Something Sinister is Buried at Sandcastle Beach

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CHAPTER 1

Sandcastle Beach had zero sandcastles.

That was because it had zero beachgoers. And that was because beachgoers preferred to spend their day a mile down the coast at Sea Raven Beach and Sea Raven Marina, where they could rent a pontoon boat or jet ski by the hour.

Sandcastle Beach had nothing to offer except for an old, weathered lighthouse made of old, weathered stone, abandoned before most of the townsfolk were even out of diapers.

Sea Raven Beach boasted a big pier with beachwear boutiques and lunch cafes.

Sandcastle Beach had rocky outcroppings that stretched out past the shoreline, ending at dead-ends and open water.

Sea Raven Beach had bathrooms with individual showers.

Sandcastle Beach had slippery tidal pools.

Even the water that crashed along its sands appeared gray and lifeless compared to Sea Raven Beach's aquamarine surf and white foam.

However, there was one feature Sandcastle Beach had that Sea Raven Beach did not: An adjacent neighborhood called Sandcastle Landings, full of brightly colored cottages and bungalows. A chain of windswept knolls acted as a buffer between Sandcastle Beach and Sandcastle Landings.

A twelve-year-old boy from Sandcastle Landings walked barefoot across the windswept knolls, stepping confidently among the tufts of reed and rye grass that were being blown sideways from the ocean wind.

His name was Story Nelson. He marched onto the beach and scanned the horizon—the same horizon he'd scanned a thousand times. And, because his imagination never turned off, he was pretending that the cloudy sky was the roof of a gigantic mouth and the choppy seas its enormous jaw. The crashing surf was a tongue lunging forward to seize him. He jumped. The water missed his toes and shrank back. *No meal here*, he thought. *Find a whale, eat an island*. As the spittle of sea foam slid back into its world-sized maw, Story stomped defiantly behind it.

He almost stepped on the X in the sand.

It was etched where the water receded furthest: Two crossed strokes, each about fifteen inches long. The lines were thin, as if carved by a stick or sword-point. And they were clean, as if they'd just been made.

Story looked around. The beach was empty. No footprints but his own. Nobody standing up on the windswept knolls. Nobody up in the lighthouse. He scanned the sea. No boats. No sign of swimmers or divers. Just relentless waves and wind. The next wave rolled in, sweeping over the X and Story's feet. He paid no heed to the frigid water. He stared at the X.

X marks the spot, he thought. What else could this mean? Something must be buried here. But who would've buried something here? And what did they bury? His imagination was already racing when he dropped to his knees and began to dig.

He stole another glance around the beach. He was alone. There were no culprits hiding themselves. No practical jokesters having a good laugh at his expense. He returned his attention back to the hole.

The next wave rolled in and collapsed the sides of the hole. He started digging faster. The hole was six inches deep when the next wave came in. The hole's edges sank again. Story got on all fours and began digging like a dog on the scent of a buried bone. The next wave hit, splashing saltwater into his face. His eyes now stinging, he sat up and tried wiping his face, but his hands were caked with cold muck. He looked at the hole through bleary eyes. It was dissolving again. Soon there'd be no trace of the hole or the X.

He rinsed his hands quickly in the water and turned toward the nearest knoll. A tall distinctive reed was bending sharply in the wind. He climbed to his feet and strode deliberately toward the reed, carefully counting off steps as he went. He reached the reed on the forty-sixth step. *Forty-six*, he repeated to himself. He turned back to the hole.

There was nothing to see but an unblemished beach. The hole was gone. *Not gone*, he corrected himself. *Forty-six steps straight ahead from here, something is buried. And I'll be back tomorrow with a shovel.*

X marks the spot.

He began running for home.

CHAPTER 2

Sea Raven Elementary School was in the shape of a broken horseshoe. In the center were offices, lunchrooms, and Nurse Nan. The east wing had kindergarten through third grade, while the west wing held grades four through six. In 1989 an earthquake broke off the end of the west wing. Although the classroom only shifted eighteen inches, the school was patched up hastily, leaving a slightly cock-eyed sixth grade. Or as the students (and some faculty) referred to it, the Slipped Grade.

Mr. Brown was Sea Raven's sixth grade teacher. His room had some unusual features, such as the Recycled Recess corner, home to classroom artifacts fashioned from recycled and repurposed materials. The used-glass terrarium was composed of pieces of old soda bottles glued together. The pet snake inside would change size and color depending on which part of the jigsaw prism it was seen through. But the classroom's most unusual feature was the brown leather recliner in the center of the room. This was not for Mr. Brown. This was for the student who had done something special, like acing a test or being top fundraiser. That student was then awarded a certificate declaring him or her BROWN'S BEST and was entitled to sit in the recliner for one whole glorious school day.

Mr. Brown was blue-eyed and gray-haired—prematurely gray. He joked with his students that *they* weren't the reason for his early graying, but their grades *were*. The girls thought he was handsome. The boys liked him because he played quarterback at recess. But Story liked him because he encouraged creative writing. In fact, every day from two-thirty to the final bell was devoted to Creative Writing. And every day, while most students watched the clock tick down to

3:05 PM, having already scribbled their half-page essays—the minimum length—Story would write a tale that he'd been musing about since his waking hour.

Today's tale was entitled "The X at the Edge." It was two-and-a-half pages long. Story was getting to the big finish, deep in creative thought, and didn't notice the boy behind him reading over his shoulder.

The boy's name was Stewart Digby, but he enforced the nickname "Dagger." He wasn't bigger than the other boys, but he acted like he was from Tough Guy Alley. He pushed Story's shoulder.

Story turned.

Dagger scrawled a quick note.

Give me your story

Story shook his head, which earned another push from behind and another note from Dagger.

I got a nife in my desk

Story's gaze went from the note to Mr. Brown. The teacher was busy erasing the whiteboard. Dagger stabbed his finger at "The X at the Edge."

Story shook his head again, bracing for the next push. Dagger casually wrote a third note.

Gutting you after scool

Story swallowed…and handed Dagger the essay.

The final bell rang, the class jumped up. On the way out the door everyone handed their papers to Mr. Brown, including Dagger. He delivered Story's essay, adding boastfully, "Some of my best work."

Story slowly approached Mr. Brown. The teacher smiled. “Where did your imagination take you today, Story?”

“My imagination took the day off, Mr. Brown. Sorry.”

Mr. Brown gave Story a look that said *I don’t believe you.* “Well, the assignment was for everyone. Please return to your desk until you have something to turn in.”

Story gulped. He could see Dagger lurking in the hallway past Mr. Brown’s shoulder.

“It’s getting late, Mr. Brown,” Story feebly explained. “I have some important things to do.”

Dagger flashed him a thumbs-up.

Mr. Brown pointed to Story’s desk. “Half a page, then you can be free to do your ‘important things’.”

Story peeked around Mr. Brown’s shoulder. Dagger was gone.

“Your seat, Mr. Nelson.”

Story plopped back in his desk and started a new tale. It was called “The Bully Who Was Buried Alive.”

* * *

Story’s home was a Cape Cod house on a road called Rain Lane. And true to its name, the skies were darkening when Story finally arrived after school. He dropped his backpack on the rear porch and approached a garden shed along the side of the house. He wrenched open the shed door, letting it bang against the house, and disappeared inside. He began tossing tools onto the lawn in a loud, clattering pile.

The back door to Story’s house suddenly opened. A woman with a pained expression poked her head out. This was Anne Nelson, Story’s mother.

"Why are the tools on the lawn? And why are you making so much…" She lowered her voice to a whispered hiss. "…*noise?*"

Story held up a shovel.

His mother pointed to the pile of tools. "Pick those up and be quiet, your father's sleeping. And get the lawnmower out. I want this grass cut before the rain comes."

Story sighed. "Lawnmower? Won't that be noisy?"

She leveled a look at him. "Mow."

Story looked to the west. Out past the neighborhood and grass knolls, the beach and lighthouse could be seen. The sky was growing wicked out over the sea. "But Mom, I have important things to do!"

"Then stop arguing. Start mowing." She went back inside and closed the door.

Story dropped the shovel, growled with frustration, and marched back into the shed.

* * *

It was past five-thirty when Story finally reached the beach, and the rain had begun in full force. So in addition to the shovel, Story also carried a flashlight and an umbrella. *Dark and rainy*, he thought as he hurried along the top of the grass knolls. *Perfectly eerie*.

His imagination had been preoccupied with the mysterious X for a full day now. Obsessed. That's why he'd written today's essay about it. He'd been careful not to include too many details. Just a beach with an X and a lighthouse. He hadn't mentioned anything about the lone tall reed. He hadn't even finished the story to reveal what was buried under the X. Of course, he hadn't the foggiest idea what was really buried there, but he could've imagined something spectacular.

If only he'd been able to finish his story. If only Dagger hadn't stolen it.

Dagger. A sudden sense of panic shot through Story: what if Dagger had figured out that his story wasn't make-believe? What if Dagger was following him to the X?

Story suddenly stopped and ducked into the long grass. He clicked off the flashlight and closed the umbrella. He scanned the beach. A minute passed. And another. No sound or movement except for the rain and surf. He was getting soaked to the bone when another moment of panic struck: what if Dagger figured out where the X had been and was already *digging it up*?

Story launched to his feet and began running over the grass knolls. He could picture an empty hole and a devilishly happy Dagger standing next to it. He neared the lighthouse, sand skittering off his heels. The tall reed was right where he remembered it. He scanned the beach as he slowed and exhaled a sigh of great relief. No freshly dug hole, no Dagger busy with a shovel.

He touched the reed gently and pivoted his feet toward the sea. Then he began counting off steps. One, two, three… His heart was pumping, adrenaline firing through his veins. Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven… His eyes strained to focus through the showers. Thirty-eight, thirty-nine…

He stopped at forty and just froze. Because there, exactly where the X had been yesterday, was another X.

CHAPTER 3

Story sat at his bedroom desk, tapping furiously on his computer, plastered head-to-toe in wet sand.

It had been three hours since he'd found the second X. Two hours since he'd almost drowned.

Things had started out promising enough. After he'd taken another long look around the beach, ensuring that nobody was watching, he'd started shoveling. Every time the shovel scooped into the sand, he'd wait for the feeling of hitting something solid, or the sound of metal thudding against timber. But the minutes passed, and the hole grew…about four feet deep, he'd guessed, before the rain became a downpour.

Then he'd tried propping the umbrella and flashlight over the hole, but the tide got higher until he was knee-deep in seawater. Then the flashlight got swept away and he was virtually blind. That's when he'd decided to stop digging and climb out of the hole.

But when he tried climbing, he found the sandy sides were more liquid than solid. Every gripped handful of sogginess just squirted through his fingers. His feet slipped dozens of times without a single upward inch of progress. His breath got shorter, his pulse faster. Water from the incoming tide poured down the sides, but there was no room to even paddle. As he stood there panicking, he started imagining the water rising until it covered his mouth. He pictured himself gasping for a clear breath, only to swallow more seawater. He saw his body, floating dead and bloated.

Then somehow he switched off his imagination and only pictured the hole as it really was. Not as a watery tomb—just a four-foot hole, with water to his knees. And he started to claw

his way up. Determined and steady, two inches up and another one back, he kept climbing. He reached the rim and hauled himself over the edge. He lay on his back to catch his breath. And that's when he realized, as the tide pressed against his body and rain tapped on his face, that a shovel wasn't sufficient. He needed a better tool.

Now, safely at his computer desk, Google had little illumination to shed on the matter. Search results about X's were limited to definitions on language or Roman numerals. When combining "X" with "beaches," the search results showed an article from the *St. Augustine Sun* about a giant sand-sculpted X that was part of a giant sand-sculpted alphabet. Story spent a few minutes reading about the artists and admiring their creation.

Then when he combined "X" with "buried treasure," a broad spectrum of pirate literature and pirate references popped forth. But nothing about *his* beach. Nothing about *his* X.

Story pounded his fists on the desk. Sand scattered across the keyboard. He gazed out the window. The storm had finally cleared. The sky was now a starlit curtain. The beach was a pulsing fusion of black void and white curling tide, and the lighthouse looked like a towering dark figure that stared back—a menacing stranger watching the watcher. A smile crept across Story's face.

He quickly typed "X + buried treasure + Sandcastle Beach."

As Story hit the ENTER key, there was a sudden knocking on his door. His head whipped around. Sand showered everywhere.

The bedroom door opened. A man with a weary expression poked his head in. Chuck Nelson, Story's dad, gave him a curious look. "What happened to you?"

"Ahh…" Story rubbed some sand from his chin. "I found something unbelievable, Dad. You have to hear this story."

“I love a good story, Son, but…” He held up his briefcase apologetically. “Get cleaned up and go to bed, okay? We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“But Dad, I found an X out on the beach. Twice. In the same place, but on different days. Impossible, right?”

“Pretty darn improbable, I’d say.”

“Really. Honestly. I almost drowned! I came back to check out Google…” He pointed to the screen, then noticed his latest search had returned no matches. Story scratched his head, releasing another shower of sand. “How could there be nothing?”

“Sleep on it. By morning you’ll see it in a better light.” His father winked and closed the door.

Story swept some sand off the desk into his palm and angrily flung it at the empty Google search.

* * *

He showered as he’d been instructed. Standing in the warm spray and steam, he scrubbed the sand out of his hair. The X *had* to be connected to a treasure. Just because Google wasn’t aware of any pirates in this area didn’t prove there hadn’t been any. He tried cleaning under his fingernails. The sand was packed in tightly. Sure, his town wasn’t famous for pirate activity, but that’s because the smartest pirates didn’t allow themselves to become famous. Pillaging towns and raiding ports and engaging in broadsides were for publicity hounds. The Jolly Roger was nothing but a cry for attention. Real pirates would be much more low-profile. He toweled off.

As he lay in bed he thought of a pirate ship with a crew of truly professional cut-throats. There wouldn’t be any eyepatches or peglegs or talking parrots. They’d have uniforms like regular sailors. The ship would be orderly and clean. No figureheads of mermaids or serpents—

just a functional battering ram to dole out damage. Cannons would be hidden at all times, and the sails would be white and nondescript. Story turned over and stared out the dormer window.

The captain would be a brilliant tactician and leader. Quiet and thoughtful, he'd rule with an iron fist and a low whisper. No plank-walking or keelhauling. His crew was loyal because he was too brilliant to challenge, too brutal to betray. Nobody knew the extent of his temper because nobody had ever dared to test him.

As Story began nodding off, he imagined how such a pirate captain would hide his treasure. He'd be confident enough to bury his treasure in plain sight, but wily enough to construct safeguards. Such as an X that could only be seen at certain times. Like only at high tide…

The X was only seen at high tide! But how could that be?

* * *

The next day, school was a long, sleepy slog for Story. He'd been up half the night thinking of phantom X's that could only be seen at high tide, and the pirate captains who had somehow engineered them. He almost fell asleep during morning lessons as Mr. Brown droned on about cross-multiplication. Every time the teacher demonstrated how fractions could be multiplied by other fractions, Story could feel his eyelids droop and his head sway. Why did mornings have to be math? He hated math.

At lunchtime he caught a quick catnap in the library. The desk cubicle was hard and cold to his head, but it was private. He woke as the bell sounded. Drool had pooled under his cheek. He wiped his face on his sleeve and darted out the library doors.

He jogged past the bathrooms and fourth grade. Thankfully, Mr. Brown was lenient about tardiness. As long as you weren't *too* late, he would just make a comic show of slapping your

wrist. Everyone in class got a laugh. Story actually felt refreshed after his nap. Now the afternoon wouldn't be such torture, plus he still had Creative Writing. Maybe he would write about Captain Corfu. This was the name he'd assigned to his genius pirate captain.

"*No running!*"

The voice was a commanding bellow. Story slowed to a walk. An eleven-year-old girl stood at the gap between the fifth and sixth grades. She wore a neon-orange vest which matched her hair and freckles. Her eyes were blue and alert.

"Late for Mr. Brown's," Story said. Her arm shot up, blocking his path. He skidded to a stop.

"A demerit for speed." She pulled out a tablet and began jotting down information.

"You're Mary Something-or-other, right?"

"Mary Elizabeth." She continued jotting.

"Yeah, well, Mary Elizabeth, how come *you're* not in class? Ms. Whittaker's fifth grade class?"

"The Above-and-Beyond Program. Extra duties for excelling." She finished writing up the demerit.

Story snatched it and huffed. "Excelling at being a pain in the neck?"

"Excelling at math and science."

"Figures."

He marched to Mr. Brown's room. Class had already begun. Mr. Brown was just beginning a new unit in World Studies. It was on the bushmen of the Kalahari. Story slipped in the doorway and began tiptoeing toward his desk. He waited for Mr. Brown to make a loud cough or a dramatic "pssst." But no sound came except for the teacher's description of a barren

desert and the harsh life amongst its people. Story sat and looked attentively toward the front. Mr. Brown hadn't even seemed to notice his tardiness.

Dagger did, though. A low whisper in Story's ear: "Cooking up another good story?"

* * *

The final bell rang and the class handed in their Creative Writing essays. This time Story kept it to a single page: a quick adventure about a bushman hunter who stalks a lion to feed his family. He made sure to stay away from anything concerning beaches or treasure. Dagger hadn't even given his essay a second glance.

Thankfully, it was an uneventful end to the school day. Story packed up his things and made his way to the door. But as he approached Mr. Brown, he could feel the teacher's eyes on him.

"A word, Mr. Nelson?" Story paused in the doorway. "Your essay from yesterday, 'The Bully Who Was Buried Alive'…inspired by anyone we know?"

Story glanced past Mr. Brown's shoulder. Dagger was nowhere to be seen. "No. Nobody we know. Just a…"

"A fictional antagonist?"

"Sure."

Mr. Brown pulled a two-and-a-half page essay from his pocket. Story stared at the title: "The X at the Edge."

"Stewart Digby turned this in yesterday." Story just shrugged. "Isn't this your handwriting, Story, with Stewart's name on it?"

"It's not mine, Mr. Brown."

"Didn't you think I'd recognize your work?" He pointed to a large bulletin board labeled CREATIVE EXPRESSION IS IN SESSION. Half the essays on display were Story's.

"But it's not mine, Mr. Brown. Honestly."

"Okey-dokey, Smokey." Mr. Brown smiled and gave Story room to exit. Story moved quickly down the hall.

A small smile crept across Story's lips. *A clean getaway…*

* * *

Story hurried along the grass knolls. The sky was crisp and blue, with not a single cloud. He didn't carry an umbrella today. And the sun was still big and bright in the sky, so he didn't carry a flashlight. But he did carry a snorkel mask, breathing tube, and swim fins.

Today he was going to approach the X with a different plan. Maybe the X wasn't related to low or high tide. Maybe Captain Corfu had left the X as a decoy. Therefore, Story might be digging in the wrong spot. Or better yet, maybe Captain Corfu had made the X as a marker that pointed to the *real* marker. Something that could only be seen under the waves.

The beach was empty. He neared the tall reed and looked out at the waves. Thankfully, the tide looked nice and shallow. He wouldn't have to fight much of an undertow. But the water would no doubt be chilly. And he'd forgotten to bring a beach towel. A shiver went through him. It would be a long, cold trip home. But if he found what he was looking for, he'd be warmed by something far better than a towel. He'd be warmed by answers. By success.

And maybe by treasure.

He stopped dead in his tracks. There on the beach, where twice he'd found the X, was now a freshly dug hole.

CHAPTER 4

Story sat at the kitchen table the following morning, chewing spoonfuls of Frosted Flakes and glowering out the window at the lighthouse.

Seated across the table was his dad, reading the online *Wall Street Journal* on his iPad and having a glass of red wine. Because he worked the graveyard shift at the Maritime Institute, his "evening" was everybody else's morning.

He noticed Story's severe chewing. "By the way, how's your adventure coming along? Something about an X on the beach?"

Story's eyes moved slowly to meet his dad's. "Just another story. The X was all in my head." He took another bite of cereal.

* * *

Story marched down the hallway toward Mr. Brown's class. His mouth was still set with the same angry lines from breakfast. He hadn't told his dad anything at breakfast about his suspicions, just kept chewing and chewing his Frosted Flakes, imagining Dagger digging and digging. His imagination eventually came to only one conclusion: Dagger uncovered Captain Corfu's stash of riches and secrets. And when Story tried imagining what those treasures could be, all he could make out was a blinding gold light. Evidently his imagination wasn't powerful enough to imagine what had lain buried beneath the X.

Mary Elizabeth stood in the hallway. She wasn't wearing her vest, but she watched him with the same self-importance she'd worn yesterday. *Just say something*, he dared her silently. *I've got bigger business than you, but I'll gladly swat you, Above-and-Beyond Brat.*

She just watched him walk by. *Smart girl,* he thought. *She must sense my fury. Now let's find Dagger...*

He reached Mr. Brown's classroom. Everybody was in their seats. All eyes were on the brown leather chair in the center of the room. Lying comfortably in the recliner, with his feet up and a smug expression on his face, was Dagger.

Mr. Brown noticed Story's arrival. "Excellent. Everyone's here. Could I have everyone's attention? Mr. Digby is being honored for his essay entitled 'The X at the Edge.' It shows a transformational improvement over his past work. Today he is Brown's Best."

* * *

The surprise of finding out that Dagger was being rewarded for "The X at the Edge" wasn't the worst part of Story's day. Lunch wasn't the worst part of his day either, when the cafeteria ran out of mac n' cheese and he was forced to have Sea Raven Casserole instead. The worst part wasn't even when Mr. Brown elected to have Dagger stand before the class and read "The X at the Edge," during which he mispronounced practically every syllable in the story.

The worst part of Story's day came just before the final bell. It was Creative Writing, and Story was just finishing a story called "The Bully Who Was Buried in a Recliner," when he spotted Dagger out of the corner of his eye. Dagger was reclined as far as possible, tapping his pencil against his forehead as if he was pondering creative ideas. Story quickly jotted a note for Dagger's eyes only.

I know it was you

Dagger's gaze narrowed. He looked around. Mr. Brown was hanging some bunting for upcoming school elections, and the rest of the class was watching the clock tick down to 3:05 PM. So Dagger responded with his own note: *No duh, idiut*

Story wrote another note. *Whatever you found, I want it back*

Dagger smiled proudly and wrote: *To late, Im alreddy Browns Best.* He patted his own shoulder.

Story stewed on this a moment. He jotted one last note.

I'm going to knock that smile off your face.

When he held the note up for Dagger to see, two things happened instantly: 1) the final bell rang, and as the students began emptying the classroom, 2) Dagger made a beeline for Story.

Mr. Brown stood at the door collecting papers.

Dagger bumped his chest into Story's. "Come on, Nelson. Knock away."

"What was in the hole?"

"Take your best shot."

Story's fists balled up. "What was in the hole?"

Dagger extended his chin for easy access. "Punch me."

"*What was in the hole?*"

"What hole, butthole?!"

Story swung his right fist and connected against Dagger's lower left cheek, knocking Dagger off balance and over two desks. Mr. Brown and the remaining students all turned. Dagger blinked once and jumped to his feet. Story stood firm and readied his fists again as Dagger rushed forth.

But Dagger didn't come with a punch, he came with a kick, his foot smacking Story squarely between the legs. Story's face went white and his body crumpled. Dagger wound up for a punch. Mr. Brown snagged his hand and pulled him away.

As Story lay on the floor, sprawled between overturned desks and staring students, and as pain shot through his body and swirled throughout his head, he had but one thought: Dagger didn't know anything about the hole.

Somebody else dug up the X.

CHAPTER 5

Nurse Nan was a dear old woman who wore her white hair in a bun. She looked about sixty years old. But when she wasn't working, and Story saw her around town, she wore her hair long and straight. That's when she looked about eighty. She handed Story an ice pack and instructed him to hold it against his crotch.

"Your parents will be here in a jiffy," she said.

Story leaned back on the small bed and pressed the ice pack gingerly to his groin. Colors were beginning to return to normal and the ringing in his ears was trailing off. But the ache was still sharp.

"So, Captain Corfu, eh?"

Story looked over. Mary Elizabeth was standing in Nurse Nan's outer office, arms crossed. "What did you say?"

"I escorted you from Mr. Brown's, and you were motor-mouthing about letter X's and Captain Corfu and a hole somebody dug up…"

Story shook his head. "I'm delirious, Mary Elizabeth. Dagger just punt-kicked my privates." He had a foggy memory of hobbling to Nurse Nan's office on Mary Elizabeth's shoulder, mumbling about his realization that Dagger couldn't have been responsible for digging up the X.

Nurse Nan patted Story on the shoulder. "Not to worry. Mr. Brown walked Stewart Digby to the principal's office straight away. He won't be landing any more hands or feet on you today, rest assured." She shooed Mary Elizabeth away. "He needs some downtime. Thank you for your help, dear."

Mary Elizabeth gave Story another judging look and then disappeared. Twenty minutes later, Story's mother arrived. She thanked Nurse Nan and helped Story to the minivan. His legs were still wobbly and his privates still throbbing.

The drive home was silent. But when they parked in the driveway, Story's mother shut off the car and turned to look at him. "I didn't wake your father. I'll inform him later. That Digby boy has been suspended for a day. Luckily for you, as a first-time offender, Mr. Brown and Principal Mayhew have agreed to let us find a suitable punishment. So be prepared: Your father will have something to say tonight."

* * *

That night, at 10 PM, Story was prepared. He lay under the covers looking out the dormer window at the lighthouse. Tree branches scraped against his bedroom siding, adding a clawing sound to the blustery night.

So now Mary Elizabeth knew the name of Captain Corfu. What harm could there be in a fifth grader knowing the name of an imaginary pirate? Still, he felt uneasy about more people knowing more pieces of the puzzle. It was his puzzle, his story, his potential treasure. And now the whole sixth grade had heard his essay. His head began hurting. And then his privates began to ache…

There was a knock at the door. His dad peeked in. "You awake, Rocky?"

"*Rocky*?"

"The Champ. The Italian Stallion. Hero of three good movies." He clicked on Story's nightstand lamp, then sat on the edge of the bed, his briefcase across his knees. "I hear you went one round with that Digby bully."

"He stole my story."

“How’re the Nelson family jewels feeling?”

“Dad!” Story pulled the covers up to his neck.

His dad chuckled. “I’m not going to check. I’m concerned. I couldn’t care less about school punishments and groundings.” Story released the blanket a bit. “It can be lonely being someone with a big imagination, dreaming up stories nobody else can quite see. I know.”

“Do you still dream up stories?”

“Not so much.” He tugged gently on Story’s earlobe. “But I would never want you to stop.”

“Do you ever wish you were still writing them?”

“Sure. But things change.”

“Like having a baby.”

“Like having my son. Remember, we called you Story because…”

Story knew this part. He’d heard it a thousand times before. “Because I was the best story you ever created.”

“As the Fonz used to say, *exact-a-mundo*.” He turned out the lamp. The only light was the glow of the waxing moon over the sea. “No more fights. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

His dad stood up and walked to the door. “I’ve been able to coax a lenient sentence out of the authority figures. Time served. Good night.”

The door closed behind him. Story shoved the covers off his body. Instead of pajamas, he was dressed in dark pants and a hooded sweatshirt. He pulled on his sneakers, stepped to the dormer window, and watched as his dad drove away into the night.

Then he climbed out the window, lowered himself carefully to the ground, and took off toward the beach.

CHAPTER 6

The moon was in the shape of a flat tire, hanging low and listing over the beach, illuminating everything in ghostly silver. Story picked his way carefully across the grass knolls. He didn't carry a flashlight. After all, if whoever had dug the hole was watching the beach, he didn't want to announce his comings or goings. He did carry his shovel, however. After all, if whoever had tried cheating him out of Captain Corfu's treasure had failed, the X would certainly be back.

Story approached the lighthouse. He tried imagining it as a beacon of light cutting a swath of hope across the dark sea. But that was not easy to imagine. There wasn't anything hopeful about it. Truthfully, from the safety of his bedroom window, the lighthouse always appeared creepy at night. But now, looming over him in the fragments of moonlight, it seemed downright sinister.

What might Captain Corfu have thought of it? What if the Captain had actually been drawn to it? What if the lighthouse's beacon was the reason he'd planted his mysterious X here in the first place?

Story reached the tall reed. He pivoted and started counting steps.

How old was the lighthouse anyway? Why was it shut down? How long had it been dark? Good questions. He had some Google-work to do when he got back home…

Story suddenly froze. Where the X had previously been—twice—and a freshly dug hole—once—there was now a long trench.

It started near the water's edge and extended almost as far as the tall reed. About eighteen inches deep and six inches wide, it looked like the kind of pathway that a cable would be buried

in. Story scanned the trench. There were no signs of heavy machines. No tire tracks. The trench must've been dug by hand. That would've taken hours.

Then Story noticed the footprints. They were mostly obscured around the trench, misshapen by shifting sand and constant movement. But at the end of the trench, closest to the grass knoll, a single-file line of footprints led away from the trench toward the lighthouse.

A trickle of ice slithered down Story's spine.

The footprints were big. Too big for Dagger. A man wearing boots made these prints.

Story stepped over the trench and moved in slow-motion alongside the trail. After several steps he realized he was holding his breath. He slowly exhaled.

He squinted into the darkness ahead. The trail ended abruptly at the lighthouse door. The footprints didn't go left or right, just terminated mid-step at the old weather-beaten door. The lighthouse didn't have an attending cottage, consisting only of the tall conical tower. He looked up. The moonlight shined against the tower. He couldn't see anything but curved stone and fast-moving clouds. He returned his attention to the trail.

Who could it be? Who was waiting inside the lighthouse? A fear he'd never experienced before kept him rooted in place. Of all the tales he'd ever thought up, none had even a whiff of *real* danger. This was something altogether unknown. He counted the footprints between where he stood and the lighthouse door. Nine.

Waves crashed. The moon slipped behind a layer of thick nimbus clouds. The beach darkened. His fingers tightened on the shovel's handle. He repositioned the shovel so it was gripped firmly in both hands. Who was on the other side of that door?

He took a half-step, his ears straining to block out the crashing surf. Was there a noise coming from the lighthouse? It sounded like an electric motor…like the sound from a vacuum cleaner or blender, high-pitched and fast. Or was it just the wind?

He took another half-step. The door was still over twenty feet away. Was his imagination getting away from him? He certainly had an active imagination. An *over*-active imagination. Every teacher he'd ever had said, *Story, you have an over-active imagination*…

That was it! That had to be the answer. He suddenly lurched forward, closing the remaining distance to the lighthouse door. *It's Mr. Brown! He's the only adult who read the story and knew about the X. He made the prints, he made the trench, and he's the person behind this door!*

Story grabbed the door handle—and froze again. The handle was cold to the touch. Little holes had formed in the brass handle, pocked by decades of salt air and sea spray.

Mr. Brown went to a lot of trouble, Story thought. Was he trying to teach Story a lesson? What kind of lesson would a sixth grade teacher hope to impart by digging up a beach in the middle of the night? The idea seemed ridiculous. Story ever-so-carefully released the door handle and took a half-step back.

The door suddenly creaked. Story sprang two full steps back. Was that the wind against the old wood? Suddenly, with ears perked and imagination racing, an internal scream sounded in Story's head: *This is not the place for you! Run!*

Story pivoted and darted toward the grass knolls, cradling the shovel like a baby. *Faster*, his mind yelled. But his feet were sluggish and slippery in the sand. He didn't dare look back. *Get to the long grass! Just get out of the open and into the long grass!*

He reached the grass knoll and dropped among the reeds. The thick stems somehow felt comforting against his face. He dropped the shovel and began scrambling hastily on his belly, performing his best impression of a centipede. *More legs*, he willed to himself. *You have a hundred legs now, move them all faster!*

The only sound was his body scraping and clawing its way through the sand and underbrush. He paused a moment, trying to listen for other signs of movement. The surf was now quieter, buffered by distance and the long grass. All he could hear was his own heavy breathing and the blood coursing through his ears. He resumed his swift belly crawl. When he reached the pavement at the far side of the grass knoll, he got to his feet and began sprinting as fast as two feet and mortal fear could carry him.

He reached his house in less than a minute.

He climbed onto the garden fence and grabbed hold of the roof's rain gutter, stealing a quick glance back toward the lighthouse. Was that a hint of light in the tower window? Or was it just a trick of the moonlight? He hoisted himself onto the roof and climbed in his dormer window.

He looked back at the dark lighthouse. *Maybe it was just my imagination*. He locked the window and lowered the shade.