

HANAIEI BAY,
KAUAI, HAWAII,
U.S.A.



▶ “CRUZ!”

His name floated easily to him across the water. Cruz turned to see his dad waving him in from the beach. It couldn't be time to go already, could it? Knee-deep in the warm surf, Cruz raised an arm. He spread his fingers to ask—beg—for five more minutes. “Please,” he whispered into the evening breeze.

In about three hours, he would be leaving for Explorer Academy. It was a long way from Kauai to Washington, D.C.—4,882 miles, to be exact. And Cruz was scared. What if he didn't make any friends? What if he couldn't handle the training? What if he disappointed his family, his friends, his teachers, and everybody who expected him to be something even *he* wasn't sure he could be?

His father was giving him the thumbs-up.

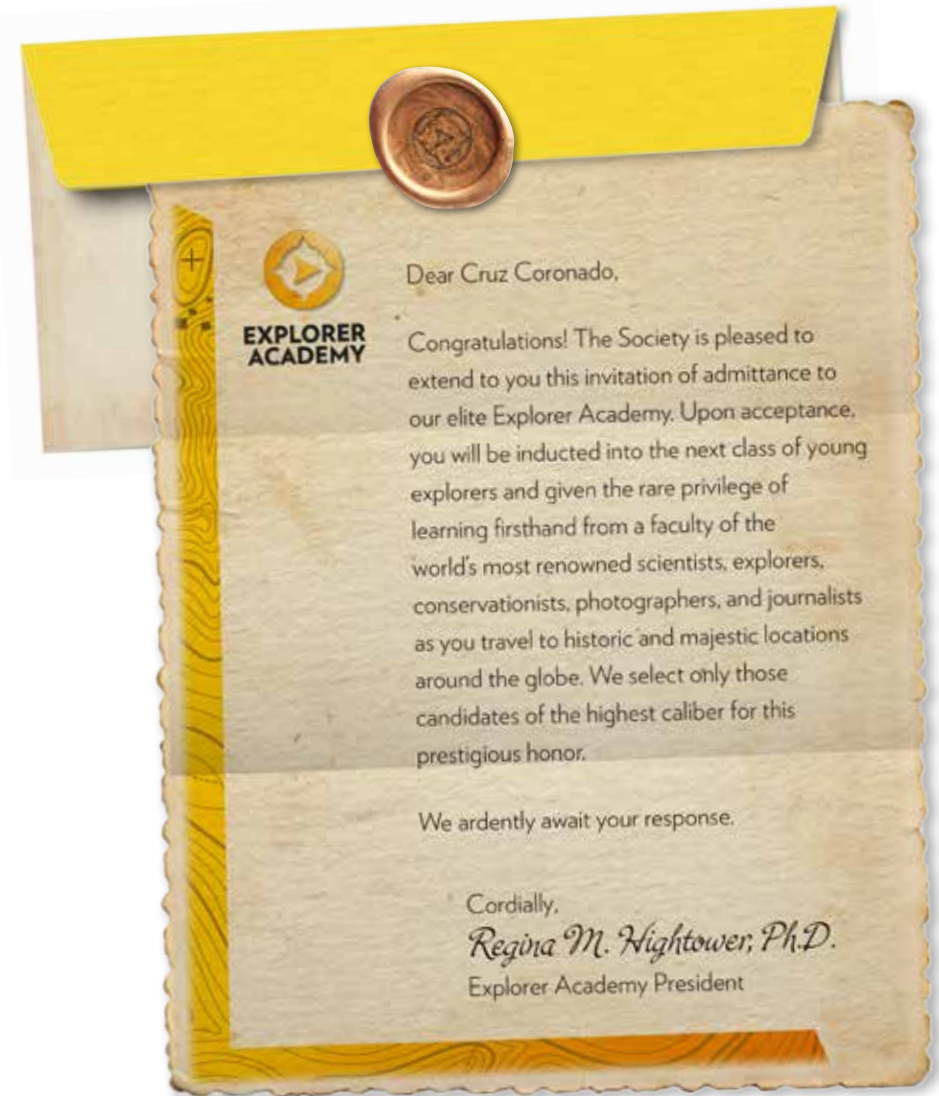
Yes!

Pushing the what-ifs from his mind, Cruz faced the tangerine sunset of Hanalei Bay. He would think about everything else later. He slid his belly onto the surfboard and began windmilling his arms through the tepid teal waters as he'd done thousands of times. He'd been surfing for as long as he could remember. His dad teased him that he spent more time in the water than out of it, which was probably true. Cruz loved the sweeping motion of the waves. Water was constant and dependable. Comforting.

Approaching the break, Cruz grasped the sides of his surfboard. He pushed the nose underwater in a smooth duck dive and the swell passed over him. Surfacing, he paddled out a bit farther and cut a 45-degree turn that put him parallel to the beach. Lining himself up with the end of the long pier, he sat up and straddled his board, legs dangling. He liked the take-off zone. It was “the calm before the ride,” as Lani liked to say. Bobbing like this, he could think about anything or nothing. The choice was up to him. On his last day at home, Cruz didn’t want to think. He wanted to feel. He wanted to feel every sensation. And remember.

To his left, beyond the crescent-shaped inlet, rose the emerald peaks of the mountains on the northern shore. In the fading light, it was easy to pick out the white waterfalls cascading down the creases of the hills. Cruz spotted his dad walking through the parking lot—geez, sailboats 20 miles offshore could probably see that crazy-bright yellow-and-blue-zigzag shirt. His father would be headed back up to the Goofy Foot, their surf shop, to close for the night. Cruz glanced right, into the deep orange sunset. It was as if the glowing orb had rolled out a carpet of light across the ocean for him, just to say goodbye. He was sure going to miss this place.

“You don’t have to go, you know,” Lani had said last spring when he’d told her he’d been accepted into the Academy. Her words stung. Lani was his best friend—the one who always found the silver lining. Not that he blamed her. They had both applied to the school, yet only Cruz had been accepted. It had come as a shock. He had thought Lani surely would have been chosen over him—she was so much smarter and more creative. But then the certified letter had arrived. For *him*. It was impressive, with its fancy parchment paper and shiny gold seal.



Cruz’s aunt, Marisol, who taught anthropology at the Academy, said they only accepted 25 or so students per class from around the world. It was quite an achievement to be admitted. Still, Cruz wondered, had he earned it? His aunt had likely pulled a few strings to get him in. Or it could have been offered out of guilt. Cruz’s mom also once worked at the Society—she had been a neuroscientist with the Synthesis, its scientific arm. Seven years ago, there was a bad accident in her lab. It had taken her life. Another Synthesis scientist, Dr. Elistair Fallowfeld, had

also died in the tragedy. That's all anyone would tell Cruz and his family. That, and his mother had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Cruz hated that saying. Isn't everyone who accidentally dies in the wrong place at the wrong time?

"I thought the plan was for us to go to the Academy *together*," Lani had said to Cruz.

"Yeah, but Aunt Marisol thinks—"

"Of course your aunt wants you to go now. She's going to be there. What do *you* think?"

Cruz knew Lani had wanted him to say he would ask the school to let him wait a year. That would give Lani another chance to apply. He wasn't sure that was a good idea. Cruz was afraid if he didn't go this year they'd never invite him again. There was something else, too. A feeling. No, it was more than a feeling. He couldn't explain it—he only knew he had to obey. "I think..." His breath had caught. "I think I want to go now."

Lani had thrown her hands up. "That's it, then. Fine. Go."

"Don't be mad. We'll still be able to see each other whenever we want, even when I go aboard *Orion*."

She'd raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Right. Like you're really gonna call me from the explorers' ship halfway around the world."

"Why not? I'll have Mell."

"They're letting you take your MAV?"

Mell was Cruz's honeybee drone, a micro air vehicle (MAV) no bigger than his thumb. It was a gift from his dad last year after Cruz had sprained his knee, so that he would still be able to "see the surf, even if he couldn't feel it." Turned out, he'd only missed a few days of surfing.

"Uh-huh." Cruz had given her a smirk. "See, it won't be so bad. I can give you the scoop on what it's like so when you get in next year you'll be set. All we have to do is pretend you're in your room and I'm in mine, instead of—"

"Half a world away," she'd said wistfully, yet she had been twisting her hair—a sign of surrender.

"Come on, Lani," he had pleaded. "I need your support."

"Okay, okay, but you'd better stay in touch or so help me I will track you down all the way to the North Pole, if I have to."

She wasn't kidding. If Cruz had learned anything it was that when Leilani Kealoha said she would do something, she meant it.

"Absolutely," he'd said. "Easy as Dad's guava pie."

She had folded her arms. "You know I hate pie."

Girls.

There! Cruz spotted his wave. Dropping his chest, he flattened himself against the board. As the swell rolled in behind him, Cruz turned for shore and paddled hard. His strokes were strong and deliberate. Timing was key. Pop up too early and he'd miss the crest. Go too late and he'd wipe out. Cruz could feel the surge growing behind him.

Almost time. Just . . . a few . . . more . . . seconds . . .

When he felt the tail of his board begin to lift, Cruz arched his back, pushed off with his hands, and planted his feet under him—right foot in front and left foot in back, in goofy foot position. Most right-handed people surf with their left foot in front, but not Cruz. Slowly, he lifted himself into a low crouch. The moment the wave broke under him, he let go of the board and rose, arms out for balance. Cruz felt the familiar smooth glide of success. He'd hit the crest perfectly!

"Woo-hoo!" he yelled, angling the board inward. Mist sprayed his face as he made a sweeping S pattern through the curl of water. Cruz shifted his weight, skimming left, then right, then left again to ride the swirl as fast and as far as he could. Surfing made him feel powerful. Free. Invincible! If only the feeling lasted longer than a TV commercial. Cruz rode the wave inland until it dissipated into foam. Reaching for the Velcro strap on his ankle that tethered him to his board, his hand hesitated. It hadn't been five minutes, had it?

Maybe one more run . . .

Charging back into the foam, Cruz tossed his board into the water, hopped on, and paddled out past the break. As before, he scooted upright to straddle his board. Cruz was lifting his left foot



to double-check the ankle strap of the leash when he felt a tug on his right heel. It wasn't a swish, like a fish or turtle passing. It was a good pull. And it could mean only one thing: shark! Cruz tried to slide to the left side of his board, away from the shark, but it had a firm hold on his ankle. He was being dragged down, away from the surface.

Don't panic! KICK!

Cruz clung to his surfboard, the only thing that would keep him afloat, and kicked with all his might. If he could manage to turn around, he could use the board to bop the shark on the nose and break loose. As he struggled, a million thoughts raced through his head.

Stupid! Sharks feed at dusk. You should have gone in when Dad called. You're not supposed to drown. Stupid!

He was swallowing water. He couldn't breathe.

No. No! NO!

The words pounded in rhythm to his heart.

He would not die this way.

With his lungs burning and his energy waning, Cruz twisted his body in one last effort to strike a blow. He lashed out and his fist hit something smooth and hard. Bubbles swarmed around him. He saw a yellow snake. No! A tube. This was no shark. It was a person! His thrashing had knocked the air hose loose from the diver's tank. Cruz felt a sharp pain in his ankle and then, suddenly, he was free! Through the bubbles, he caught sight of a pair of fanning fins. The diver was moving away.

Cruz stroked for the surface, his chest on the verge of exploding. He pushed his arms up through the water, up and out, up and out. He kept his feet moving, kicking, kicking, until finally he breached the surface. Cruz gulped as much air as his lungs could handle. Treading, he spun around, his eyes darting from the pier to the beach to the horizon and back. He did several circles, but didn't see anyone nearby.

Take it easy. You're okay. He's gone. You're okay.

Cruz flung his arm behind him, groping for his surfboard, still tied to his leg. He tried to slide it under his body but was shaking so much it took him a few tries to do what usually came naturally. Clutching his

board and looking over his shoulder, he rode the tide in until he scraped bottom. Still gasping, Cruz rolled off the board and onto the wet sand. Never had he been so happy to be back on land! He lay on his back for several minutes, feeling himself breathe. His hands tingled, his throat was raw, and his right ankle throbbed. But he was alive.

As Cruz stared up at the deep violet sky, at the first winking stars of night, one word kept scrolling through his brain: *Why?*