

Charleston Harbor, South Carolina

The First Sunday

“Oh, look, Mommy! Look! Look! I see a dolphin!” the tow-headed, freckle-faced, seven-year-old boy shouted, pointing to a dark, shiny shape that appeared in the waters of Charleston Harbor. He, his family, and several dozen other tourists were aboard the Spirit of Charleston, a ferry boat taking them to the famous Fort Sumter.

The fort, situated on a man-made island at the entrance to the harbor about three and a half miles from downtown Charleston, was the site of the first shots fired in the American Civil War in 1861. Sumter was a popular tourist attraction, accessible only by boat.

The bottle-nose dolphin the young boy spotted had surfaced about fifty yards off the ferry-boat’s starboard bow. Its dorsal fin sliced through the water as it took in fresh air through the blowhole on the top of its head. The dolphin then slid with grace and silence back down, only to reappear about fifteen yards away. This time it wasn’t alone. Two other dolphins swam with him, their wet, grey bodies gleaming in the rays of a bright sun shining in the spectacular blue Carolina sky. All three blew air and water out their blowholes, producing a glittering spray against the sunlight, creating small rainbows to the delight of passengers aboard the ferry. The towhead squealed in excitement again.

The three dolphins disappeared under the water just as several other passengers rushed to the railing for a glimpse of the impromptu maritime show.

“Where are they?” one man asked.

“They were right there!” exclaimed another. “They just went back under the water.”

“Oh, shoot!” a woman complained in disappointment. “I missed them! Darn.”

A volunteer tour guide had joined the group gathered at the railing.

“Yeah,” he said with a grin. “That’s the thing about dolphins. They’re quite independent. No matter how much we try to reason with them, they do whatever and go wherever they want. They really have minds of their own.”

The guide’s little joke elicited a few chuckles from among the group. He was distracted, however, by something else that caught his eye. They were passing a medium-sized, white yacht, floating, virtually motionless, just outside the harbor channel. That, in of itself, was not unusual.

Small fishing boats often took up positions away from the main navigation channel where fish were plentiful.

But the yacht looked like no fishing vessel. It was a pleasure cruiser. Furthermore, the guide could see no one aboard, topside, at least. Someone could be below, he supposed. The boat was not at anchor and cooling water was pumping out of the exhausts, so he knew the engines were running. They seemed to be just idling. Yet, he saw no one at the helm. That was odd.

The tour guide kept his eyes on the yacht for several long minutes as the Spirit of Charleston chugged past it, thinking he should say something to the ferry captain. But they were nearing the fort and the volunteer had to give the tourists disembarking instructions.

The freckle-faced boy squealed again just as the guide picked up his microphone to make the announcement.

“Look, Daddy! Look Mommy!” he yelled. “There’s another dolphin! And it looks like he is trying to climb out of the water onto the rocks!”

“Oh, honey,” the guide heard the kid’s mother say. “Dolphins can’t...”

Then she screamed. “Oh my God! It’s a body! There is a body there! On the rocks!”

The tour guide rushed to the bow. There. He could see it, entangled in the giant boulders that surrounded Fort Sumter acting as a breakwater. Waves were sloshing against it.

It was a body all right. But it was not the body of a dolphin. It was the body of a woman.