

## DIEGO AND THE GHOST OF CLOSSIE MOTT

Diego felt a sour taste in the back of his throat. He did not want to be on this boat. He wanted to be on a plane heading to Nicaragua. Part of him was excited. It would be nice to spend the summer with his dad. For once, just the two of them. But he wished they weren't spending it on an island in the middle of nowhere. He wished the waves weren't so huge.

Diego sat on a crate labelled *Life Preservers* and looked towards the island. An older man was leaning against the railing throwing pieces of bread to a seagull and two teenaged girls were walking a small, white dog and laughing. None of them looked seasick. A girl with a purple bandana wrapped around her head leaned against a bench and stared at him. She had tons of freckles and intense green eyes. He had never seen eyes that green. The way she was staring creeped him out, so he put his head down. But putting his head down made his stomach feel worse.

The boat lurched, and something bumped against his knee. He looked up. It was the girl with the green eyes nudging him with a can of soda. "Try this," she said.

"No thanks."

"It's made with real ginger. Three sips and you'll feel great."

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 a creepy stare.

"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."

"How do you know?"

“I just know. Try it.”

This girl sure is bossy, Diego thought. But the sour taste was now in his mouth, so he opened the can and took a few sips. “Thanks,” he said. He leaned back and closed his eyes, hoping the girl would take the hint and go away, but when he opened his eyes a few minutes later, she was still there.

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

Even though he felt slightly better, Diego had no desire to move and no desire to follow orders. “No thanks, I’m good right here.”

The girl sat down next to him. “Look,” she said. “I’ve seen a lot of people on the verge of puking and you look like you’re going to lose it any second. There’s something I wanna show you on the bottom deck. It’s really cool. Plus, it’s a lot less rocky down below. You’ll feel better. I promise.” The girl stood up and tugged at his sweatshirt again.

Diego yanked his arm back. He was about to tell her to get lost, but what if she was right? Maybe he would feel better down below. He stood up and followed her. First, down one set of stairs, then another. There was 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. He was already in enough trouble for breaking rules, he didn’t want to get into more trouble for someone he didn’t even know.

“It’s okay,” the girl said. “I have permission. The Captain knows I’m down here.”

“It’s not that,” Diego said. “It’s my dad. He might come looking for me.”

“This will only take a few minutes, and . . . well it’s not something you see every day on the Block Island ferry.

Diego stared at the girl. Part of her was still annoying, but something about her eyes looked different. She had that look his grandfather gave him when he was explaining something important. Maybe there was something cool down below. And moving downwards definitely felt better than being seasick up top.

“Okay,” Diego said. “But I can only stay a sec.

“Great.” The girl ducked under the chain and went down the narrow steps to the bottom deck. She wove between the tightly packed cars to the back of the boat. Diego stopped and stared. Behind a pickup truck were two horses, calmly eating hay. There weren’t huge horses, but they weren’t cute little ponies either.

Diego’s spine stiffened, and he took a step backwards. Why hadn’t he stayed up top?

“What’s wrong?” the girl asked.

“I...I don’t like horses,” Diego said.

“Why not?” The girl said, walking over to the light brown horse. “What’s not to like?”

“I... I just don’t like them.”

The girl stroked the horse’s neck. “This is Sweet Pea. She can be a bit spirited, but Tally’s gentle. You can pet her all you want.”

But Diego did not want to pet her. He wanted to leave. Something didn’t feel right. “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 grandkids, Madison and Mikayla. They’re identical twins. Well, except that Mikayla has a scar over one eye, but other than that they’re identical in every way, including being too lazy to take care of their own horses, so I help.”

Diego did not want the girl to think he was afraid, so he took a step closer. But, when he reached out to touch Tally, the horse snorted and stomped. Diego froze.

“She won’t hurt you, I promise. Especially not if you let her smell you.” The girl leaned forward and breathed into one of the horse’s nostrils.

Diego thought this was the weirdest thing he’d ever seen. He was about to stroke the horse’s neck when a horn blew, and an announcement came over a loudspeaker: “All passengers with vehicles please proceed to your cars.”

“I gotta go,” Diego said.

“Where you staying?” the girl asked.

“The Spring House. My dad’s the new cook . . . the head chef. We’re living there for the summer.”

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

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Well, nothing much, except for the manager. She can be nasty. Like a poisonous snake, she’ll strike when you least expect it.”

“How do you know?”

“My . . . my brother works there. He takes stuff to the dump, carries bags for people, helps out in the kitchen. He knows everyone and everything. Plus, I live right down the hill.”

Diego’s cell phone rang. “*Si Papi*, I’m coming. *Voy en un minuto*.” He backed away from the horse. “I gotta go. Thanks for the soda.” He turned towards the stairs.

“Whynd,” the girl said, extending her hand.

“*Wind?*” Diego asked.

“Yeah, my name is Whynd. W-H-Y-N-D. Whynd Sage Perkins.”

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

“Good luck with the manager, and,” Whynd leaned towards Diego and lowered her voice,  
“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 through town, Diego felt like he had gone through a time machine.

Everything was old. There were lots of hotels and souvenir shops, but there was no mall, no gas station, no shiny yellow arches. There was a movie theater, but the paint was peeling, and it looked like the roof was going to cave in. The main street was deserted.

“Papi, where is everybody? This place looks like a ghost town.”

“It’s early in the season. *Esper que llegue el Sabado*. I promise you, by Saturday this place will be packed. There’ll be tons of kids your age.”

Diego stared at the window displays filled with brightly colored tee shirts, flip flops and beach toys. Maybe his dad was right. Maybe there would be tons of kids, but they would probably all be wearing those collared shirts with alligators on them. Diego glanced at his father. He wanted to ask when they could go fishing. Surf casting with his father, early in the morning, that was the best. But even though his father’s face looked calm, his fingers gripped the steering wheel. Diego pulled a small, white stone from his pocket and placed it on the dashboard. “Don’t worry Papi,” he said. You got this. You’re going to rock this job.”

His father glanced at the stone and smiled. “*Abuelo’s* good luck stone. You remembered.” He released his grip on the steering wheel and ruffled Diego’s hair. “*Gracias, mijo, gracias.*”

They drove up a hill, past more houses with faded paint, and through two stone pillars and a sign that said Spring House Hotel. 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. Diego did not see a swimming pool.

Diego's father pulled into a parking lot and they unloaded their bags. Diego grabbed his fishing pole 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 6:00 p.m. 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. Whynd was right. The manager looked as evil as a Black-headed Coral Snake ready to strike.

Armando touched Diego's arm. "*No te preocupes mijo*. 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, broad shoulders and dreadlocks was cutting potatoes. "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."

Francis led them to a small cottage behind the main building. They climbed a rickety set of stairs to the second floor and Francis opened the door. “As you are Executive Chef, you have the best accommodations. Welcome to the Sunrise Cottage.” Francis pointed to a large window. “An ocean view *and* a private bathroom!”

“Thank you.” Diego’s father said.

Diego walked through the door and instantly felt a change. It felt like he was in a cave in Nicaragua. The air was chilly, and it smelled weird. The only furniture was two twin beds, a rocking chair and an old wooden bureau. “Excuse me,” Diego said, “but, is there a TV? Do you have Wi-Fi?”

“No, there is no TV or ‘Wi-Fi’ in the rooms.”

“What?” Diego panicked. How could he Facetime with Jeremy? “You mean there’s no way to log onto Wi-Fi? Even if we pay?”

“No worries, there is Wi-Fi in the sunroom and a TV in the bar. It has the Tennis Channel! I am from Ghana and my favorite player has a match tonight. “Francis clamped his hand on Diego’s shoulder. “You have the build of a tennis player, small frame, but strong. Do you play?”

“Me?” Diego said. “Tennis?” He was about to tell Francis that he lived in an apartment next to a housing project, a police station and a huge IKEA store, not exactly the tennis capital of the world, but one glance at his father and he switched gears. “No, sir, I’m from New Haven. We . . . I don’t think people play much tennis in New Haven.”

Francis smiled again. “Ah, then I will teach you.” Francis turned to Diego’s father. “I will cook for the staff tonight. Dinner 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.*”

“I am being positive. I just mean it stinks in like it smells really, really bad. I think 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.”

Diego’s father sighed, and Diego wished he could suck the words back inside of him, “*Papi, lo siento.* I’m sorry. I don’t mean that *abuelito*’s place wasn’t great. It was. I miss it a lot. I... I miss him a lot.”

Armando sat on the bed. “I know you miss him. So, do I. And despite the smell of rotten things under beds, I think he would have loved it here.”

“I just wish I could go back there,” Diego said. “To the ranch. Even if only for a few weeks.”

“I wish you could too, but *Abuelita* can’t take care of all of the grandkids by herself.” Armando wrapped his arm around Diego’s shoulders. “Hey, we are on an amazing island, a family vacation paradise. Let’s enjoy it.”

“Ok, I’ll try. I know it’s a big deal that you got this gig. But when you said it was one of the best hotels on the island, I thought it would be, I don’t know, fancy. Have a huge pool.”

“This is one of the best hotels on the island,” Armando said. “Be patient, *mijo*. You’re going to love it here. The island is beautiful.”

“Beautiful? Well, I guess the harbor looked nice, but everything seems so old. I mean super old. It’s kind a creepy. And that Nicholson lady, I think she’s a psycho killer.”

“She’s not a psycho killer. She’s just under pressure. Try to be nice to her. I mean really nice. I had to do a lot of *dulce*, how do you say in English? Sweet talking to convince her to let you come. Let’s not mess this up. Okay?” Diego’s father stood and extended his fist towards Diego. “To a great summer.”

Diego gently bumped fists with his father. “Okay, but can’t Jeremy come, please? I promise we’ll stay out of trouble.”

Diego’s father stiffened. “I told you, your cousin coming is not an option now. After the trouble you guys caused in Nicaragua you should be glad I’m even considering it.”

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 Irish accent. The other woman listened intently, her hands wrapped tightly around a 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. And David, our sometime dishwasher, sometime bellhop, is around here somewhere. 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 the 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.

“Thanks, but ah, my stomach still feels kind of weird from the boat ride.”

“How about some sweet potato fries?” Francis asked.

“Sure”, Diego said, and he spooned a bunch of orange colored French fries onto his plate.

“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 do online gaming, they watch YouTube. They do not watch the Tennis Channel.”

“Well, maybe our Diego is different.” Francis said. Then he nudged Diego and nodded towards the back door. “Looks like someone is here to see you.”

“To see me?” Who would be coming to see me? Diego thought. Did his dad surprise him and invite Jeremy after all? But when he turned around, it wasn’t Jeremy. It was Whynd, pressing her face against the screen door. Ah, of all people, why her? Diego turned back to the table. He reached for a sweet potato fry, but he had no desire to eat it. Whynd Sage Perkins was definitely not Jeremy Lacayo.

“Maggie, can I come in?” Whynd said.

“No Whynd,” Maggie said. You know the rules. Best you not come inside.”

“But I need to talk to David, it’s important.”

“He’s not here,” Maggie said. “I think Nicholson sent him to the grocery.” Maggie stood up and began clearing the table. Diego reached for another sweet potato fry.

“Psst, Diego,” Whynd said.

Diego turned around.

“I need your help,” Whynd said.

“Why?”

“I need someone to come with me to the bluffs, and David might not be back in time.

We need to get to the bluffs and we have to get there fast.”

“What’s the hurry?”

“If we don’t get there soon, there’s gonna be a murder, and probably more than one.”

### Chapter 3

She must be an alien, Diego thought as he peddled a rusty bike up a steep hill. Whynd looked like a human, she wore clothes like a human, but she was definitely an alien. That was the only possible explanation for why she got him to do things he had no desire to do. First, breathing into a horse's nose, then getting on an old bicycle, and now, following her to some bluffs 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 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 pink and yellow flowers. It did not look like a potential murder site. "So, whose life are we saving?"

"Not who," Whynd said pointing to a mound of dirt. "What. We're saving turtles."

"Whynd, that's a pile of dirt. Maybe you need glasses. There aren't any turtles."

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 annual Block Island BATSPA," Whynd said.

"What's a BATSPA?"

"Before All the Summer People Arrive. It's a big party the island kids throw the first Saturday before tourist season officially begins. They start coming right before sunset, they make a huge bonfire and drink lots and lots of beer. Tons of people come on mopeds, Jeeps, cars, 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 on a stick with hand painted letters: **Turtle eggs. Endangered species. Do not crush under penalty of law.** “Here,” she said, handing Diego a large rock, “I’ll hold the stick part and you pound. I tried doing it myself, but it kept falling over.”

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 see a beach anywhere.”

Whynd started digging a hole next to the eggs and put the sign in it. “You got 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’re still baby turtles. They’re still important.”

Diego sighed and pounded the sign. The rock was heavy, but it felt good to be pounding something.

“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?”

Diego checked the time on his phone. “No thanks. I better get going, I don’t want my dad to worry.”

“Your dad seems to worry a lot,” Whynd said.

“No, he doesn’t. We only got here today. My dad’s cool, very cool it’s just-”

“So, I was wondering, is your dad an illegal immigrant?”

“No, he’s not an illegal immigrant! He’s married to my mom and has a green card. What makes you think he’s illegal?”

“I don’t know. Because you look like you’re Mexican. Dark hair, dark skin, kind a skinny. Except you got that blue eye thing going.”

“I’m not Mexican! My father’s from Nicaragua, my mom’s from Connecticut and I was born in America,” Diego said. What was with this kid? Forget about being an alien, she just had zero social skills. “And I’m not skinny. I do lots of martial arts. Francis said I have the build of a tennis player.”

“Sorry. It’s just that 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.”

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

Whynd choked on her water. “You’re staying at the Sunrise?”

“Yeah, it has an ocean view *and* a private bathroom.”

“Yeah, well, maybe it does have a private bathroom, but it’s also one of the most haunted houses on the island. Rocking Rosie’s chair has been seen rocking all by itself and when the last head of housekeeping lived there, she saw the ghost of Clossie Mott.”

“Well, I’ve never seen a ghost and I am not worried about seeing one, especially not one named Rosie or Clossie.” Diego reached for the other water bottle but paused before opening it. What if Whynd was right? Maybe the cottage was haunted, maybe he should be worried. Whynd had been right about Janice Nicholson, and the Sunrise Cottage sure didn’t seem all that ‘sunny’ to him. It was eerily chilly, and it smelled weird. “What do you mean, ‘seen’?” he asked. “Do they do anything?”

“Well,” Whynd said. She turned around and glanced at the dirt path as if checking to see if anyone was coming, “The ghosts don’t do stuff like in super scary horror movies. I’ve never heard of an island ghost slitting someone’s throat or anything, but, the Lady in Black follows people who ride their bicycles at night, and sometimes they get so scared they crash. The ghost at

the Hygeia is supposed to be really creepy. The twins said their aunt stayed there last summer, and in the middle of the night, something grabbed her ankle and yanked it.”

Suddenly Diego felt cold, really cold; like waiting at the bus stop in January cold. He wished he had brought his sweatshirt. He wished he hadn't come. He wished he was in Nicaragua where it was hot. He wished he was with Jeremy on the ranch with their other cousins. The younger kids could be annoying, and there were nasty bugs like scorpions, but at least the little kids weren't weird like Whynd. And, at least you could see scorpions; you could check in your shoes for them. How did you check for a ghost?

Whynd brushed some dirt back and forth with her hand. “Sorry, I don't mean to scare you and I don't mean to pry about your dad. My teachers say I have “acute curiosity disorder”. At camp, they call it CCPA, ‘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 Clossie.”

“Thanks, but I'm not scared. Before he became a chef, my dad was a bodyguard for the Cuban ambassador and, I've been taking karate for two years. I think we can handle an old lady ghost.”

“Karate?” Whynd asked.

Diego realized that karate probably was not the most effective ‘ghost protection skill’. Now he really wished Jeremy was with him. Jeremy would know exactly how to fight off a ghost. Diego stood up and got on the bike. “I better go.” He stared 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 thrilled about leaving Whynd with a bunch of drunk teenagers, but, if he was going to prove to his dad that he was responsible, spending his first night on the island *waiting* for a bunch of drunk teenagers, probably wasn't the greatest idea. "Come on," he said. "The sign's good. No one's gonna bother the eggs." He got on his bike and was about to take off when several cars and mopeds pulled into the parking lot. One of the mopeds stopped directly in front of Whynd, the tire inches from the mound of dirt. Whynd tried to shove the tire away from the eggs, but the wheel didn't budge.

A kid, not much older than Diego, yanked off his helmet and dropped it at Whynd's feet. "Why, it's 'Whyndy' Perkins," the kid said smiling, "I was wondering when the island's most notorious nutcase was going to show up. So, whose life are you going to mess up this summer? Don't tell me you're here to crash the BATSPA?"

Whynd stood up and put her hands on her hips. Her stance looked tough, but Diego could tell she was nervous. "No, I'm not going to crash your stupid party, TJ, and don't you dare come any closer."

TJ looked at the sign and then at the mound of dirt where one of the eggs lay partially uncovered. Diego gripped the bars of his bicycle. Part of him wished he had left two minutes earlier, the other part wished he had paid more attention in karate class.

TJ picked up the egg. "Endangered? You're even more wacko than you used to be. These are box turtle eggs, about as common as rocks at the bottom of the bluffs." TJ turned the egg slowly between his fingers. "In fact," he said drawing the egg closer to examine it, "It looks like a frigging snapping turtle egg to me. What kind of wacko saves snapping turtle eggs?" TJ raised his hand high as if he was about to smash the egg.

"Stop!" Whynd screamed. She reached to grab the egg, but TJ held it up higher.

Diego pushed his bike towards the moped. His heart was pounding, the chill replaced by sweat. Although TJ was still smiling, he looked as though he was wanted to mess with Whynd in a bad way. Again, Diego wished Jeremy was with him. Jeremy always knew exactly what to say to distract someone. He could talk anyone out of doing anything. But, Diego felt clueless. He had no idea how to stop this guy.

Whynd reached for the egg again. “TJ, please, it’s not funny. Put it back.”

“Well, maybe we should crack it open to see just how special it is.” TJ held his hand higher and let go. The egg smacked against a rock and cracked open.

“No!” Whynd cried. She knelt down next to the broken shell. Green slime oozed out covering a small, grey lump. Whynd picked up the grey lump and cradled it in her hand. She wiped her eyes with the back of her other hand and stared at TJ. “How could you?”

A girl carrying a heavy cooler walked over and knocked her shoulder against TJ. “Yes, TJ, how could you? When are you going to get a life and stop bothering Whynd? Here,” she said shoving the cooler towards him. “Here, this is heavy, take it.” Then she put her arm around Whynd. “I’m sorry Whynd, I’m not sure why he does stuff like that. I’ll keep an eye on him, I promise. I’ll make sure no one bothers the rest of the eggs.”

“Thanks, Sanna,” Whynd said. Whynd knelt down and buried what was left of the turtle. Then she jumped on her bike and tore 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, Whynd was gone.