couldn’t stay angry. She sounded as chill as always.

“He could be a stone psycho,” I whispered.

“Ha! So could I.”

“This isn’t a joke. You don’t know a thing about him.”

“You don’t know *what* I know,” said Malley.

I told her that threatening me about Saint Augustine didn’t matter. Even if I stayed quiet, her parents would eventually learn that she wasn’t at boarding school.

“All I need is a week,” she said. “Then you can tell ’em everything.”

“What happens in a week? Why are you doing this?”

Gaily she said, “YOLO,” an annoying abbreviation for *You only live once*.

“That’s weak, Mal. Only yo-yos say YOLO.”

“Gotta go, dude.”

After she hung up I checked the caller ID, which said “Blocked.” I tried back on Malley’s regular number but her phone went straight to voice mail. There was no point leaving a message—the Talbo Chock impostor was probably screening her calls.

When I heard my mother come in the front door, I took a deep breath, counted to twenty and walked out of the bedroom. She gave me a hug and said there were groceries in the car.

I pulled out a chair from the kitchen table. “Mom, sit down.”

She looked at me over the top of her sunglasses. “Right this minute, Richard? First let’s get the bags from the backseat, before Trent’s ice cream melts.”

“No, we need to talk now.”

“What is it? Something happen?”

“I’m pretty sure Malley ran away.”

“Oh.” Mom didn’t shrug, but she wasn’t exactly blown away by the news. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she said.

“It’s not like the other times.”

“How do you mean, Richard?”

“She’s not alone,” I said. “There’s a guy she met online. I think we should call Uncle Dan and Sandy.”

Mom took off her glasses. Her face darkened with worry.

“How old is this person?” she asked.

“Malley won’t tell me anything. She’s being a major b-word.” I related everything I knew so far, including the content of the bogus letter she’d left in her desk.

“Has he harmed her?”

“I don’t think so, Mom.”

“Okay. That’s good.”

I went to the car and grabbed the grocery bags. Trent's precious dessert, a half-gallon of Heath Bar Crunch, made it safely into the freezer. My mother was already on the phone to Uncle Dan. She was in total courtroom mode, her voice steady and calm.

Mom's a lawyer with a small firm that specializes in environmental cases, going after companies that dump waste into public waters. There's not much money in it, but she gets really stoked about her work. I hear her ragging Trent about all the fertilizer pollution caused by golf courses—the club he belongs to is on the bank of the river, and it's totally old-school. The chemicals that are spread on the fairways leach out if there's a heavy rain.

When my mother gets focused on a situation, things move along briskly. After speaking with my uncle, she made several other calls while I put away the rest of the groceries.

"All right," she said when she was finished. "Now we wait for the police to do their jobs."

"Think they'll find her?"

"I do, Richard. Definitely."

Once Malley learned that the cops were out looking for her, she'd go ballistic. I considered telling my mother about Saint Augustine, just to get it over with and beat Malley to the punch.

I didn't say a word, though. No guts.

"If she calls again," Mom was saying, "keep her on the

line as long as you can. Try to remember everything she says. Any small remark could be an important clue.”

“How’s Uncle Dan and Aunt Sandy?”

“Scared. Upset. Like any parents would be.” She got up and started rearranging the cereal boxes in the pantry. “That cousin of yours, I swear. She has no idea what she’s gotten herself into.”

“I told her the same thing.”

“And what did she say?”

“She just laughed, Mom.”

The best thing, of course, would have been for Malley to come back on her own. Part of me almost believed that was what would happen, that she’d just stroll through the front door tomorrow, chill as ever, announcing her adventure was over. Uncle Dan and Sandy would be so out-of-their-minds happy to see her that they probably wouldn’t even ground her.

The worst thing would be if she decided she wanted to come home but the fake Talbo Chock wouldn’t let her. Even though the police go full-tilt on a missing person case when it’s a kid, none of us who were close to Malley could be very helpful. We didn’t know the true name of the guy she was traveling with. Didn’t know how old he was, what he looked like, where he was taking her.

When the officers came to interview me, and I knew they would, all I’d be able to tell them about the fake Talbo Chock is what Malley had told me.

He's sweet, Richard.

He's funny.

He's like a poet.

I didn't want to think too much about what he really was, the awful possibilities.

After dark I ran back to the beach carrying a flashlight instead of my baseball bat. Near the edge of the dunes I found a small, cold campfire; among the coals were a few animal bones.

Up and down the beach I checked a bunch of turtle nests, but none had a soda straw sticking out of the sand.

The weird old governor was gone.

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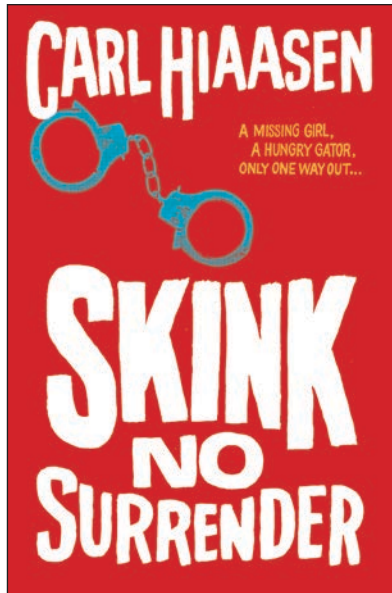


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