

PROLOGUE

He stands next to my hospital bed in a neat, clean white uniform. So bright it hurts my eyes to look at him. The doctor tells me the relentless sun, reflecting off the ocean, might have permanently damaged my vision. Each night and every morning a nurse puts drops in my eyes. It stings. There are rows upon rows of ribbons on his chest. But right now I can't tell what color they are. Like everything else—since they pulled us out of the water—they all look gray to me.

The doctor says, “Patrick? This is Admiral”—something-or-other, I forget his name as soon as I hear it—“and he wants to ask you some questions.” He shakes me gently by the shoulder, because I’ve closed my eyes again, pretending to be asleep. If I could, I’d like to sleep and never wake up. Not die. I don’t mean that. Besides, Benny made me promise to

live. Benny made me an honorary marine and always said marines never go back on their word.

But I'd like to sleep. For a really long time. Just to rest and dream. Dream about anything else except what happened. I'd like to dream about going to watch the Detroit Tigers at Briggs Stadium and the smell of the fresh-cut grass and the world's best ballpark hot dogs. About playing baseball in the lot just down the street from Most Holy Trinity Church, and how everybody on each team always wanted to play first base, just like Hank Greenberg. I'd dream about dinnertime at our house on Porter Street. We'd sit and pray, and then we'd eat. Dad would tell us about how everyone had to look sharp at the plant that day because Mr. Ford had come through, inspecting the production lines. I'd dream about Christmastime and standing in line at Hudson's department store to see the windows all decorated up with lights and tinsel.

I'd dream about those things. And I wouldn't wake up for a really long time. Because I for darn sure don't feel like answering some admiral's questions.

“What do you remember, son?” he asks me anyway, even though all the nurses say I’m supposed to be resting. I don’t like him calling me “son.” I’m *not* his son.

Everything. I remember everything. But I keep quiet.

“What can you tell me about that night, Patrick?” he prods me again.

Nothing. Admiral. Sir.

He wasn’t there. Not with us, in the water, fighting for our lives. He hasn’t earned the right to ask these questions. And it’s not because he doesn’t deserve answers. It *was* a catastrophe. Benny used to tell me, “We all got jobs to do, pipsqueak. Yours is to mind your P’s and Q’s and to listen up when Benjamin Franklin Poindexter, Private First Class, United States Marine Corps tells you what’s what, *capisce?*” Half the time I never understood Benny. Except when he told me things that really mattered.

I don’t know how long I’d been in the hospital—a couple of days, maybe—when I overheard one of the nurses and orderlies talking about what happened. She said it was the worst disaster in naval history.

I'm sure this admiral has a big job to do, sorting it all out. Men died and people are going to want to understand what happened. Why it happened. But I'll bet right now all he really wants to know is what a twelve-year-old kid from Detroit and his ten-year-old brother—who never speaks—were doing right in the middle of it. He won't get a word out of my little brother, Teddy. Right now Teddy's in the bed across from me, buried in layer upon layer of crisp white bedsheets even though the room is stifling. He's turned toward the wall and huddled up into a ball. He rarely moves. The only time he makes any noise is when he's asleep. And even then he only cries and whimpers.

And no one will tell me where Benny is. Not the doctor, not the nurses, not the orderlies. Nobody.

But the admiral isn't interested in any of that. He just wants to know how two kids managed to stow away aboard the USS *Indianapolis*. His back is straight and his hands are hidden behind his back. His pants are creased and his posture so rigid, it makes me ache just looking at him. He isn't going away. So finally, I

open my eyes and slowly sit up in my bed and look him in the eye. My back is sore, my hands are bloodied and scarred. He won't get any answers out of me until he answers *my* questions.

“Where is Benny?” I ask the admiral once more.

He doesn't answer. Just prods me again. “Son, what do you remember about that night? When the ship sank?”

Just for a moment I want to tell him. I really do. But I don't want to get Benny in trouble.

He got us on that ship. Thought he was doing us a favor. But that was before the ship went down. And before the sharks came.

You want answers, Mr. Admiral?

You'll have to ask me the right questions.

The question isn't “What do I remember?”

It's “How will I ever forget?”