

PROLOGUE

THE surfers called it *dawn patrol*, and it was Cory's favorite time to surf with his little brother. The ocean sparkled gold in the first light of morning. The city behind the beach was just waking up, and the water was smooth as glass out beyond the breakers. The surf wasn't crowded like it would be a few hours from now.

Cory sat astride his surfboard, dangling his feet in the water, while Aaron lay on his back, an arm draped over his eyes. They bobbed gently as the swells off the Pacific rushed toward shore. Cory watched the sunrise. Aaron was twelve and had no interest in sunrises.

If he wasn't riding a wave or looking for the next one, he wanted to be sleeping.

Cory thought of his younger brother like some kind of surfing sea creature. All Aaron did was sleep and eat and surf and sleep some more.

Cory was envious. He hadn't been sleeping well at all lately. He had a full week off at home, but he wasn't finding it restful. He wasn't even *supposed* to be home right now, surfing with his little brother. The United States Navy had *sent* him home after the most humiliating day of his life: the day he quit training to become a part of the navy's Sea, Air, and Land teams, better known as the Navy SEALs. They were the toughest, most elite special forces operators in the world, and their training was the most difficult military training anyone had ever created.

He'd failed it.

Cory had made it through a month of the Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training, a series of grueling physical and mental tests. BUD/S trainees barely sleep, barely eat, and hardly ever get to clean

themselves. They spend most of their time cold and wet and in pain.

He had been doing fine being miserable until the fourth week of training, the week they called *Hell Week*. That was when Cory reached his breaking point.

After twenty-hour days of being shouted at by instructors, running countless wet and sandy miles, and never sleeping more than four hours in a row, he knew he couldn't handle another week of the training, let alone another five months. And he'd been told that after the training, the life of a Navy SEAL was even harder. Could he really commit to spending his entire career feeling this horrible all the time?

At the end of Hell Week, he took his helmet liner to the little green sign with the bell next to it, set it down, and rang the bell three times. That was the signal that he had quit.

No one was looking at him when he did it, but he felt like all the eyes of everyone he'd ever known were on him, judging him, seeing that he was a failure. Cory wasn't the first to drop out and he knew he wouldn't

be the last — eighty out of every hundred guys in BUD/S training drop out before it's over — but knowing that did nothing to lessen his shame.

He went home for a few days to recover, to collect himself and tell his friends and family he would not be a Navy SEAL.

He didn't know yet where the navy would assign him next, but he was pretty sure it would be a job that no one else wanted. He would receive his new assignment any day now. He wasn't so sure he would accept it. He thought about quitting the navy altogether.

"You ready to go in and get some breakfast?" Cory asked Aaron as they floated on the ocean.

His little brother didn't even turn his head. "You tired already, old man?"

Cory wasn't tired, he just didn't feel like having fun. It was too much work to enjoy himself when all he wanted to do was wallow in self-pity.

He made up an excuse. "I'm sick of choppy swells," he said. "There are nothing but bad breaks this morning."

Aaron sat up, paddled himself right next to his brother, and looked at him gravely. "There are no bad waves, Cory," Aaron told him. "Just bad surfers."

Cory sighed, then leaned over and shoved his younger brother right off his board.

"Bwah!" Aaron laughed, falling with a splash, and surfaced right beside Cory again. He shook his mess of blond curls out like a wet dog. Cory rubbed his own crew cut.

Aaron may still have had his hair, and he may have been twice the surfer that Cory was, but Cory's brief time in SEAL training had given him one advantage: He'd only been home a few days and his muscles were still ripped. What good was having a little brother if you couldn't show him who was boss from time to time?

He shoved Aaron under with one arm, counting to five before letting him go.

Aaron popped up, gasping. He looked up at Cory. "If the navy deploys you to the other side of the world, I'm totally taking your room."

Cory moved to shove him under again. Aaron flinched. Cory smiled and helped Aaron back onto his board. He didn't mention that he probably wasn't going anywhere, that he was probably quitting the navy.

"You know," Aaron said, looking away from his brother, like he did whenever he said anything important to him. "Most guys wouldn't survive a day in SEAL training."

Cory didn't know what to say to that. He just shrugged. Then he actually felt himself tearing up with regret.

One day or four weeks. There was no difference if you quit before you finished. You weren't good enough to be a Navy SEAL.

Without another word about it, Aaron flipped around on his board and paddled into the surf. He called back over his shoulder: "Try to keep up, sailor!"

Cory was grateful. He didn't want to cry in front of his little brother.

He lay down on his board and swam after Aaron. With a few sweeping strokes, he was paddling alongside.

A big swell rose behind them and Cory felt that rush as it pushed them forward, raising the tail of their boards, speeding them up. Aaron glanced over his shoulder at Cory, gave him a nod, and together, like there was a string connecting them, they popped up to their feet, driving the back of their boards down into the wave as it crested, and cruising along its face.

Cory was just behind Aaron. He felt the beautiful pressure of the wave, the air across his shaved head, the splash of the salt water against his face. He watched the muscles on Aaron's back to see when his brother was going to turn up into the wave, to cut back, to drop to the bottom of the trough and zip up it again, to jump and grab the board in the air.

Cory tried to keep up, but Aaron could do tricks Cory couldn't even think of. The best he could do was to keep his eyes fixed on his little brother and try not to crash into him.