

DIEGO AND THE GHOST OF CLOSSIE MOTT

Diego climbed to the top deck of the Block Island ferry and sat down on a crate labeled LIFE PRESERVERS. He felt so seasick he was tempted to grab one of the life preservers and jump overboard, but he had no desire to swim in frigid, salt water. He noticed a girl wearing a purple bandana staring at him. She had tons of freckles and enormous green eyes. He had never seen eyes that green. Her stare creeped him out so he put his head down.

The boat lurched and something bumped against his knee. He looked up. It was the girl in the purple bandana. She thrust a soda at him. "Try this," she said.

"No thanks."

The girl nudged him with the can. "It's made with real ginger. Three sips and you'll feel better."

Diego took the can and read the label- *Smooth Sailing*. It probably wouldn't kill him; still, he didn't feel like putting anything in his stomach, especially not anything handed to him by a girl with freaky green eyes.

"And don't put your head down," she said. "That makes it worse. Look out at the horizon. Your stomach isn't really sick, it's an ear thing."

"You a doctor?"

"No. I just know it works."

Diego opened the can of soda and took a few sips. "Thanks." He leaned back and closed his eyes, hoping the girl would go away. No luck. When he opened his eyes a few minutes later, she was still there.

The girl grabbed his sweatshirt and tugged. “Come on.”

Despite the curative effects of *Smooth Sailing*, Diego had no desire to move and no desire to follow orders from this girl. Something in her urgency made him curious though, so he stood up and followed. She went down one set of stairs, then another. A chain stretched across the top of the next set of stairs with a sign that read- EMPLOYEES ONLY- NO PASSENGERS BEYOND THIS POINT. Diego hesitated.

“It’s okay,” the girl said. She ducked under the chain and bolted down the narrow steps to the bottom deck. Then she wove between the tightly packed cars to the back of the boat where two horses were tethered to ropes eating hay.

“This is Tally,” the girl said, rubbing her hand along the horse’s neck. “That one’s Sweet Pea. Not that she’s sweet or anything, she can be nasty, but only if you rub her neck wrong or whistle. Tally’s a sweetheart though. You can pet her all you want.”

“I don’t like horses,” Diego said.

“What? How can you not like horses?”

“I don’t like horses because... because the last horse I saw was mean and the policeman sitting on him looked even meaner.”

“Tally would never hurt you.”

The light brown horse did look calm still, Diego felt nervous. “You sure it’s okay we’re down here?”

“Positive. The horses belong to my neighbor, Nanny Voigt. She brings them over every summer for her grand kids. Madison and Mikayla are spoiled rotten though and Nanny Voigt’s getting old, so I help her take care of them. I’m supposed to be down here.”

Diego took a step closer, but when he reached out to touch Tally she snorted and stomped. Diego froze.

“She won’t hurt you, I promise. Best thing is to let her smell you first. Breathe into her nostrils real close, like this.”

Diego watched as the girl bent over and breathed into one of the horse’s nostrils. This kid was definitely nuts, but he didn’t want her to think he was a wimp, so he leaned in slightly. A horn blew and an announcement came over a loudspeaker: “All passengers with vehicles, please proceed to your cars.”

“I gotta go,” Diego said. “I don’t wanna make my dad late. He’s starting a new job.”

“Where?”

“The Spring House. He’s going to be the cook...the head chef.”

“Oh.” The girl stopped petting Tally and stared at Diego.

“What? What’s wrong with the Spring House? I heard it’s real fancy.”

“It’s fancy all right. Well, maybe not Hilton Hotel fancy, but it has a nice view of the ocean. The problem’s not the hotel, it’s.... it’s the manager.”

“What’s wrong with the manager?”

“She’s evil. Like a poisonous snake. She’ll strike when you least expect it.”

“Yeah, right. How do you know?”

“My grandma works at the Block Island Grocery. She knows everything.”

Diego’s cell phone rang. “Yeah, Papi?... Okay, *ya vengo*.” He backed away from the horse. “I gotta go. Thanks for the...soda.” He turned towards the stairs.

“Whynd,” the girl shouted.

“Wind?” Diego asked.

“My name’s Whynd,” she said. “Whynd Sage Perkins.”

“Oh. My name’s Diego. Diego Jorge Lacayo.”

“Good luck with the manager, and watch out for the...”

“Watch out for the what?”

“Nothing. You better go. You do not want to keep Janice Nicholson waiting.”

Chapter 2

As his father drove up the hotel driveway, Diego realized that Whynd was right. The Spring House wasn't Hilton hotel fancy, but it was fancy in an old-fashioned way. The main building was bright white with a red roof, and it had a long porch with wicker furniture. The lawn sloped down to a tennis court, and several white wooden chairs were lined up facing the ocean.

“Hey Papi, where's the swimming pool? I thought you said we were going swimming?”

“*Aya*,” Diego's father said pointing to the ocean. “There is your *piscina*.”

They pulled up next to the porch and unloaded their bags. Diego grabbed his fishing pole and backpack and followed his father through the main entrance. The walls of the lobby were covered with black and white photographs of old buildings and fishing boats. Diego stepped closer to check out a large boat.

“That is an original photograph in an antique frame.” A voice admonished. “Please do not touch.”

Diego turned and saw a tall, skinny woman, hair tightly pinned against her head, walk down a wide staircase. She looked eerily like his fourth grade music teacher, Mrs. Gurney.

“Hello,” the woman said extending her hand to Diego's father, “I'm Janice Nicholson. You must be Armando Lacayo.”

“Yes, nice to meet you. This is my son, Die-”

“There is a staff meeting at 6:00pm sharp. Francis, your sous-chef is waiting for you in the kitchen. She turned and pointed to Diego. “No fishing poles allowed in the main building. That stays in your room or it will end up staying in my office.”

Diego stared at the woman as she walked behind the front desk. She might look like Mrs. Gurney, but Whynd was right again. Janice Nicholson acted like an evil, poisonous snake.

Armando brushed his hands through Diego's hair. "*No te preocupes hijo*. Don't worry. Everything's going to be fine."

Diego followed his father through a narrow hallway that led into a large kitchen. A dark-skinned man with huge biceps and broad shoulders was chopping carrots. "Mr. Armando," the man said smiling. "It is an honor to meet you. I am Francis. And you must be Diego. Let me help with your bags."

They followed Francis to a small cottage behind the main building. "As you are Executive Chef, you have the best accommodations, the Sunrise Cottage." Francis pushed the door open and pointed to a large window. "An ocean view and a private bathroom!"

"Thank you." Diego's father said.

Diego glanced around the small room. There were two twin beds, an old rocking chair and one small, wooden bureau. "Excuse me," Diego said, "But, is there a TV? Do you have Wi-Fi?"

"Wi-Fi?" Francis looked confused, but then he smiled. "Ah, wireless internet. No, there is no TV or 'Wi-Fi' in the rooms, but there's a TV in the bar. It has the Tennis Channel! I am from Ghana and my favorite player has a match tonight. Maybe you will watch it with me." Francis patted Diego on the shoulder, knocking him off balance. "You must be tired. Get some rest. I will cook tonight. Dinner for the staff is at 5:30."

As soon as Francis left, Diego flopped down on one of the beds. It sagged under his weight and the springs creaked. "Papi, this place stinks!"

“Diego,” his father said, “Remember your promise? *Actitud positiva?*”

“No, I mean it really stinks! It smells like something died in here.” Diego leaned over and checked under the bed. There was a lot of dust and what looked like an old sock, but nothing dead. “This place makes *abuelito*’s house in Managua look like a palace. I thought we’d be staying somewhere nice.”

Armando sat on the bed. “This is a nice place. Be patient, *hijo*. You’re going to love it here. We’ll go swimming and fishing. The island is beautiful. I’ll show it to you after the meeting.”

“Beautiful? Everything’s old, I mean super old. Did you see the movie theater? It looked like the roof’s about to cave in! And that Nicholson lady, I think she’s a psycho killer.”

“She’s not a psycho killer. She’s just under a lot of pressure. Come on; let’s get the rest of our bags.” Diego’s father stood up and extended his fist towards Diego. “To a great summer.”

Diego gently bumped fists with his father. “Okay, I’ll try, but when can Jeremy come? If he’s here, we’ll be out fishing every day. We won’t bother you at all. I promise.”

Armando put his hand under Diego’s chin. “We will see, *hijo*. We will see.”

At exactly 5:30, Diego sat down at a long wooden table in the back of the kitchen across from Francis and two young women. One had bright red hair and waved her arms as she spoke with what sounded like an English accent. The other woman listened, her hands wrapped tightly around a coffee mug.

“Maggie,” Francis nudged the red-haired woman. “I want you to meet Diego, Chef Lacayo’s son. Diego, this talkative lady is our head waitress Miss Maggie. The nice quiet one is Miss Zosia, head of housekeeping. The rest of the staff will come tomorrow.”

“Hi,” Maggie said,” shaking Diego’s hand. “Welcome to the Spring House, which, other than its Sous-Chef, has tha finest staff on the island.”

“Hi,” Diego said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Here,” Francis said, passing Diego a large platter. “Have some calamari.”

Diego stared at the purple and white rubbery looking creatures lying on the platter. “Thank you, but ah, my stomach still feels kind a weird from the boat ride.”

“How about a sweet potato fry?”

Diego took a bite of an orange colored French fry. “Very good, thanks.”

“So, do you want to watch the tennis match with me?” Francis asked.

Maggie leaned over and patted Francis’ arm. “Darlin’, this is America. In America, kids play video games, they watch YouTube. They do not watch tha Tennis Channel.”

“Well maybe our Diego is different.” Francis said, and then he nodded towards the back door. “Your friend is here.”

Diego’s heart raced. Jeremy was here! But when he turned around his heart sank. It was not his cousin Jeremy. It was the girl with the purple bandana, scraping her fingers against the screen door.

“You almost done?” She asked.

“No.”

“Can you hurry? It’s important.”

Maggie leaned across the table and winked at Diego. “Go on,” she said.

Diego stood with his back to the door, and silently mouthed, “I don’t want to go.”

Maggie ignored him and shouted, “Diego will be right with ya, Whynd.”

Reluctantly, Diego grabbed his baseball cap and opened the screen door. “What’s so important?”

“I need your help. We have to get to the bluffs and we have to get there soon. If we don’t, there’s gonna be a murder, and probably more than one.”

Chapter 3

The girl was an alien, Diego thought as he rode a rusty bike up a steep hill. She looked like a human, she wore clothes like a human, but she was definitely an alien. That was the only explanation for why she was able to get him do things he had no desire to do. First, breathing into a horse's nose and now following her to stop a supposed murder.

The road leveled off and they turned into a dirt parking lot. Whynd jumped off her bike and sat on the grass. She was breathing funny and she put her head between her knees.

“You okay?” Diego asked.

“Yeah, I'm fine. Just...asthma.”

Diego glanced around. There was a plaque with a map of the island and lots of wildflowers. It did not exactly look like a potential murder site. “So, whose life are we saving?”

“Not who,” Whynd said pointing to a mound of dirt. “What. Turtles.”

“Whynd, that's a pile of dirt. Maybe you need glasses. There are no turtles here.”

Whynd carefully brushed the dirt aside and Diego saw several eggs. “Who would want to kill a bunch of turtle eggs?” he asked. “And what's the big hurry?”

“Tonight is the PUARBP,” Whynd said.

“The PU what?”

“Providence University’s Annual Reunion Bonfire Party. They’ve been having this reunion on Bluff Beach for like forever. They come at sunset, make a big bonfire and drink a lot. They come on mopeds, motorcycles, cars and trucks and they all park right here. If we don’t put up the sign, they’ll drive right over the eggs and kill them.” Whynd reached in the bushes and pulled out a wooden sign with hand painted letters. **‘Turtle eggs. Endangered species. Do not crush under penalty of law.’** “Here, use this.” She handed Diego a large rock.

Diego stared at the eggs. “Whynd, the only endangered turtles I’ve heard of are sea turtles. Far as I know sea turtles lay their eggs near the sea. I don’t actually see a beach nearby.”

Whynd started digging a hole next to the eggs. “You gotta a point. These aren’t exactly sea turtle eggs. They’re box turtles. But if I didn’t put ‘endangered’ on the sign, no one would pay attention. They are still baby turtles. They’re still important.” Diego sighed and started pounding the sign.

“That should do it,” Whynd said. She placed several small stones around the sign post and tried wiggling it. “Perfect!” She sat down and pulled a couple of water bottles from her backpack. “Want one?”

“Sure.”

“So,” Whynd asked, “I was wondering, is your dad a felon or something?”

“Felon? No, of course he’s not a felon!”

“Illegal immigrant?”

“No! He’s married to my mom and has a green card. He’s not illegal and he’s not a felon!”

“Sorry. It’s just that he has a strange accent and I can’t see why someone would work for Janice Nicholson and live at the Spring House unless they didn’t have any other choice.”

“He’s working there because they’re paying him lots of money and what’s wrong with staying at the Spring House?”

“It’s fine for tourists, but have you noticed where they put the help?”

“They gave us the best apartment. We’re staying in the Sunrise Cottage.”

Whynd choked on her water. “The Sunrise? You’re staying in the Sunrise Cottage?”

“Yeah, it’s great. It has an ocean view and a private bathroom.”

“It has an ocean view alright, but it also has a ghost. The Sunrise Cottage is one of the most haunted houses on the island. The ghost of Clossie Mott has been seen there tons of times.”

“Well, I have never seen a ghost and I am not worried about seeing one, especially not with a name like Clossie.” Diego took a sip of water and realized maybe he should be worried. Whynd had been right about the hotel, she’d been right about Janice Nicholson, and the Sunrise Cottage sure didn’t seem all that ‘sunny’ to him. “What do you mean, ‘seen her’? Does she do anything?”

“I don’t think so. Sorry, don’t mean to scare you and I don’t mean to pry about your dad. My teacher says I have “obsessive curiosity disorder”. At camp they call it my ‘Curiously Caring Personality Attribute’, but whatever it is, I can’t help it— I ask a lot of questions. I just wanted to warn you, so you won’t freak out if you see her.”

“Thanks, but I’m not worried. Before he became a chef, my dad was a body guard for the Cuban ambassador and I take karate lessons, I think we can handle an old lady ghost.”

“Karate?” Whynd asked.

Diego realized that karate was probably not the most effective ‘ghost protection skill’. Now he really wished Jeremy was with him. Diego stood up. “I really should go. My dad’s probably waiting for me.” He starred at the mound of turtle eggs, then at Whynd. She was still breathing funny. “You coming?”

“Nah, I better stay, just in case.”

Diego felt torn. He wasn’t keen on leaving Whynd with a bunch of drunken college kids, but if he was going to show his dad that he was acing ‘Responsibility 101’, it was probably better that he wasn’t hanging out waiting for a bunch of drunken college kids. “Come on,” he said. “The sign’s good. No one’s gonna bother the eggs. He was about to get on the rusty bicycle when a bunch of cars and motorcycles pulled into the parking lot. A large man on a motorcycle yanked off his helmet and shouted, “Hey, you kids need to move. We got gear to unload.”

Whynd stood up. “You can’t park here. This is a protected wildlife area.”

The man got off the motorcycle, looked at the sign, then at the mound of dirt where one of the eggs lay uncovered. Diego gripped the bars of his bicycle. Part of him wished he had left two minutes earlier, the other part wished he was two feet taller and two hundred pounds heavier.

The man picked up the egg. “Endangered? Looks like a common turtle egg to me.” The man held out the egg as if he was going to drop it.

“Stop!” Whynd screamed. She reached to grab the egg, but the man held it up higher.

Diego pushed his bike closer. “Sir, I know they look common, but they’re not. We’re interns with the Block Island Wildlife Department.”

“Interns? You don’t look like interns.”

A woman wearing a Providence University sweatshirt walked over carrying a blanket and beach chairs. “Come on Chaney, stop being a jerk. Leave the kids alone.”

Whynd reached for the egg again. “Please put it back. My friend is right. These eggs are part of a special project.”

“Well, maybe we should examine it closely to see just how special it is.” The man held his hand higher, dropped the egg onto a hard patch of dirt and it cracked open.

“No!” Whynd cried. She knelt down next to the broken shell. Green slime oozed out covering bits of grey lumps. Whynd picked up the tiny lumps and cradled them in her hand.

She lifted her head, tears pouring down her face and stared at the man. “How could you?”

“Yes, Chaney,” The woman said grabbing the man’s arm. “How could you? When are you going to grow up?” She turned to Whynd. “Look sweetie, I’m sorry. I’ll keep an eye on him, I promise. I’ll make sure no one bothers the rest of the eggs.”

Whynd knelt down and buried what was left of the turtle. Then she jumped on her bike and flew out of the parking lot.

“Whynd wait!” Diego tried to follow, but several cars pulled up blocking his way. By the time he made it out to the main road, she was gone.