

PROLOGUE

THE cargo ship sounded the alarm, blasted its water cannons, and sped up as fast as its engines would go.

Its engines would not go fast enough to outrun the pirates.

The pirate warlord known only as Surfer Boy smiled as his three small motorboats accelerated alongside the big ship. His men fired their machine guns into the air, and on deck, the cargo crew ducked and covered, scrambling like roaches caught in the beam of a flashlight.

“Stop your engines!” one of his men shouted

through a bullhorn. “You will now be boarded by the Somali navy.”

Surfer Boy laughed at this. They were no more the real navy of Somalia than he was a real blond. He bleached his hair every week to keep it shining bright, almost ghostly white. And Somalia had no true navy.

The pirates answered to no nation or government. They answered only to him.

His man shouted the warning again and Surfer Boy rubbed one hand over his short hair. In his other hand, he held a well-oiled and fully loaded Uzi submachine gun. He nodded at one of his men, who had an AK-47 submachine gun strapped to his back and an MP3 player in his hands. The man hooked the MP3 player up to the speakers on their boat and hit PLAY at full volume.

Playing the Beach Boys as he raided a ship had become a kind of signature for Surfer Boy. Any cargo ship that strayed too close to the shores of Somalia as it passed along the Horn of Africa was in danger of attack by pirates, and no pirate was as feared as Surfer

Boy. He could imagine the terror on the bridge of the cargo ship as they heard the sweet tones of the music gliding across the waves . . . and realized at last who they were up against.

The first boat weaved between the jets of water that the cargo ship used to try to stop the pirates from boarding. The pirates tossed up a grappling hook, and two of them scurried up the lines with guns on their backs, while the other men in the boat continued firing into the air to keep the crew on board ducking low.

Once the first two men were on board, they held the raiding ladder for the rest of the pirates, who scampered up fast, shut off the water cannons, and rushed to find the captain and his officers and hold them at gunpoint until Surfer Boy himself was on board.

By the time Surfer Boy strolled along the deck of the cargo ship, all the crew were his hostages and his men had taken control of the bridge. He stepped inside with a smile on his face, and only when he met the captain eye-to-eye did the blaring Beach Boys song stop.

“Good morning to you, Captain,” he said in the sudden silence.

The captain, a gray-haired man with a neatly trimmed beard and a sunburned forehead, stood up tall and tried to stare him down.

But Surfer Boy wouldn't be intimidated. He had been seizing cargo ships and taking hostages for eight years now, and he had met all kinds of captains — brave captains and cowardly captains, captains who cooperated and captains who tried to fight back. Not one of them had impressed him. Before he became a leader of pirates at sea, he had commanded an army on land. He'd fought in Somalia and Yemen and as far away as Afghanistan. He had killed more men than this captain had ever met. The captain's angry stare only made Surfer Boy smile.

“If it's ransom you want,” the captain said, “make your demands and get off my ship.”

Now Surfer Boy laughed. “Why so hasty? There is no reason we cannot conduct ourselves as gentlemen.”

With a smooth motion, he swung his weapon around and pressed the barrel of the submachine gun into the captain's cheek. "Understand?"

The captain nodded. He didn't look so brave now. The metal gun barrel made a little round dent in the captain's soft pink skin.

"Now, tell me, Captain, did you send out a distress signal before we boarded you?" Surfer Boy asked him.

The captain shook his head no.

Surfer Boy pulled the gun away from the man's face. He pointed at the first mate, a younger man, who was being held by two of Surfer Boy's pirates. Without a word, Surfer Boy lowered his gun to the man's foot and pulled the trigger.

Rat tat tat tat tat, the gun barrel spit hot lead.

"Augh!" the first mate screamed as his foot was torn to shreds by the bullets. He fell on his back, rolling in agony, his blood pooling on the metal deck.

The loud shots made Surfer Boy's ears ring like he'd been at a rock concert. It was a feeling he loved.

His two favorite things in the world were the rock 'n' roll music of the Beach Boys and the sound of gunfire. His chosen profession let him enjoy both.

"Why did you do that?" the captain yelled.

"I require your honesty," Surfer Boy said. "Your man will live with a wounded foot. If you lie to me again, I will shoot him in the head."

The captain's face had turned pale.

"Now tell me again," Surfer Boy said. "Did you send a distress signal to the antipiracy task force?"

The captain nodded. "Yes," he said. "I did."

"Exactly how long ago?"

The captain looked at the clock on the wall of the bridge. "Seventeen minutes."

"Good." Surfer Boy checked his watch. "Then the navy will be on their way. We will wait."

The captain looked confused, which was just what Surfer Boy wanted. Confusion in the enemy was a warrior's best friend.

They waited. The pirates kept their guns pointed at the hostages. The first mate clutched his bleeding

foot. In less than thirty minutes, Surfer Boy saw a United States Navy warship on the horizon, racing toward them. A helicopter lifted from its deck and sped across the water. One of Surfer Boy's men had slung his gun on his back to free up his hands so he could take notes on everything the navy did.

The radio crackled: "This is Commander Harwell of the USS *Ritland* representing Task Force 151. We have come to negotiate for the release of your hostages. Please respond."

"Wonderful," said Surfer Boy. He checked his watch again. "Thank you for your help, Captain."

He barked an order at his men and one by one, they fell back, withdrawing from the bridge, scampering down the ladders and onto their small boats.

"Please respond," the radio crackled again.

"What about . . . your demands?" the captain asked. "Your ransom?"

"You've given me a greater gift than any ransom." Surfer Boy gave him a playful salute. "I now return your ship."

He followed his men to their boats. Surfer Boy now knew what would happen the next time they took hostages. The ship from counter-piracy Combined Task Force 151 would come, probably this same US Navy vessel, the USS *Ritland*. He knew how long they would take to get there, and that they would deploy a helicopter. They would want to negotiate, to pay him to free the hostages. They would talk and talk and talk.

But Surfer Boy had other plans for the United States Navy the next time they met.

He had his man put on the Beach Boys again as they sped away in their small boats in all different directions.

Let the fools be confused, he thought. The enemy will never know what hit them.

As he sped toward the safety of Somali waters, where the US Navy warship dared not follow, Surfer Boy rested his weapon in his lap and laced his fingers behind his bright blond head. He closed his eyes and listened to his favorite song while he dreamed about

the bloodshed he was preparing to unleash on the unsuspecting sailors of the United States Navy.

Round round get around . . . I get around.

Wah wah wah wah

Surfer Boy sang right along to the song, laughing all the while.