

Prologue

Tuesday, May 14th, 4:12 am. Pramana Setiawan and his three crewmembers were already on board his wet-fish long liner, the Hollywood Catch, in the Muara Baru Harbor. They had no freezer units onboard and only room for five hundred tuna below deck. They relied on each tuna to keep its companions cold. Hence, the wet-fish title. The ship was tied by the temperature of the fish to a short leash and a quick run back to keep the catch pristine enough for the buyer at Celianu Cold House.

This early in the morning, it was only 78 degrees, but it would hit 86 degrees later, and with the wet season starting in Indonesia, the breeze would be up by six, and the water would be choppy.

Someday, Pramana hoped to save enough money to buy a ship with freezers onboard and large enough to handle a long line of 2,000 hooks instead of the measly 500 he fished with now.

Today, the four of them checked the five hundred snoods, the short lines with hooks tied to the heavyweight long line. Once out of the harbor and into the Java Sea, they would bait each hook with a sardine and hope to trade that tiny bait fish for a much larger tuna.

By 6:30, they had checked the entire line. As dawn stretched restlessly above the shimmering sea, they put out of the marina, north into the region just east of Djakarta. A mile and a half out, they began to pay out the line, dipping into the nearby buckets thick with living sardines. The line was slightly weighted, so it drifted a fathom deep, keeping the bait safe from troublesome seabirds.

Pramana pulled off his LA Dodgers baseball cap and ran a hand through his thinning hair. The time plodded along while they waited. Two of the crew played the Javanese version of cribbage. All four of them smoked. Pramana himself smoked Winstons. They were more expensive than other brands, but he liked anything to do with America, and he puffed contentedly on his cigarette. There was a little turbulence nearby. A tuna must have grabbed one of the closest hooks. But it was too early to pull the line. The tuna they've hooked would have to wait, too.

When the time was right, they started up the hydraulic line hauler, but something was wrong. The hauler moved much too rapidly. On the third hook was a 30 lb. yellowfin, then two empties, then a small big-eye tuna, followed by three hooks holding nothing but sardines. The end of the line! Something or someone had sawed the heavy line in half. The other 491 hooks and bait and the line they were attached to was gone! Sunk to the bottom of the sea.

Who, or what, could have cut it nearly under their noses? Pramana looked around. There were no boats within half a mile, and they were too far offshore for a jokester with scuba gear. He hauled the last few yards of the line in by hand and examined the end. It had been pinched off by some kind of cutting shears. Pop! Nice and neat. Well, no reason for them to linger here. The wind was coming up, and they had a day's work ahead of them creating a new line for tomorrow. His three young children would have very little fish with their rice tonight. He slammed his cap onto the deck and bellowed, "Asu raimu!" which is Javanese for...well, you get the idea.

One

Wednesday, June 23rd. Today is Saffron's birthday. I can't believe that our little girl is already five years old. It seems like yesterday that Mercy and I left Monterey, zigzagging our way into what we hoped would be safety and a new life for the two of us, or rather three of us. Kashiina, one of the Neptunes we rescued from a radical military interrogation at the Monterey Aquarium, had sensed that Mercy was pregnant, and indeed she was. I still call Kashiina by my pet name for her, Saffron. And after she saved Mercy's life on that day, it was natural for us to pay tribute and make her our daughter's godmother.

The trip to our new home is worth remembering. We fake the accident and push my beloved Alfa Romeo Spyder off a cliff near Big Sur, then borrow a car from friends, who shall remain nameless, and drive to Phoenix. I get in touch with my colleague, Allison Phelps, who writes our obit, so friends and family can mourn. Early the next morning, we fly to Atlanta and look at our options. The world is our oyster, if we can stay alive long enough to enjoy it, since a rogue military special ops force would just as soon have us both dead.

We decide to decompress in Rome and fly there the following day. We find a small pensione near San Gennaro Square. We visit museums, eat good Roman food, drink good Roman wine (at least, I drink the wine. Mercy is definitely showing signs of early pregnancy and, in preparation for a new human being, is on the wagon. So I buy her the best bottled water I can find. We make love at all hours of the day and night. If she's pregnant, I want to make sure that she's good and pregnant. And she doesn't seem to mind at all.

We also spend a lot of wonderful time talking. We both know that this bliss is temporary. We're not really safe here. After two weeks, we take a ferry to Morocco, then fly south to Johannesburg. It's lovely, but it doesn't seem to quite fit with our dreams. One day, chatting with an Aussie couple, they tell us about Fiji. They're so enchanted by it, I wake up while it's still dark and stand at the window, looking out across the lights of the city. Over coffee the next morning, I convince Mercy that we should take a look at Fiji.

In Suva, we have drinks with friends of the Johannesburg Aussies, and they tell us about a developer who desperately wants to build a resort on a small island east of Viti Levu, but just can't make it pencil out. The island is only about six hundred acres. It has a deep-water well and, with a portable generator, can support eight hours of electricity a day, but won't work for enough people

to make it profitable. We talk to the developer, and fortunately, he knows nothing about American media. He never suspects that Mercy might be a Hollywood star, and I tell him that I'm a diver and a writer, looking for a place to write my memoirs. He takes us out to the island. It's called Vatu. It's only 25 kilometers north of Ovalau Island and Levuka, the old capital. All coconut palms and white sand beach surrounded by two little bays thick with coral reef. It's love at first sight, and suddenly, we're the proud owners of an island. We find a contractor on Ovalau to build our dream home. The Neptunes believe that Mother is God, so while the house is being built, we decide that Mercy needs to be our child's legally married God, and we find a judge in Levuka. We hunt down a 28-foot Boston Whaler in Suva and cruise it back to our island.

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Mercy and I have been on Vatu for five years, and life has been good to us. I've managed to grow and learn to relish the moment more than I ever did before, and Mercy hasn't gotten older. As the saying goes, she's gotten better, if that's possible. And of course it's possible, now that, as the Neptunes say, she's become the God of Saffron.

Our little girl is the joy of our existence. She's a child of the sea, not quite like her namesake, but loving the water and thriving close to it. She learned to swim when she was three, and she dives and bobs in it like it's a part of her life, which it is. Our tiny island is close to the ocean surrounding it, wherever you walk. And the ocean here is so benevolent, you have to love it.

Today, being a birthday, is special, and Saffron, being a child, lives in the moment. Her nanny, Talei, is a precious woman, barely more than a child herself. She has been with us since Saffron was born, and she's more like an older sister than a nanny. She's just twenty-three now, and she and Saffron have gone on many adventures around the island as Saffron became a toddler, then a young child. They love swimming in our little bay together, and Talei has taught Saffron all the names of the fish that swim in our waters.

Saffron is just starting to read, and today, on her birthday, she receives books that will make an indelible impression on her for life. Books like *One Fish, Two Fish* and *Goodnight, Moon*. I rejoice in my ability to help develop a mind that can think, and Mercy and I share the feelings of creating an individual capable of intelligent thought.

Mercy brings out the coconut cake, and Saffron blows out the five candles mounted in tiny shells on the frosting. She delights in the fact that she blew them all out, and claps her hands with happiness.

When she finishes her piece of cake, she asks, “Daddy, can I go out and tell the ocean that I’m five years old?”

“Of course, lovey.” I answer. She’s been well taught to love the ocean, but also to respect it, and we don’t worry about her being down on the beach alone.

She runs out of the house and down to the beach. I look at Mercy and smile the smile that I’ve given her a thousand times. We traded successful and meaningful lives for what we have here, and it turns out that this is better than anything we could have ever expected.

Mercy clears the dishes left from the cake and comes over to me and sits in my lap. This woman is beyond belief. She always knows what the right thing is. I put my arms around her and look into her eyes.

Saffron runs back into the room and shouts, “Daddy, daddy! People on dolphins! There are people on dolphins out there!”

I smile at her, and then see the urgency in her face. I jump up and run down to the water. Saffron isn’t kidding. There’s a battalion of people on dolphins heading south just outside our bay. I run back to the house and grab my binocs, then race back down. In the glasses, I see that they’re Neptunes! They’re riding on spinner dolphins that are moving them at full speed through the water. They’re like a cavalry of Napoleonic hussars racing across the Eastern front. There must be fifty of them. And they’re definitely on a mission. I’m sure that they’re only above water here because of the shallow reef. What in the hell is going on?

I send a message on our satellite phone to our friend, Daniel Patrick, in LA. Patrick knows more about the underwater race we call Neptunes than anyone I know. It was on his expedition near Big Sur where we first made contact with them.

Patrick, we just saw about fifty Neptunes riding by on dolphin-back. What’s happening? Have you heard anything?

Patrick has turned himself into a millionaire many times over by trying to save the planet. He’s a philanthropist whose major concern is anything to do with protecting Earth from our citizenry. I’ve been on a couple of his expeditions where my goal was to save a salamander from extinction in the fever-ridden jungles of Borneo. Not my favorite project. But with Patrick’s contacts, and the information we amassed, we managed to do it. Since our discovery of the underwater race of humans we call Neptunes, their well-being and the entire status of the oceans have been his major concerns.

In a couple of hours, I get an answer from him.

Jamie! So good to hear from you! It's been too long, but I completely understand why the silence. I wonder at the timing of your email. Not a word of communication for nearly a year, then here you are, back from the non-existent. I'm sure that you and Mercy are somewhere in the middle of a life that I would envy. A place full of sun and water and love.

But again, the timing is remarkable, for today is the second day of Chevy Washington's testimony at Camp Pendleton. A military tribunal is underway against the gangsters who kidnapped Mercy. Dr. Blankenship from the Monterey Aquarium made charges as a witness yesterday that have already set the stage for Washington's words to come today. Twenty-three have been arrested who are facing serious charges, and whatever items the military decides to drop, a civilian court plans to act on immediately.

The papers and the tabloids are full of questions about your whereabouts, if you're not both dead. As for myself, since you and Allison confided in me, I've waited impatiently for further news from you.

Regarding your question of Neptune activity, a lot has happened since you dropped out of sight. The Neptunes have been recognized as a unique people, and talks with the United Nations are underway. Progress on slowing the poisoning of the oceans is being made, but of course, things are moving far too slowly.

Recently, there have been reports, especially from Southeast Asia and on down to Australia, of a series of attacks on commercial fishing vessels. Long liners having their lines cut, purse seiners' nets being tangled beyond use, gill netters losing their entire catch. A lot of the fingers are pointing at some kind of Neptune involvement to encourage humans to meet their demands regarding our dumping of everything we don't want into their seas.

I don't know where you are, Jamie, but this is looking serious. People in high places are starting to ask for some kind of response, and the military has been consulted, which, as you would surely guess, scares the hell out of me. I'll do some further research and get back to you.

In the meantime, welcome back from the dead.

Daniel

I reread Patrick's words about the trial and look at Mercy, who's looking back at me with a question on her face.

"What is it, Jamie?"

"Patrick says that they've rounded up the black ops group, and a military tribunal is underway at Pendleton. This is day two. Dr. Blankenship testified yesterday, and Chevy is due to testify today."

"Somehow, I knew that the military would catch up with those bastards," she says. "Actually, I thought it would have happened sooner."

"So what do you think, my love? Do you want to trust in luck and go back to help put them away?"

I cross over to her and sit down on the sofa next to her. "It'll be so rich, you coming back from the dead. Think of the disorder we can cause."

She smiles at me and slaps me on my bare leg. "Something you would love to do, you rascal."

"Well, there would be some good side effects, like getting to see our families again."

"What about this Neptune nonsense you and Saffron saw today?"

"We could probably get better info direct from Nonria in Santa Monica. We aren't in touch with any Neptunes here."

"It would be a huge culture shock for Saffron." says Mercy.

"We'd have to bring Talei with us. The two of them can help each other through all the new nonsense."

Mercy puts her arms around me. "Okay, as long as we both know that this is temporary. I happen to like what we have here. But I'd love to give them a sucker punch."

I can see my smile reflecting in her eyes. I kiss her soft mouth and say, "Mmm hmm."

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I wait until it's early evening, Pacific Coast Daylight time, and call Chevy.

"Hello?"

"Chevy, it's Jamie."

"Jamie, it's good to hear your voice! I was just talking about you today."

"So I hear. How'd it go?"

"We're going to send them up for a long time."

"How'd you like to bring in the Golden Fleece?" I ask.

“What?”

“Mercy and I are ready to come and testify, too. I think the actual victim of the kidnapping might have an impact on the judges.”

“Wow! I think you’re right.”

“Do you have any misgivings? We are safe now, aren’t we?”

“They’ve all been rounded up. You can come home.”

Two

We start to pull out our suitcases to pack and realize that we have two suitcases and no clothes, other than our island clothes. Five years on 600 acres surrounded by the Peppermint Sea doesn't require a whole lot of dressing up. The next day we take the Whaler across to Levuka. It's small, but it does have a few shops, and we're able to put together a semblance of wardrobe for all four of us. Saffron is very happy with her miniature Hello Kitty rolling suitcase, and Talei is overwhelmed by the cute clothes we find for her. Of course, the fact that she's a lovely young woman of twenty-three gives her a head start. I avoid the stale Polo shirts and find some spicier batik numbers that go great with silk slacks from Hong Kong. We remember that June gloom can inhabit LA and shop accordingly, but Mercy picks out a dangerous backless dress that'll start heads turning wherever she goes and keep me busy reminding everyone that she belongs to me.

After a rare treat of sushi for lunch, we stop at Fiji's oldest travel agency and book our flights. Saffron is excited at the idea of flying in a plane. At five, she hasn't learned yet that she's not immortal, so has no fear. Only respect for the ocean when it's needed.

Two days later, we embark on a trip we've never done before. Cross to Ovalau, leave the boat and the keys with a caretaker, catch a half hour boat ride to the big island of Viti Levu, then an hour and a half taxi ride on dusty roads down the east side of the island to Suva, the modern capital. We wait an hour for a half hour flight to Nadi, site of the international airport on the west side of the island. Saffron calls this our test flight and writes a song in her journal about "Fly, Fly in the Sky." After a two-hour wait, we leave the smoky airport terminal and board Air France Flight 137 bound for LAX, ten red-eye hours away. Somewhere, once upon a time, I remember the advertising jingle about "Getting there is half the fun." I don't believe a word of it.

Halfway through the flight, Mercy puts her hand on my knee and says, "I don't think we want to do this very often, honey. What do you think?"

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We land in Los Angeles at 7:35 in the morning, the clocks in our heads telling us it should be 2:35 a day later. Patrick had wanted to put us all up at his mansion in Benedict Canyon, but we had both agreed that we wanted to be closer to the water. Coming out of Terminal 5 at LAX, the early morning gray assaults us like a cool blanket, and we assure Talei that this is not a storm, it's only regular LA weather. In the cab, on the way to Santa Monica, the jacaranda trees are blooming

like crazy, and Saffron wants to know if Los Angeles is always purple. The traffic is LA traffic, and Mercy and I look at each other, realizing how this is not us anymore.

We've booked a bed and breakfast that's, while not on the beach, only a block from it with a view of the little waves lapping ashore. Santa Monica Bay looks like a gray, leaden pool after five years of the Peppermint Sea of Fiji. Once we're checked in, we take Saffron and Taeli down to the beach and shuffle barefoot along in the surf for a little while. I try to convince both of them that this is the same ocean that they know at home. I fail miserably.

We decide that we're hungry, and since it's about ten o'clock, we might as well have some breakfast. One of my favorite places near the beach in downtown Santa Monica is the King's Head British Pub, so we walk the couple of blocks there and take a booth. Since Fiji was once a British colony, some of the food choices like fried bread and crumpets have hung on as favorites. There are plenty of comfort choices for Taeli and Saffron, who wants bangers, which she calls "bangs."

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The cell phone wakes me up at a quarter past two. We've all been taking naps after the long flight and the hearty breakfast. It's Chevy calling me back.

"Jamie, did I wake you?"

"Actually, you did. We got in early this morning, and our clocks are all mixed up. What's happening?"

Mercy rolls over against me and opens her eyes. I run my hand through her tousled hair.

Chevy answers, "I talked to David Scott about you two. He's the lead prosecutor on the case, and he's dying to meet you, the sooner the better."

I cover the mouthpiece and tell Mercy that it's Chevy, then ask, "Can we meet sometime this evening?"

"That'd be great. Where are you staying?"

"We're in downtown Santa Monica, but we have a car, and we can meet anywhere that's convenient."

"Do you know Oceana?"

"Sure. Very handy for us."

"I'll bring David with me. We'll see you at eight."

"Thanks, Chevy."

I give Mercy a little hello kiss and tell her the news.

“What’ll we do with the girls?” Mercy asks.

“It’s too bad you don’t have your wonderful house, and your secretary.”

“I bet if we ask nice, we can take them up to Daniel’s. Marcela loves kids.”

“Good idea. And I was thinking we should call Allison. If we give her an exclusive, she can help us keep the media under control.”

“Another reason I married you,” says Mercy. “You’re smart. Here, give me the phone.”

I give it to her, and she presses a couple of numbers, waits and then says, “Daniel, it’s Mercedes.”

She smiles at his response and says, “It’s good to hear your voice, too. Jamie and I are wondering if we might drop by this afternoon. We have a meeting scheduled with the prosecutor in the court martial, and we’re hoping Marcela can watch the girls.

“Our own five-year old, Saffron, and Taeli, her nanny, who can certainly help Marcela.

“That would be great. Oh, and Daniel, are you still in touch with Allison?”

“Could you call her and see if she can come by your place, as well?”

“You’re a sweetheart. We’ll see you soon.”

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We drive up the 405 and out of the June gloom at Mulholland.

“Daddy, it’s sunny!” Saffron announces.

“It’s like this a lot,” I say, “faded and gray down below; it’s called a marine layer. But it’s sunny up above.”

We wind across to Benedict Canyon in our little Jeep Compass rental and reach Patrick’s mansion, where four cars are parked in the curved driveway. Mercy and I look at each other. Marcela opens the door for us, beaming with welcome.

“Miss Mercedes!” she says, embracing Mercy, “and Mister Jamie! Now, who could this pretty little girl be?”

“I’m Saffron, and this is Taeli. She helps me a lot.”

“Well, Miss Saffron, won’t you come in?”

We troop into the beautiful vestibule, and Marcela says, “Mr. Patrick and his guests are out on the patio. Just go on out. I’ll see you in a minute.”

As we reach the patio, we’re greeted by a round of cheers and laughter. Patrick has been a busy boy. Not only did he get hold of Allison, but Alex, Katrina, and her husband, Tony, are here

as well. Two-thirds of my group of scientists who discovered the Neptunes five years ago. It's interesting how some people look the same while others have changed dramatically. Alex has grown a full beard, and Allison, who sported a platinum pixie cut five years ago, has become an ash blonde with long, luxurious hair. She looks like a shampoo ad. And, to top them all, Katrina is five months pregnant.

Lots of hugs and kisses later, Patrick lifts his glass to propose a toast, "To good friends and justice."

"Cheers and hear, hear," answer him, and Saffron and Taeli raise their Cokes and say "Bula," the Fijian word for pretty much everything. I stretch my arms around both of them and repeat, "Bula," and they giggle uncontrollably, and Saffron falls to the ground laughing.

Later, we sit down around the big patio table and fill them all in on what we're doing back in LA. This is not a vacation, I say. Our flight and five years in a very different life has changed us, and we intend to return to it when we're done doing our part to put this group away for a long time.

Allison says, "You can't just sweep it under the rug."

Mercy answers, "We both know that. And we don't really want to. We want people to know the truth about what happened. The truth about Jamie and me, as well as about the Neptunes."

Katrina chimes in, "For myself, I think they should all be shot, hiding under the name of the Marines for their coercions."

Patrick adds, "I don't envy their defense attorneys. The public outcry is growing like crazy."

Mercy and I look at each other, and we both smile. I know that she is thinking what I am. It's all about a feeling that I had never known until we fled to Fiji. We are a team, two people against the world. And for each other. Not exactly against the world but separate from it. We have an investment as two. I can never be alone again.

When we leave for our meeting with Chevy and the prosecutor, we leave with all their good wishes and promise to stay in touch. We kiss Saffron goodbye, and she says, "Uncle Daniel's going to show us some pictures."

I park in the public garage up the street from Oceana, and we walk down the sidewalk toward the restaurant holding hands. It's chilly for us, and we've both put on jackets, but the sky to the west is clear, and the golden light from the setting sun is bouncing off the bowl of the bay. We're early, so we tell the hostess to find us in the bar. I order us two glasses of Sauvignon Blanc. It's delicate and very drinkable.

It's odd, sitting here," says Mercy. "I feel like a girl on a date. LA feels so foreign. It's strange and exciting."

"I know what you mean, sweetness. We've changed, but the world hasn't."

The hostess finds us and leads us to our table, where Chevy and Lt. Scott both stand up to greet us.

"Wow!" says Chevy. "You both look great! You must like what you're doing."

"Absolutely," I answer.

"Lt. David Scott, this is Mercy Atkins and Jamie Edmondson."

"I'm happy to meet you both. I was a big fan of yours in *Sunset Strip*, Mercy. The show isn't the same without you."

We spend half an hour filling Scott in on what happened to each of us, then order dinner.

Scott says, "I was originally thinking about using you as surprise witnesses, but I've decided, if you're in agreement, to have you meet with the defense. I don't want any technicalities getting in the way of the value of your testimony."

I look at Mercy, and she nods, and I say, "Let us know where and when, and we'll meet with them."

Chevy picks up a forkful of salad and says, "It's good to see you looking so well. I was so worried about you after what that slime did to you."

I think back to the day when Joel Blackburn showed me a photocopy of Mercy's face pushed against the copier's screen, and my heart hits me in the throat again. Ancient history, but a fear that I'll never forget. Suddenly, there's an uproar at the end of our row of tables, and some guy punches his companion, and two waiters move in and forcibly eject him. I don't want any shit to mess with what Mercy and I are about to do. We need to get this chapter finished and move on with our lives. Then I remember the thing that got this whole thing started—the squadron of Neptunes on dolphin-back that Saffron and I saw. I forgot to ask Patrick about Nonria.

I come back from my thoughts when Scott says, "I'll contact the defense first thing tomorrow and call you to schedule a meeting."

Mercy looks at me and says, "We're available."

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When we get back to Patrick's, Marcela opens the door and whispers, "Shhh. Two sleeping beauties."

We follow her in and look into Patrick's study, where both Saffron and Taeli are curled up on two of the Victorian loveseats that furnish part of it. Patrick is in the kitchen, and we join him for a nightcap.

"You have two angels there," he says. "Your daughter is smart as a whip, but still a little girl, and Taeli is precious. How did you find her?"

"After Saffron was born," answers Mercy, "we decided that we wanted to be able to spend time together diving and exploring our new home, going places we couldn't take a baby. There was a family on Ovalau without the means to support their six children. Taeli and I bonded immediately. She was, like the others, suffering from hunger and a mere shadow of what she's become. We've tried to help the entire family as well, and Taeli's been like a big sister to Saffron since."

"Well, I can't tell you how much I'm enjoying the sound of youngsters here in the house. They're both welcome any time."

"Thank you, Daniel."

I change the subject with, "I forgot to ask earlier. Are you still in touch with Nonria?"

"Absolutely, Jamie. Based on her, and your, recommendations, I got a little charter fishing boat. We keep it at Marina Del Rey, and at least two of the team meet with Nonria and others twice a week. In fact, we're scheduled to meet her tomorrow if you'd like to join us."

"I'd love to," I say. "Who else is with her these days?"

"Cronino is still with her. And two new colleagues—Juniina, a young female, and Dondiin, a male a little older than Cronino. After what happened to Kashiina, they've sequestered her in her home place."

"I'm not surprised," I say, and Mercy concurs.

"So you're diving now, Mercedes?" asks Patrick.

"Yes, Daniel, I've started diving, but I'm still a beginner."

"She's almost moved up to intermediate. We've even started Saffron and Taeli. We know Saffron's younger than most diving associations would allow, but considering where we live, we wanted her to start, and she loves it."

I add, "I want Mercy to meet Nonria, but I think this time adding me to the group will be surprise enough."

Mercy nods her head, and Patrick says, “Mercy and the girls should come along for the ride, though. There’s plenty of room aboard.”

“Great.”

“We’ll see you at ten o’clock then. Drive to the end of Tahiti Way and park in the garage. We’re at slip B1350. The boat is called “4 *Oocina*.”

“Very cute, Patrick. The name the Neptunes call themselves.”

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The next morning, we park in the Tahiti garage and walk out to the slip. Patrick’s “little fishing boat” is a Hatteras 68 Convertible, outfitted to the teeth. We climb on board and are greeted by Hiroko, as well as by Alex. Hiroko is delighted to see us, and she gives me a big kiss, telling Mercy that it’s all right to kiss the groom since she missed the wedding. She tells me that she had her own wedding two years ago, so I have to kiss the bride as well.

Saffron says to Mercy, “Mommy, I think Daddy and Hiroko are friends.”

Patrick introduces us to his captain, Kevin McNair, who gets us underway. Hiroko can’t get enough of Saffron and Talei, and she leads them out on the aft deck with Mercy to show them the sights as we head out the channel. Alex and I go below to find a wetsuit that’ll fit. My old short suit is still in the collection, and I bring it and a tank up to the deck. I know the water will feel cold, but I want to remind Nonria that I’m more than a black neoprene suit with fins.

We’re all hanging out on the aft deck, and I ask Patrick if Nonria knows about the trial.

“You know, we haven’t seen them since the trial began. It would be great if you could report it to her.”

Two miles straight out from the Marina channel, the captain puts it in idle, and Ben Moriguchi, the mate, drops the sea anchor. It’s half past ten by now, and there’s a little chop developing. We’re due to meet the Neptunes in ten minutes. Three of us climb down to the aft transom and slide off into the water. I look up and wave at Mercy and Saffron, watching from the deck, then duck under.

We swim past the bow of the boat, then head down to the twenty-foot rendezvous point. I can see four figures waiting for us. As I approach, I hear the voice of my English professor in my head.

It’s Nonria, and she asks, “Jamie? You are Jamie!” She swims toward me and puts her hands on my shoulders, then presses her cheek against mine. It feels like cool suede charged with electricity. I learned five years ago how the touch of a mature Neptune feels.

“I am happy to see you again, Jamie.”

And I think, “I am happy to see you, Nonria. I am happy you are well.”

Nonria swims back and introduces me to Juniina and Dondiin, and we exchange pleasantries. Cronino starts swimming toward me, and I swim toward him, and we touch hands. I think, “It is good to see you again, Cronino.”

Nonria asks, “And is Mercy well, Jamie?”

“She’s fine, Nonria. She’s here in Santa Monica with me. I’d like to bring her down to see you on another tide. And our little daughter. She is five of our years. We call her Saffron.”

“A welcome tribute,” thinks Nonria.

I pause, then think, “I have some news to share with you all.”

“Yes?”

“Do you know ‘courts?’”

“Do you mean discussions to find right or wrong?”

“Yes. When we have a person we think did wrong, we discuss it to find if that person needs punishment.”

“Yes, Jamie. The Oocina have deliberations from time to time.”

“The men who took you and Cronino and Kashiina and put you in pools have been arrested. We feel they did bad things to you and bad things to Mercy and me. Mercy and I have come back to testify, to report what they did to us. If the court decides, these men will spend many years in prison.”

“Do you want us to, you say testify?”

“It would be hard on you. I couldn’t ask it.”

I sense that there is discussion between the four Neptunes.

Then I hear Nonria. “I do not wish to make it hard for Cronino, but I will go to your court and tell what these landsmen did. I will testify against these bad, you say shits.”