SCORCHED LEGACY

Is the third generation ready?

A Novel By

JB GATLING

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"Scorched Legacy," by JB Gatling. ISBN 979-8-9976232-0-3 (softcover); 979-8-9976232-1-0 (hardcover); 979-8-9976232-2-7 (eBook).

Library of Congress Number on file with publisher.

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Dedication

To those who tirelessly invest in the vitality of family relations.

The death of an elder is like the burning of a library.

African Proverb

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CHAPTER 1:
Dagger

At six feet four inches and one hundred and eighty-five pounds, Carlton Blake felt cramped within his reclined leather seat in the mostly empty first-class cabin.

Before pulling down his eye mask, he checked his watch: six hours, forty-five minutes before touch-down in Accra, Ghana, where the mission begins

As he settled back, years of late-night video gaming made him relish the prospect of upcoming, uninterrupted sleep.

CHAPTER 2:
Sister Sarah and Baby Girl, Ghana

"How can you not go, BG?" Sarah asked.

Sarah understood that her wife's negative comments about returning *all the way to California* to see her dad had more to do with unknown truths about his real health condition than with objections over the length of the trip.

"If he's sicker than we both suspect that he is, despite your mom's optimistic reports to the contrary, then...well, you know," Sarah said.

Sarah chose not to mention the real dilemma facing BG.

BG stayed silent. Sitting beside Sarah on the couch, she fluffed a cushion and leaned back while stretching her long legs out in front of her. She scrunched her shoulders and rolled her head in circles to relieve her tension.

"I wish we all could go with you, but you know how crammed the clinic appointments are for the next few days. Thankfully, we are well prepared for that. And I don't need to remind you about our children's hectic schedules, but David will be a great help as usual with the twins," Sarah said.

BG knew exactly what the clinic patient load was and what the count was likely to be in the coming few days. With her gone, Sarah would be the lone doctor at the clinic as demand steadily increased. Thank God they had trained four extra RNs fresh out of college during the past year. If those women stayed healthy

during the expected spike, maybe things would be okay. Even if one went down for family issues, the other three could still help Sarah weather the storm, *maybe*.

Sarah's mention of the clinic appointments and how well-prepared things were was meant to make her seem brave and project confidence to BG. But inside, Sarah was bracing herself for the coming onslaught of sick villagers that would arrive at the clinic as the seasonal flu tightened its grip throughout the Volta. They were the only two doctors within a thirty-mile radius. Most patients who needed significant specialized care couldn't make it down to Accra. Their treatment option was local, only at the clinic, which was why BG and Sarah opened the facility in the first place.

Without BG being there to meet that expected onslaught, Sarah knew that the risk of patient deaths was real because there was always an invisible line that existed in every medical facility. Once crossed, once the treatment delay timeline was exceeded, mortality numbers spiked. Her calculation was grounded in reality. She saw it unfold years before when they practiced together in Chicago before their move to Ghana. During those days they, along with several other emergency ward physicians, struggled to triage a significant spike in inpatient treatment requirements. While that increase was driven by gang shootings, drug overdoses, and assorted trauma, the consequences of overrunning a medical treatment center were the same: patients would die who otherwise might have been healed.

Sarah tried mightily to conceal her anxiety; she had to send BG off in good spirits.

"You’re going to love those northern California cool morning walks, and I'll bet you stop by the *Sail Shape* camp to sail out of the harbor early on a Soling, that one with your name on the transom. I also know that you will get out for a hike or two before the neighborhoods wake up out there. I greatly miss the Tennessee Valley, the redwoods and Tamalpais; we had some great hikes back then, didn't we," Sarah said.

"Sure did. I may not get out that far from the house, but I will take closer hikes, for sure. And boy, I would love to take a Soling out; we'll see. I remember the year Dad surprised me with it after he had the maintenance guys put my name on it. You know, I can't believe that the last time I saw my dad in the flesh was when we took the kids back for the 50th anniversary bash to mark the founding of the sailing camps," BG said.

Sarah calculated the months and years as her wife spoke.

"That was almost seven years ago; the twins were just turning five, and David had started middle school," Sarah said.

Sarah eased back into the veranda couch and snuggled her back into BG, who had shifted herself against the stout arm of the couch after bracing her back.

"The video calls since then have been nice over the years, but not a substitute for live hugs," BG said. "Not a complaint, don't get me wrong, but I wish it had worked out to where our kids could be closer to their grandparents and even to their other cousins. But that's been our journey Sarah, we chose it and I wouldn't change a thing."

"And neither would I. It's funny, isn't it, love, when we left here for that trip back to California, we were unsure about the paths that both of our medical careers would take during the next few years in Accra. We just knew in our bones then that big city medicine in the Ghanaian capital had lost its shine for us. Somehow, by the time we got back here, we decided on a couple of monumental things." Sarah said.

BG sat up, bringing Sarah up with her. She remembered those things exactly.

"I recall those two decisions precisely; one was fast, and one was slow. The fast one: move out of the city to the Volta Region--two hours into the country and open a public medical clinic. But the most monumental of all, and the slow one: contact the sperm donor clinic that all our research said would provide you with the

best chance of birthing a healthy baby. We started that tortuous process, which resulted in the birth of our baby girl," BG said.

Sarah smiled when she thought about the most momentous decisions in her life, of their life together.

Suddenly pulling away from BG's embrace, Sarah lunged to the other end of the sofa and peeked under the mosquito net that covered the day bed braced against the end.

Inside, three-year-old Eliasi was tucked in and peacefully napping.

BG laughed at Sarah's sudden move and called it what it was.

"Belated new mother radar syndrome, again, BNMRS, for sure," BG said!

They laughed.

BG's spirits were lifting.

Sarah felt better now that her wife felt better.

Goal accomplished.

"Well, I'll guarantee you this, Sarah," BG said, pushing herself up from the sofa, "this clinic that we've built is vital, and it's going to keep on functioning despite the capacity problems. You and the team will make it happen and I'll get back here to assist as soon as I can after I check in on Dad. But one thing will be different from the last time when I returned from California."

Sarah's eyebrows peaked.

BG pulled Sarah up from the couch and placed her right hand against Sarah's back while pressing her ear against Sarah's belly. After listening for a moment, she issued a proclamation.

" I, Baby Girl, hereby proclaim before my departure to California and in the future when I return, that this womb is done; there will be no future births. Period. Caput"!

They laughed and kissed.

Sarah had no problem with BG's proclamation.

CHAPTER 3:
Changing Dreams

Joshua Howard believed that no matter how much resistance and pushback his father had overcome during a remarkable career leading *Sail Shape's* national camps, and no matter how much of a legend his father was in the hearts of thousands of young and old campers whose lives he altered around the country, he might not beat what he faced now: the effects of a much weakened heart.

At one point, as recently as ten years ago, and after several previous cardiac warning episodes, the idea of his father succumbing to ill health still seemed unthinkable. He would bounce back almost as good as new after a health emergency. It was because he was Brett Howard, the man with the plan and inspiration, the social justice advocate who never stopped pushing. In fact, the idea of his father losing at anything, including losing to ill health, was completely foreign.

It was now a distinct possibility now.

For many years, Joshua's father had been Chairman Emeritus of *Sail Shape*, no longer board chair and decades removed from the operational control that he once exercised as CEO. But Brett Howard’s grip on the strategic direction of the national sailing organization remained ironclad.

Despite his weakened physical state, Joshua knew the last thing to go would be his father's combative attitude. That hard edge fueled *Sail Shape's* national ascendancy. Joshua recently felt that

hard edge on a phone call with his father. The call focused on the best long-term strategy for Sail Shape's survival in a drastically changed landscape of rising operating costs, reduced corporate giving, and dwindling individual financial support.

As the major financial backer of the camps, an amount that now exceeded twenty million dollars, Joshua believed that a new and sustainable strategic direction for the organization was needed now more than ever. Yet during the call, his father was adamant that all the camps had to do was execute the old mission that always focused on changing the lives of boys and girls throughout the summer camping season. The tool for that was hands-on nautical and moral instruction. His father believed the camps had to lean in more and accomplish the mission faster and more completely for each camper. It worked and would continue to work, he repeated several times during the call, citing the large number of campers *Sail Shape* served over the years, a number that was likely higher than actuals Joshua believed.

As an experienced businessman, Joshua knew that his father was dead wrong. The consolidated financial accounts showed that the current path was unsustainable. Joshua was blunt in making that case over the phone from his London office; his patience with his father's optimism was running thin.

"The camps are open three months of the year, Dad, which is when most revenue from major corporate donors who respond to the fundraising initiatives is received. Corporate sponsorships tied to branding opportunities are year-round sources of income, of course, and then there is the income from individual donors, and the few campers' families around the country that can afford to pay the going rate; the remaining campers are on some level of scholarship. But insurance premiums, capital expenses, land leases, fees, health insurance premiums, maintenance, and repairs are year-round expenses that must be met every month or every quarter. You know this, Dad; you haven't been away from operations that long." Joshua said.

Joshua shouted that reality into the phone a second time after it was all but ignored, but his father still was not listening.

Something had to give.

Even though Joshua was a less-than-average tennis player in high school and college, he watched many professional matches over the decades since that time. The back-and-forth with his father reminded him of most of the high-caliber professional matches he had attended because serving up ideas to his father always resulted in the same return, with the same spin, back to the same court location. During a tennis match, that pattern would persist until one player took the initiative and changed the ball's direction, speed, or spin.

He would have to use that approach now to get through to his father. He needed to radically change the pattern of their interaction.

With his own retirement looming, he was convinced a face-to-face sit-down was essential. But before that time, he delivered his warning shot over the phone.

His message was straightforward: Sail Shape had to diversify its income stream, significant dollars beyond camping-season revenue flow had to be generated at every camp, costs had to be significantly reduced, and there was no other alternative.

"Absent that, Dad, I will pull back my financial support in a significant way, no more year-end deficit payments," Joshua said.

After making the threat, he felt a rush of relief and a slight sense of optimism; he had finally crossed the Rubicon.

Brett listened but said nothing. He wasn't prepared for his son's threat. All he knew was that this was different, that things had changed between them.

Joshua’s threat meant he was no longer willing to be the passive financial partner that his father assumed he would always be. It also meant he was no longer the son who cut his father slack

because he failed to follow in his father's footsteps; why should he feel guilty about that and genuflect for not choosing a path he wasn't passionate about? Most importantly, it meant he was no longer the son who felt guilty for breaking away from the cult of his father's personality and assuaged that guilt by covering an endless stream of red ink.

After the call, as he planned his flight to California, Joshua turned over the upcoming meeting with his father several times in his mind. He used that practice to prepare for any business problem. It ensured he would accomplish what was needed. And it would fuel his determination at the upcoming face-to-face to break through what he increasingly characterized as his father's brain fog. That was the only way Joshua could describe blind adherence to a business strategy that had stopped being effective years ago.

He hoped to have enough time to sit down with his wife before leaving on the trip. But Mikala had her own business travel booked, taking her down to central London for several days. That was a shame because she was probably the best source for any other arguments that might get through to his father. After all, she had served as CEO of the organization for five years a decade and a half ago, in part because Joshua had long before taken himself out of his father's succession plans.

He remembered that when Mikala was at the helm, it was a time of camper growth and acquiring more land for additional camps throughout the country. During that period, Joshua moved his brokerage business to the States to support his wife's hectic role running the national organization. More than once he wondered whether that had been a mistake, a wrong choice, both for himself and for his twins who were young kids at the time of the move away from London.

He'd have to make time before flying out to California to pick Mikala's brain, even if it meant a phone call to her from Heathrow.

CHAPTER 4:
The Senator and The Governor

Brett Howard was on the phone late morning with a long-time ally, Jay Broderick. Jay was a former state senator and later a two-term governor of California. After leaving public office, Jay was a high-powered political lobbyist and eventually became a developer of affordable housing in California's central city neighborhoods.

"Look, Jay, Joshua is flying in from London tonight. He claims that he's checking in primarily to see how I've recovered from my recent micro-stroke, but I know that isn't the real reason for the visit," Brett said.

"Wait a minute, Brett, I don't think it's fair to impugn your boy's motives. You and Joshua haven't fallen out again, have you? I mean, I know that over the years it's been bumpy between you both at several points, but you've got to realize that he is genuinely concerned about your health and well-being, as we all are," Jay said.

Even though Jay was one of his oldest friends, Brett couldn't bring himself to admit the simple truth: his son had threatened to pull his financial backing from the camps unless big changes were made to operations.

Brett could feel his blood pressure rising as he anticipated the coming confrontation with his son. He walked slowly over to the recliner chair in his large bedroom, put down the phone for a moment, and took a seat before responding.

He sipped water from a nearby glass.

"Yeah, yeah, I know he cares. I love the boy, the man. Of course I do. He and Mikala have been great to me over all these years, no question. When she was CEO of the national organization, I couldn't have been prouder. No other CEO before or since matched her record for camp expansion and camper growth year over year," Brett said.

Jay knew that was true. He also knew that it was Brett's own ambitious plan from his position as Board chair at that time to radically grow the organization. Mikala and her executive skills enabled that vision. However, growth and profitability after the expansion depended on a stable economy, a stable political environment, and a stable national will to address the historic social inequities that *Sail Shape* was founded to confront. Over five years, beginning near the end of Mikala's tenure, Jay watched national consensus and stability around the economy and social progress twist and contort. At the same time, the political climate lurched between two extremes, eroding the national will to address social inequities.

Unlike Jay's own ability to influence the external climate during his years in California politics, other states with *Sail Shape* facilities were negatively affected by shifting economic conditions and fractured political support. Those shifts ran directly counter to the organization’s ability to sow increased opportunity for kids born without a chance to make it.

Overall, the impact on Sail Shape led to growing operating deficits.

Jay understood that without his old friend's unshakeable determination to drive and expand his personal vision for social advancement for the underserved, *Sail Shape* would have been swept aside or gutted by forces that had done the same to many other social services organizations around the country.

"Point of fact, Jay, my boy was never fully invested in what I built. You know how I know? Because he walked away from it at

the first chance he got after business school. London was his plan. Who did he know in London? It was just his abdicating his responsibilities here. I wasn't going to beg him to stay. The truth is, he never had the passion for what we do here. That's what it takes, Jay: passion. Not a bean-counters' summation of projected profit and loss quarter to quarter. I know what moves the needle in these kids' lives, and without passion that needle wouldn't have budged, trust me," Brett said.

Jay could hear that same will and energy in Brett's voice even now when he should have been focusing all his attention on his own health issues.

Brett's baritone tenor reminded him of the very first days when they met. Brett was a young, newly minted MBA graduate back then, working for a real estate developer. Jay was in high school. Brett volunteered as a tutor at Jay's school. He was giving back even then. The energy and commitment in Brett's voice in those early days were just as strong as they are now. Jay recalled what happened to him and the other students; it changed him forever. Despite the passage of decades, the experience continued to influence him.

Brett was in the middle of it.

Jay was an ordinary high school kid back then, a decent student at a dilapidated school in New York City. The school was rumored to be on the chopping block due to falling enrollment. The actual school shutdown date was a slow, nebulous process year after year. The uncertainty stripped away motivated teachers who took more stable jobs, and it siphoned away budgetary and material resources year after year. After all, why invest in a school that's going to close?

Finally, it was announced that the high school would close on a certain date. A developer would take over the land to build retail and other infrastructure improvements. Brett worked for that same developer who won the bid. Yet Brett continued to serve as a tutor for enrichment programs at the soon-to-be-closed high school.

Jay and his best friend Val, along with dozens of other students and friends, felt that they deserved a better shake and a better school. They organized and mounted spirited opposition against the developer after the bid was awarded. Students set up picket lines, and a large group seized and occupied a section of the site where development would occur. Energetic waves of students picketed and denounced the developer, who countered the negative press by announcing plans to accelerate development and bulldoze the entire high school, which presumably would silence the protests.

Confrontation and hatred swelled as police clashed with protestors. It was Brett, Jay remembered, with his confident voice and attitude, who brought the sides together and reined in the chaos. It was Brett who convinced everyone to stand down and who ultimately had the two sides reach an agreement that guaranteed the construction of a new high school. The one thing that Jay really admired about him, even during the grieving phase after the accidental police killing at the high school of his best friend, was that Brett was so strong and so committed to helping the students and diffusing the violence. His intervention and push for a peaceful and just solution almost saved everyone, almost saved Val.

The sound of Brett's deep voice yanked him from the past.

"But Joshua and I are at a different place on how we see the next few years, Jay. He's hell-bent on diversifying the camps and adding services plus online experiences around the country for the well-healed. You know what, Jay, those things haven't been tested in the landscape we operate in. To me, it almost seems like he wants to seriously dilute what we've always done and take us down a road where we become an entertainment business rather than remaining a national sailing camp that turns around the lives of kids that everyone else wants to throw away. Our work has always been serious, always been gritty, always been relevant. I didn't start this thing to play around and look good, you know that. I always wanted to make a difference. I've said it a million times, change will occur if we continue to attack the twin anvils

holding back many young people: idle time and lack of motivation. And that means hands-on, day-to-day focus on sailing and seamanship at every camp, every day," Brett said.

"I hear you, Brett. *Sail Shape* stands for that exact commitment; it’s a lighthouse, and any proposal for fundamental change in its mission has to be a non-starter," Jay said

Even as he said that to placate his friend, Jay well understood the hard financial reasons for Joshua's pivot. Jay had done the same thing, or at least something similar; he corrected himself. He had turned his back on familiar territory out of necessity. It's all about the narrowing path behind you and the wider path ahead, he would say to friends. Otherwise known by the maxim, all good things come to an end.

After Jay left the governorship, his inability, as a private citizen, to rally state and foundation funds to support the California *Sail Shape* camp's major contributions contributed to its financial woes. The deficit became an annual financial anchor for Joshua and other backers. Jay's diminished political stature in the state ended his role as patron to the California camp. Jay suddenly stopped being *that guy*; he had to become the guy who entered private business, the guy who hustled to make a living outside of politics. The change had been good for him, but again, it meant that the former good life in politics and the gravy train of steered support for *Sail Shape* had to die.

After Jay left the field, Brett's team had to develop new allies and new funding sources. All good things, but it hadn't happened at a fast enough pace to outrun the mounting red ink.

Jay tried to be real with his old friend about what the future held for Joshua's role, while avoiding having his friend split a gasket.

"Joshua's been one of the camp's major benefactors for more than twenty-five years, right, Brett," Jay said, already knowing the truth of that.

Brett let out a low-sounding, guttural huff from the back of his throat that the open phone circuit picked up, but Jay barely heard.

Jay kept going.

"I don't believe that he is signaling any immediate change in his support for the camps, Brett. But I do believe he is concerned about the growing red ink that the camps will continue to generate. As Joshua winds down his brokerage business over in London and looks at his own retirement, he's got to have serious questions about how the camps fund current operations and deficits and how they generate the capital to grow down the road. And don't forget, his twins are heading to university this year. I'm sure your grands aren't heading to a bargain-basement university. What's the going rate, one million for Caleb, one million for Iris over four years, or is it more than that nowadays? What about grad school costs after that? And when Joshua retires, who or what will supplant the millions of dollars that his profitable business has allowed him to contribute over the years," Jay said.

There was nothing but silence on the other end of the phone. After calling Brett's name a half dozen times, Jay hung up and searched his contacts for the personal number for Brett's wife.

When he reached Lailani, she was at home after all. She said Brett had exhausted himself on the call, which had happened to him more frequently.

"I had just gone back to his bedroom to tell him I was heading out late to the chamber of commerce due to an evening commitment I had to meet with the small business council. When I peeked in, he was out cold with the cell phone on his chest. A quick read of his digital monitors showed that a sudden elevation in pressure caused him to pass out." Lailani said.

"More importantly, Brett's personal physician warned him several times against stressful phone calls," Lailani said.

"I understand, Jay, that you had no way of knowing that and my stubborn husband would be the last one to fess up and tell you," Lailani said.

"You're right, Lailani. I wasn't aware of the medical limitations at all when we were speaking, and of course, he never mentioned

his condition beyond saying he was feeling much better," Jay said. "Knowing him as I do, I should have probed much more into the airy summation of his health."

"There is a day nurse in the back wing of the house near Brett's room, Jay; she was supposed to keep an eye on him and monitor his phone habits. Well, obviously, that did not happen today. I've already called the medical service and requested another RN to take her place. As for her, I asked her to gather her things and leave. This could have been much more serious; she had to go," Lailani said.

Jay was shocked as he listened to Lailani's description. It reminded him of the heavy lobbying for greater access to health care that black and minority communities had engaged in while he was a senator and later as governor. They spent days in Sacramento canvassing legislators to back bills that increased access. One of their arguments was that inadequate care was not confined to poor, resource-starved communities; it also occurred among the well-healed and affluent members of minority and majority communities. At the time, Jay thought that argument was more of an add-on, something to make the argument for better services for the poor more palatable for those in power. But as he soaked in the statistics during those lobbying sessions, it opened his eyes. The health care system penalized the poor and the privileged; systemic change was needed.

Brett's case was a prime example. He was affluent and a minority; the negative health care outcomes were amplified, amazingly enough. The neglect in this case could have ended his life. The root cause was poor staff training and supervision. Fortunately, his friend had the one thing that was essential for better outcomes: an advocate, his wife Lailani.

"But Jay, I'm a bit worried now; I've seen some decline in the last six weeks. I'm just waiting to see the improvement that we've been praying for; God willing, it's coming soon," Lailani said.