

# SALAMANDER BOY

## CHAPTER ONE

Our block near LA can feel as desolate as an aircraft carrier without jets or crew. Dads and Moms work all the time as lawyers, a world renowned hematologist, and even folks who follow a guru called Yogananda. Is that really a word? I think he's dead, or in India. All have daughters near my age who live nearby. Daisy's redheaded with lots of freckles, and a month older than me. She burps when she giggles and giggles because she's embarrassed. I can't say anything around her that doesn't make her laugh. If I'm quiet, she thinks I don't like her. If I talk, she laughs and we're both embarrassed. I stay away from her. Lacy belongs to Wave—a volleyball club. She trains every day. She's tall and slender and blonde, can strike like a pro, and acts as if she has no time for friends at school. Josie moved here last year from Laos. She can edge her skateboard across the highest beach wall. I tried but crashed. To my chagrin, Josie remarked, "maybe you should take up tricycling." All three live in fancier, bigger houses across the street from where the rustic, funky cottages were bulldozed to make way for luxury condos yet to be built. Now I can watch the waves like they do from their second story windows if I want. Right here, if I stand up on my bed, in the last cottage on their side of the block like those demolished. Where I am now.

"Blacky!" I shout.

Blacky is my white Siberian Husky with blue eyes. Yea, Blacky. But I didn't name him. He was a rescue, and I didn't dare change his name. It's been hard enough to get him to come when I call. I love the dog. But I sometimes I don't like him. It's hard for me to talk to girls and whenever they come over and cuddle Blacky, they want to talk to me. Yes, he's beautiful is all I can say, and they frown as if I've made them feel stupid.

"Blacky! Drop it!"

I leap off onto our wobbly wood floor. A crack in my window gets longer. Under it are eleven coffee cans of paint with paintbrushes in everyone. Blacky grabs the one not stuck in dry paint.

"Don't shake. Mom'll will kill me."

Bright paint splatters across his front legs. Less purple flips across the slick black leather pants Mom has draped over a chair. I rush forward and hug him. I reach around. After a brief struggle, I yank the brush out. He lunges and carries me away. I let go and turn back to the mural on the wall I never would have wished for. Last week, Aunt Gresham painted these gigantic flowers with petals as red as fiery hot peppers. Stamens yellow enough to cool the sun. An orange fluffy rose explodes with brilliance. All painted with flashy, broad strokes like waves a big wave surfer rides.

I came home from school and called her.

"Why Auntie?" I asked.

"Your room feels like a dungeon."

"It has a window," I replied.

She laughed. It was a tiny, narrow one. But it was a window.

"I'll wake up and think a giant bee buzzes out of one of those flowers," I said. "What if it stings me?"

"What would you have me paint?" she asked.

"I don't know. Why does it matter? A white wall is a wall."

"I won't."

“How about...?”

“One of your heroes?”

“Don’t have any?”

“Really Phinn?”

My hero must remain a secret. She wouldn’t understand. I don’t think I really do. It was someone I dreamed about. I knew he was there, but I could not remember where I saw his face. Like a new friend buried under an avalanche. Or someone I shared a video with before a plane crash. We never looked at each other.

“Phinn?”

“No heroes. Understand?”

“Everyone has to.”

“Okay. Blacky.”

“Blacky? He’s just a dog.”

“More.”

“Like Rin Tin. I always preferred Lassie.”

“What?”

I hung up. It felt weird to be angry about something I didn’t really care about with someone I cared about. Everyone should have a secret hero. Like Jean Valjean was to so many in the novel, *Les Misérables*. I’d call back Aunt Gresham and explain. But now I should deal with Blacky. His too blue eyes stare at me. What does he want?

## CHAPTER TWO

I head towards Blacky. His snout pressed against the rusty screen for our front door. His tail flat and low worries me.

“Blacky, don’t even think about it.”

If his tail flips up and curls, I’m doomed. Like a light bulb going on, he’s come up with mischief.

“Oh, no.”

The tail’s up before I can get there. He busts out the screen. Like an arrow, he darts across our front yard, crosses the street, and leaps into the chain link fence that guards the demolition zone. He ably claws up the top and leaps off. He dashes across the sand. No wonder he was returned to the Humane Society three times.

I’m out the door, on the street. Lacy trots by. She gives me that look. I shrug. I get to the fence. I reach down to tug up my shorts to get up my courage to climb over the fence. I grab boxer shorts. I forgot to get dressed. Lacy? I blush like a girl, I worry. Is she watching? I turn slowly. Blacky yelps.

What is he about to kill? Has he gone after Josie’s tabby cat?

I snap back. Blacky furiously claws at a window flat on the sand that had been missed by the demo crew.

Is he crazy or what? I’m relieved. At least there’s no dead kitty.

“Should I ask?” Lacy asks.  
I lean into the fence as if I could disappear into it.  
“I can make him stop,” she offers.  
She smells of the same lemony sunblock my sister uses. It kinda throws me off.  
“If the glass breaks,” she adds.  
“Blacky, please,” I whisper.  
It’s a double hung window. He tugs it halfway open. Lacy shifts to my right.  
“Okay, here goes.”  
She leaps up and spikes the volleyball over the fence. It clips Blacky’s ear. He keeps digging.  
“I could have told you,” I got out.  
Her shoulder playfully bumps me like a guy would do.  
“You going after him?” she asks.  
I’m confused. Why doesn’t she make fun of me?  
“You’ll get my volleyball, right? You know where I live.”  
I nod. It’s not much of a nod—my forehead pressed against the chain link. Lacy laughs. It’s pleasant without any ridicule. Now I’m really confused.  
“He’s into the sand,” she says. “You better hurry.”  
I turn. He’s up to his shoulders.  
“What about my boxers?” I ask.  
“You could take them off,” she replies.  
“Huh?”  
“Put on shorts!” she blurts.  
I turn. Lacy races away.  
“That was weirder.”  
Blacky sneezes violently—sand up his nose. Climbing up the fence is not an option. I have a cowardly fear of heights. I can’t even cross a bridge. I glance around. There’s a gap between the gates. I’m kinda skinny. I can stretch the chain enough. I dash over. It’s tighter than I thought but I squeeze through.

## CHAPTER THREE

I squat in front of Blacky.  
“Okay, dude.”

Whatever he wanted, he’s found, I decide. He sits on the glass and snorts as he pants. Sand caked around his snout. I brush it off. He pants normally. Out comes his mischievous grin. I look in the hole.

The tail fin of a skeletal fish pokes out.

“This?”

I pull it out. It’s a flat fish with a round belly—about the size of a volleyball.

“Really, Blacky?”

I expect him to pounce on it. A seagull flies over. He blinks. He’d been pooped on before—right between the eyes.

“All this for this.”

I drop it. He smells it and sneezes indignantly as if disappointed at what he found. I’m not surprised he knew. We can be walking along the beach, he stops to raise his head, and sniffs. Out beyond the waves will be a porpoise. Last month, he lifts his leg on a tall cactus in our backyard. He whips around, scrapes his leg, the fur never grew back, and tears off. He knocks the gate latch open and dashes to the sea where a baby seal had been beached. On his belly, they stared at each other. I called *Sea World*. They came and rescued the seal. “Lucky for the seal,” they said. “Lucky you have Blacky.”

Lucky, I saw it first. In the hole he dug a little deeper, is a small weathered, frayed leather satchel. It’s pink paint, once red, I figure, a design might be crinkled on it.

“Cool.”

I reach for it. Blacky dives. It’s gulped down.

“Really, Blacky?”

He backs out, turns, and trots off. I walk over to the volleyball. I pick it up. It’s sticky with mint chip ice cream. I try not to think too long about Lacy sloppily licking an ice cream cone. What’s wrong with me? I’m fourteen, and I don’t even know if I like her, but I like thinking about sexy stuff like that. I look up and out across the sea. The spray from a whale blowhole mists through the sunset.

“Hey, Blacky,” I almost cry out.

What is wrong with me? What’s wrong with Blacky? Why doesn’t he go after that whale?

He sits on my foot. I look over.

“Yea, right, you hate the water,” I say and smile. “Don’t have to worry you’ll swim out.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

I’m pretty much left to myself during the summer. Mom is a high school drama teacher and has the summers off. From sunup, sometimes past midnight, she sews the costumes for the play she wants to produce the next year. Last summer, I rarely saw her. The difficult costumes were for *The Lion King*. As a boy, I was the model for every kid in whatever play there was a boy. I didn’t mind being Wally in *Our Town*. But this summer is much, much worse.

Mom’s doing *West Side Story*. Yep, you got it. She thinks I’m perfect for the female parts too. Especially Maria, she explains, who is Juliet from *ROMEO AND JULIET*. Don’t know, don’t care, I tell her. So far, as of tonight, I’ve escaped. It would be better if Dad was here. He’d stop her. But Dad left yesterday and will be gone all summer. He’s a sales rep for hydroponic supplies. He must be at every funky, hippie country fair all over the country. I worry that he sells to pot growers. That would be dangerous if they are dissatisfied. I wonder if they could find out where we live.

“Blacky, knock it off.”

He’s licking the volleyball I’ve squeezed between my knees. I grab the ball and shove him back. He leaps up onto my bed and lays down behind me.

I’m surprised I’ve been able to stay awake this late after I decided to sneak over to Lacy’s when I know she’s asleep. Set her volleyball on the porch.

I get up. I turn.

“Maybe you should stay here.”

He’s up and grinning.

“Yea, right. But you’ve got to be leashed.”

Maybe, I mull over, it’s late, no one’s up to see me, and I’ve always wanted Blacky to pull me on my skateboard.

“Okay, why not.”

I wrestle on his harness. He lunges off and spins me around. By his leash, he tugs me to the window. It takes all my strength to stop him from jumping out.

“Got to get my skateboard,” I declare, yanking him back. He sits.

“Damn, really, Blacky.”

He wags. I come back with my skateboard. I listen. The whir of the sewing machine gets louder.

“Go, Blacky, go.”

He leaps, I follow.