

In the Beginning

THE KNIGHTS OF SPRING LAKE SERIES

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“I think that guy’s in trouble,” David said to himself.

David was on his surfboard, about thirty yards from the Spring Lake beach, and he could see a swimmer who was getting nowhere as he tried to bodysurf to shore. It was nearing six in the evening, and there were no lifeguards since the official summer season of 2019 was still weeks away.

David looked back and saw a promising swell, but he hesitated and turned his attention back to the guy in the water. The middle-aged man was now farther from home than when he’d started, and he seemed to be floating out on an invisible current.

Riptide, David thought.

David put his belly on his board and started paddling in the man’s direction, not quite sure what he was getting into. As he got closer, he heard a voice behind him.

“You see that guy too?”

David turned his head and said, “Yeah, I think he’s in a riptide.”

The other voice got closer. “I think so too.”

David saw a Wild Child PU board glide up next to him, and while he quickly checked out the board, there was a moment of recognition.

“Hey, Jon,” David said, recognizing his classmate from school. While they hung with different crowds and had different interests, they sometimes saw each other on the water. David didn’t know

Jon well, but he remembered that he enjoyed being in his religious education class, referred to as CCD, last year.

Jon smiled and said, “Hey! How you doing, David?”

“Better than this guy,” David replied while motioning at the now fast-floating swimmer. “What do you think?”

“I dunno. You have an idea?”

“He’s a lot bigger than us, and he might be scared and get in a panic, so why don’t we paddle closer and calm him down? I’ll hitch a ride on your board, and we’ll give him mine to hold on to.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jon said.

They maneuvered closer, and David called out, “You all right?”

The man gave a thumbs-up and said, “OK so far.” He took a breath. “A little tired.”

He was bobbing up and down in the waves but was far enough away from shore to be out of the grip of the riptide. The man was not panicking, and that helped David and Jon stay calm as well. The issue now was going to be getting him back in while dealing with waves big enough to be surfable, a strong current, and jetties of jagged rock that defined the boundaries of the surfing-only section of the beach. As a bonus, Jon could see the riptide that had carried him out was doing what riptides do—diverting to a path parallel to the beach before dissipating. They were all moving south toward one of the jetties.

“Here,” David said. “I’m gonna push my board to you. Think you can get on it?”

The man nodded.

“Let’s do this,” David said as he pushed the board toward him.

David may have pushed a bit too hard, and with his momentum, he lost his grip on Jon’s board. He flailed a bit as he lost his connection to the board and his sense of direction.

Jon saw David was in trouble. As an experienced surfer and swimmer, he confidently got off his board and held it with one arm as he reached for David with his other. He let David take the front position, and he got on the back.

The man struggled to get up on David’s board as Jon yelled, “Go,

go, go!” He and David started paddling hard toward open water to avoid the fast-closing rocks. David glanced back and saw the man was now on the board and, after a slow start, was also paddling to get outside the jetty.

“Come on, David!” Jon yelled as the combination of current and swells was making it hard to clear the rocks. At almost the same moment, Jon screamed, “Ahhh! The rocks cut my leg!”

David continued to paddle furiously, and after a couple of tense seconds, they were clear of the jetty and soon in calmer waters. David looked at the gash on Jon’s leg and said, “It’s not too bad.”

“Maybe, but now we’re shark bait. Keep paddling!”

Jon was not kidding. One of the fun facts about this idyllic seashore town of Spring Lake was that in 1916, a great white shark killed a man right off this beach and at other spots at the Jersey Shore as well. The book and movie *Jaws* was based on those attacks. Every Spring Lake kid knew this because the town played the movie on the beach every Labor Day weekend and the mayor told everyone about Spring Lake’s real-life “contribution” to the tale.

They were soon able to relax as they let the now muted waves on this side of the jetty take them peacefully to the beach. They looked back and saw that their victim had also cleared the jetty and was following close behind. As they looked, the man yelled, “Thank you!”

Jon turned to David as they climbed out of the water and asked, “Isn’t that Mr. Gabriel, our old CCD teacher?”

“Yeah, I think it is,” David replied. “That’s really weird.”

Mr. Gabriel got to the beach, handed David his board, and said, “Hello, boys.” Mr. Gabriel put his hands on his knees and rested a moment. He was still panting and a bit out of breath. He inhaled deeply, stood up tall, and said, “Wow, who would have thought this is how we’d meet again!” He shook their hands. “Thank you, Jon. Thank you, David. You guys really came through.”

“Yeah, I’m glad we were here,” Jon said.

“I guess you remember we were in your class,” David said. “You always said to just do the next right thing.”

“That was the *Australian* guy on the videos,” Jon said, exaggerating the adjective with a terrible Aussie accent.

“Well, anyway,” David continued, “I guess you taught us well.”

“Maybe,” Mr. Gabriel said while pondering the thought. “I am sure that your parents had a lot more to do with it.”

Before the boys had a chance to say anything else, Mr. Gabriel reached out and shook their hands once more. “Thanks again, boys. I’m pretty tired, so I’m going to head home.”

As the man walked away, Jon yelled, “Next time maybe stick to the pool, Mr. Gabriel!”

Mr. Gabriel kept walking but reached both arms over his head and gave a double thumbs-up.

“Boy, that was a dumb thing to say,” Jon said. “It just came out.”

“No, you’re fine. If I remember from class, he probably expects something like that from you,” David said and flashed his mischievous smile.

Jon chuckled.

The boys grabbed their boards and headed to the boardwalk and their bikes.

“Whatever happened to Mr. Gabriel?” David asked.

“I don’t know. I heard he doesn’t teach CCD anymore.”

“He was a good guy.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Jon said.

Jon and David shielded their eyes from the setting sun as they headed up the stairs to the boardwalk. Each had on his wet suit with the top half pulled down to the waist, a board under his arm, wet, salty, and disheveled hair. David had a sense of having done something special.

“Well done, lads,” came the voice of a man on the boardwalk.

They squinted and could see a figure at the top of the stairs. He appeared to be wearing all black, but they could not see his face since it was overwhelmed by the brightness of the sun, which was directly behind him.

“Thanks,” David said, “but it was no big deal.”

“I disagree,” the man replied. “There is no greater love, said the Lord, than to lay down one’s life for a friend.”

They were now at the top of the stairs, but the brilliance of the setting sun continued to outshine their ability to see his face, showing only that he was wearing a long, sleek black robe and sandals.

Not your normal Spring Lake boardwalk attire, David thought.

“Well, we didn’t lay down our lives,” Jon said. We just laid down our boards.”

“And he’s not our friend,” David said. Then, remembering the connection, he added, “But we did know him from CCD class.”

The man stepped to the side, and now the boys could see him in full, including his priest collar.

“I’m Father Eli,” he said as he offered his hand.

“You’re a priest!” David said as he shook his hand.

“Duh,” Jon muttered as he also shook Father Eli’s hand.

“I am,” Father Eli said.

“Are you at St. Catharine’s?” Jon asked. “We go to church there.”

“Sometimes,” David whispered playfully.

Jon gave David a quick, wide-eyed, disapproving look that said, *Whoa, not in front of the priest*. David again flashed his mischievous smile.

Father Eli replied, “The order to which I belong has asked me to come to Spring Lake. I am not sure how long I will be here, but I like it already.” As he began to walk west off the boardwalk, pointing at the lake that gave the town its name and the beautiful dome of St. Catharine Church on its southwest shore, he asked, “Are you heading this way?”

The boys nodded as they loaded their boards onto their beach cruisers.

“Great!” Father Eli said. “Come walk with me awhile.”

After securing their boards to their respective racks, they unchained their bikes and walked with Father Eli. He asked a lot of questions about their interests, school, family, the town, the church, sports, and music. Reaching the base of the lake, Father Eli asked the boys which way they were going. They pointed to the road that