



The
75-Cent
Son

QUICKREADS

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Javier rested his heavy hand on ChiChi's neck. He grinned sourly at the four college students gathered in front of them. "This is ChiChi," he announced. "He's also known as Mr. C-minus. Who knows? Maybe some of your learning will rub off on him."

Burning with humiliation, ChiChi quickly twisted away from his father's strong grip. He turned toward the back of the truck where the boxes were waiting. Just behind him, he heard one of the students snicker.

Hefting a box to his shoulder, ChiChi started down the ladder to the *Paloma*. She was a sleek 38-foot motorboat, a gleaming beauty that was the pride of the University's Marine Institute.

Two of the college kids followed ChiChi's example and grabbed boxes out of the truck. The other two, a round-faced girl and a tall boy with floppy blond hair, clambered down the ladder to the cabin. Their voices floated back to the others.

"Watch your head!" called the boy. "These doorways are really low!"

"Hey, Traven!" the girl yelled. "This is cool! It's got its own little kitchen!"

"It's called a *galley*, Crystal," said Traven. "And I'm not impressed unless there's a maid to go with it."

From the truck, Javier called out to ChiChi. "Be careful with those boxes, boy! This is important stuff—scientific equipment, you know!"

"Yes, sir," ChiChi grumbled.

A short, stocky girl fell in step beside ChiChi. "I'm Jenna," she said.

"Hi," said ChiChi, not looking at her.

"Hey, I'm not sure *that* box is so important," Jenna said with a grin.

ChiChi looked at the box. It was a case

of beer. He glanced down at Jenna. Her bright brown eyes were warm and friendly. He smiled in spite of his dark mood. As he stepped onto the *Paloma's* deck, he noted with pleasure the gleaming wood trim around the cabin. The boat was well cared for.

On the foredeck, Traven was wrestling with Crystal, pretending to push her overboard. She laughed shrilly, butting Traven's chest with her head.

"Come on, you slackers!" Jenna called to them. "Give Derek and me a hand!"

Shoving at each other, Traven and Crystal walked back to the truck.

With everyone helping, the truck was soon empty. Now backpacks, sleeping bags, food, and boxes labeled *Marine Lab* were jammed into the cabin. ChiChi had been hoping his dad would let him take her out of the harbor. But Javier said, "Where are your books? You brought your books—right?"

"I think you watched me pack," ChiChi said coldly.

"Don't get sarcastic with me!" said

Javier. He raised his arm and ChiChi backed up instinctively. “*Get out your books!*” he demanded.

ChiChi walked slowly to the heap of luggage piled around the dining table and found his backpack. Javier snatched it away and turned it upside down. Books and clothes tumbled onto the table. Crystal, who was in the kitchen, watched with amusement as ChiChi grabbed his underwear from the pile and shoved it back in the pack.

“All summer you have to study. *Every single day!*” said Javier. “That’s the only way you’ll get a good grade when you take these classes over!” He slammed a biology textbook on the table. “Here, read this one! Real science. You might learn something like these smart kids here.”

ChiChi let the book fall open. It didn’t matter where he started to read. Whatever it was, he wouldn’t remember anyway. He was struggling through a paragraph about the parts of a plant when Derek, Crystal, and Traven came down the ladder and swarmed

through the galley. Chatting with careless, confident voices, they moved past him as if he were invisible.

“Why did you want to go out with her at all, Derek? That girl’s a toad,” Crystal said in a mocking voice.

“That’s *cold*, Crystal,” Derek said. “Truth is, she looks more like a frog.”

Jenna walked in from the cockpit. “Did you notice, guys?” she said. “Girls who go out with Derek are gorgeous. Girls who turn him down are ugly.”

“I never said she *refused* me. Did I say that?” said Derek.

“You didn’t have to,” Jenna teased while the others giggled. Then the laughing college students ran up on deck—everyone but Jenna.



Jenna turned to ChiChi and started reading over his shoulder. “Are you studying this stuff for summer school?” she asked.

“No,” he said, unhappily.

“I get the feeling you’re not into it,” she said sympathetically.

He gave her a sour smile.

“You don’t like biology?” she asked.

“I hate *reading*,” said ChiChi.

“Really? Is that because you’d rather be doing something else—or is reading just hard for you?” she asked.

He searched her face. Her expression showed only curiosity and concern. He decided that he could trust her.

“The thing is that I—uh—letters get mixed up,” ChiChi said quietly.

“No wonder you hate it,” said Jenna. “You mean like switching *b* with *p*?”

ChiChi nodded miserably.

“So are you saying you’re dyslexic? Like Tom Cruise?” said Jenna.

“Huh? Tom Cruise?” ChiChi asked in surprise.

“Right,” Traven’s voice boomed out from behind them. “Did you ever see that guy read anything in a movie?”

ChiChi turned. He was surprised to see

Traven rolling his long body out of a bunk bed behind them.

“Traven!” Jenna cried. “Why are you sneaking—”

But then she was interrupted by Crystal, who hollered from the deck, “ChiChi! Your dad wants you *now!*”

ChiChi charged into the cockpit. He was just in time to see a long yacht pass less than three feet from the *Paloma*'s port side! A red-faced man on the yacht's deck was yelling at Javier, and Javier was screaming right back.

ChiChi's dad was sweating and swearing at the wheel, his cigarette dropping ashes on his shirt. When he spotted his son, he barked, “Take it through the harbor—I'm going below. That bunch of idiots out there can't even steer a boat!”

ChiChi took the wheel. The harbor was busy with motorboats, fishing trawlers, and beautiful sleek yachts. He guided the *Paloma* smoothly through the heavy traffic, loving the feel of her polished wooden wheel and

the steady hum of her motor below.

But ChiChi's moment of peace was over all too quickly. Once out of the harbor, Javier took the wheel again. While he guided the *Paloma* to the bay beyond the new power plant, ChiChi was put to work helping the students.

"Get the raft ready," Javier ordered. "I'm taking Derek and Crystal close to the rocks. You keep the boat right here, ChiChi—and be careful. This boat's worth a lot of money!"

The inflatable raft was suspended from the davits, the long arms that stood at the back of the *Paloma*. ChiChi carefully lowered the raft to the water and brought it alongside. Derek and Crystal were waiting for it.

Crystal shouted "Me first!" and ChiChi held out his hand to help her onto the inflatable. But then Derek abruptly pushed in front of him.

"Don't fall in the drink, madam," Derek said as he took Crystal's hand.

"Hey! If I'm going in, you are, too," Crystal said as she stepped over the few

inches of water that separated the *Paloma's* deck from the raft.

“Get out of the way!” Javier cried as he shouldered past ChiChi and climbed onto the raft. “*I'm* starting the motor. You go get that anchor.”

“Don't you want to load the anchor first?” ChiChi said.

“Did you hear me asking for advice? Do something to earn my respect for once. *Then* I'll take your advice,” Javier snapped. Then he bent over the outboard motor and pulled the cord once, twice, three times, four times. He swore.

“*ChiChi!*” he yelled. “Come see what's wrong with this stupid machine. Looks like somebody broke it.”

ChiChi stepped onto the raft and pulled the cord on the outboard motor. It roared to life, making the raft shudder as it sent up a thin cloud of blue smoke.

“Huh,” grunted Javier. “Now let's have that anchor. And be careful!”

ChiChi stepped onto the deck, hefted the