

Life Within the Trap

The Fall After the Summer of 2010

He figured if someone was to call him by a name at this very moment that the only proper name would be The Escapee. He'd discovered a while back how to rig his door so it wouldn't lock fully, yet there was almost no likelihood that he could escape the institution without help. He could, however, wander the halls and pass the other locked rooms. The Escapee intended to be quick; there were risks. He waited until he was sure the night shift had changed and then took off running.

As he sprinted down the hall, his bare feet made a wet sound each time they slapped against the cold floor. The hard part was getting access to the bastard's room. The employees of the institution used these plastic key cards to lock away the unfortunates.

He'd tried to imitate these devices, testing bits of metal against the locks, which ended in a series of failures. The Escapee tore down the hall praying that whoever was on duty wasn't watching him through the cameras.

He flattened himself against the wall to get a load of the situation around the corner. The night staffer was a thin man with a blonde mustache and a weak chin. The sound of his thumbs punching the plastic keys of his cell phone made a serious racket; but, then again, the only sounds competing were a steady rush of air from the ducts and The Escapee's muffled heart. He crept closer, staying low, his calves balling up in anticipation. The staffer leaned back in his chair and yawned. The Escapee sprang and grabbed a loose pen on the desk.

"Jesus!" was all the man was able to say.

The Escapee held the man to the chair, the menacing pen tip brushing his neck. "I need your key card."

"Take it!" The man's arms were up. The card dangled from his belt by a clip.

The Escapee snapped the card off its leash and hesitated. He looked at his captive's name tag.

“Jerry, I need a favor from you.”

“Anything, man, just don't hurt me.”

“I could stick you right here, right now, but I like you, Jerry. I don't want to see you get hurt.”

The Escapee cocked his head to the right, while his eye lids stretched wide; he should have been an actor. “I need you to promise me you'll wait three minutes. Three minutes, you sit here, you don't move, don't call anyone . . . until I've done what I need to do.”

“S-Sure, man. Three minutes. No problem.”

“If you don't do that, I'll come back here. I assume you know who I am right?”

Jerry nodded vigorously. “The guy from the news . . . you killed . . . those people.”

“Bingo!” the Escapee said. “We got a deal?”

“D-Deal.”

“How many minutes, Jerry?”

“Three minutes.”

“Exactly.” He took the pen away from Jerry's quivering throat and took off back the way he'd come. As he ran he took a quick glance back over his shoulder and saw Jerry sitting stiff in his chair, afraid to move, afraid to breath.

The dim light guided The Escapee past the face-sized black square windows. He stopped in front of room thirty-six and took a moment to catch his breath. It was dim inside, only the sliver of moonlight broke the darkness within. His hands trembled as he put the card up to the door and heard the lock retract. The green light told him to go. He pulled the door open and moved inside, his eyes adjusting to the gloom. He saw—a vacant bed. Wait, where the hell is he? Shit. Had he been moved today? The room remained silent.

Chapter 1

The shark passed slowly through the water, quiet and fluid, a thick body of muscle and teeth.

Maya saw it too late. “Jesus!”

James covered his mouth.

Maya's hand was flat across her chest as if taking a pledge. “I didn't see it coming.”

James slid beside her, a broad smile parting his face. She'd fallen away from the tank only to be sucked back in again by the underwater views. Maya stuck her palm against the glass. The blue ripples of light from the tank found refuge in the diamond on her left hand. James admired the way the blue glow of the tank fell across her dark skin. He watched her eyes as they followed the schools of fish, whose flashing scales brushed by seemingly inches from her nose.

“I love you,” he whispered in her ear, his lips brushing the tiny, sensitive hairs.

Maya's bare arms slung around his neck. “I love you too, babe.”

A rush of horniness sprouted from his crotch and rose up his torso to his head, spilling back down to his finger tips. Embracing the feeling, he lunged with his teeth bared. “Duna, duna, duna, duna duna.”

“James, not here, you horn dog.”

He began munching her neck. All she could do was squirm against the tank glass, half giggling, and half pushing away. James kissed her neck and left a trail of wet ovals. She scrunched up her face, inhaled sharply, then released a pleasure-filled exhale like jiffy pop exploding from the bag. Music.

She fought against him—or pretended to—at first, but as he began tickling her armpits and blowing on her neck, she started to put force into her shoves.

“Ahem!”

James looked up from Maya's belly button and into her eyes. Her eyebrows jumped in response

to the cleared throat behind him. He turned to see a pair of parents wearing matching indignant frowns.

Two little kids tugged about their dad's pleated pants: a red-cheeked boy wearing a corduroy Red Sox hat, maybe three, and girl in a pink dress, probably five.

“Sorry,” Maya blurted out as she squeezed out of James's grasp.

James felt himself smile, the humor outweighing the awkwardness, or maybe the awkwardness made it funny. Either way, the kids seemed to get it.

James let himself get dragged away by Maya's strong grip. She took him further up the main tank, the heart of the New England Aquarium, conveniently built beside Boston Harbor. The central tank had the look of giant test tube with a ramp that circled to the top like the threads of a humungous screw.

“You're ridiculous, you know that?”

James ignored her sarcasm. “Ridiculously amazing.”

“Honestly, why they let you work with kids . . . it's a mystery.”

“Oh, come on, *officer*. You going to tell me I'm a bad social worker?”

“Detective. 'Officer' makes me sound—”

As she spoke James made a show of looking around then leaned in and mashed his lips to hers before she could continue. She kissed him back; her teeth holding him prisoner by his lower lip. A quick pinch to her thigh got her to release.

At the top of the tank, they stuffed themselves between clusters of school kids. Together they gazed and pointed down into the tank's depths. A large sea turtle glided across the top of the water. Its spade-shaped head poked above the surface breaching for a quick breath. The way the light crosshatched its back made the turtle look like a living mosaic.

“Look! The divers are getting in,” Maya said.

James turned his head too fast and too sharp away from the turtle, because the black sun glasses

on his head continued to travel in the direction he'd turned. James watched helplessly as they flew out of reach and hit the water with a dull splash.

“No!” he felt himself say, the word sounding more like a yelp.

The crowd hugging the edges of the tank turned at his sudden distress. He could feel the blood filling his cheeks, while warm splotches of heat stained his pale neck. The glasses sank, spinning in a slow pirouette. He followed them until they were lost in a school of yellow fish.

The divers, who were suiting up on the small platform along the tank, must have noticed the attention switch from them to James. James pointed to his head and then down into the tank.

The older diver snapped his mask on, inflated his vest, and splashed into the water followed by his partner, a boney girl in a pink wetsuit. In a few fin kicks they were bobbing below James. The man took out his regulator, which to James looked like a big black pacifier.

“What'd you drop?” The diver had a mess of wet, gray hair and his mask pushed against his face so hard that the skin on his forehead grew several deep trenches.

“My sun glasses. I'm sorry about this—“

The man threw up a hand. “It happens, just about every day. We'll see if we can find them.” The diver stuffed the regulator back in his mouth and signaled to the girl. They made a slow descent and passed through heavy fish traffic.

Behind him, James could hear people explaining what had happened to newcomers. He pulled at the collar of his shirt, which felt as if it was choking his neck.

“At least it wasn't anything valuable,” Maya said, patting his hand.

Bless her heart. The sun glasses may be cheap gas station quality, but they were worth a great deal more to James. He'd owned them since he was a kid; they'd helped hide his face, hide the bruises, and the puffy raccoon eyes so that everyone would see a kid, not a victim.

Underneath the water the divers came together at the base of the coral. They lingered for a

moment and then began ascending, their air bubbles racing ahead of them. The divers breached and inflated their vests again.

The girl in the pink suit, probably in her early twenties, held up James's sun glasses triumphantly. Someone in the crowd behind him clapped. James wanted to look the clapper in the eye, but didn't dare turn around and show them his flushed face. He took the glasses from her and ushered a quick apology.

The girl seemed amused. "A parrot fish was trying to eat them."

"Don't let it happen again," the gray-haired diver said, as if he was the security guard of the tank.

James silently cursed the man for making him feel small. "Let's go check out the other exhibits," James said to Maya.

The lower levels had smaller tanks filled with exotic creatures. They passed fish that glowed in the dark and an electric eel with dead eyes. James pulled out his glasses and rubbed the small chip on the frame. When he looked up Maya had moved on. He found her staring intently at a lobster.

"You can see those at the supermarket, babe," James said.

"I know. It's funny, I've never really *looked* at a lobster before. They're like little aliens."

James got close to the glass. The creature did look as if it came from space. The armor plated crustacean flexed its antennae, taking time to clean the length of each, by passing them through its fang-like mouth. It had black bulbs for eyes that seemed soulless. James watched curiously as it sucked one eye in and out of the socket. The lobster's claws were laid out in front like a bulldozer. Dark red blazed about its sides and black splotches littered its back from tail to claws.

There was movement from behind a forest of kelp in the back: an albino, layered with a tint of blue as if the veins on a pale forearm. James stepped back and read the sign above the exhibit. "Gulf of Maine Exhibit," "American Lobster," and "Rare Blue and White Lobster."

It was odd. He'd lived on the New Hampshire Seacoast his entire life and he'd never once thought of how the coast of New England was a Gulf. He pictured a map in his head: from the Northern tip of Maine down to the foot of Cape Cod, it truly was as the sign said.

Before they left, Maya wanted one last look at the penguins. Almost everyone loved the penguins, except James. They were in a big, deep exhibit at the front of the Aquarium entrance, with rocks to perch on and ample room to swim below. They smelled, which came as no surprise, because if you looked around at their bored expressions, there was usually one shooting a stream of toothpaste shit out their little tuxedo body. The penguins below were more like dogs, swimming circles and chasing shadows. James didn't get the appeal.

This time James had to drag Maya away, as she looked back longingly. "They're like little babies," she said. "I should bring a big purse and steal one some day."

"I can see the headline now, 'Crooked Detective Maya Cooper, Caught Poaching Penguin,'" James said, panning his hand across the air.

"This coming from the guy that dropped his glasses in the tank," she said. "I can't believe you did that, and you cried out, like you'd been hit or something."

"They're important to me."

"More important than me?" She tossed her dark curls out of her face and gave him her best sweet face.

"Nothing's more important than you, babe," James said. His words were corny, but sometimes the truth was sappy.

His arm wrapped around her waist as they left the aquarium. He slid his hand down her back, past her white shirt and crossed the border of her tights to the smooth curve of her butt. She swiped the hand away, and returned his arm back around her waist.

The cool summer night air offered the smells of the historic Boston Waterfront. The strong

scent of seaweed and salt water mixed with the damp red bricks, fried food, and the invisible steam rising out of the sewers. There was no particular rush to retreat to their car and make the drive North. Instead, they walked the wharves, speaking very little, both content simply being with each other even if they were separated in their thoughts.

They came upon a series of columns supporting concrete arches that created a long, open corridor. As they passed through, James regarded the wooden lattice work above their heads. The sun had allowed tangles of stringy vines to weave a green roof of teardrop leaves that searched desperately for hope-filled rays. The boomerang moon above left the leaves wanting. Amid the greenery, white ornamental lights supplied a romantic glow that stirred James's heart.

Passing through the final arch James stopped. "I really do love you, Maya."

She paused, then said, "I want to set a date."

"For?" he asked.

"The wedding." She released his damp grip and latched her ring hand to her hip.

She didn't say anything and she didn't need to. "It's only been what?" James asked.

"Two *long* years." Maya said.

"Tons of couples stay engaged for longer than that."

"I don't see the problem with setting a date."

"Weddings are expensive, and—"

"You idiot, you know that doesn't matter to me." She clapped her hand to his cheek. "I just want to be Mrs. Maya Morrow—what's that face about?"

"Don't! Do that."

"James, I barely touched you."

"I don't care," James pointed at her. "Don't do that. Not in my face, not ever," James said.

"Okay, fine. Sheesh."

The sounds of a car horns yelling at each other interrupted the tranquility of the water lapping along the wharf. Maya's cell phone went off. She flipped her hair back and took the call. "Hello?"

James backed away and looked towards the docked boats resting in the harbor.

"Where is he?" Maya paused. "Where did you find him?"

James turned at Maya's obvious change in tone.

She rubbed her forehead then dropped her hand. "Yes, I understand. I'll get there as soon as I can." Her mouth was agape and her eyes darted back and forth, as if she was trying to read the air.

"What is it?" James asked.

She shook her head. "They found my father."

"Seriously?" James's eyebrows rose. "Where?"

"Salisbury Beach. The police picked him up. Said he was talking to himself and scaring people. He's at Amesbury Hospital, psych ward."

"What do you want to do?" James asked.

"I have to go, as little as he means to me, he's still my blood."

"Amesbury's right on the Mass border," James said. "We can get there in less than an hour if we hurry."

"Yeah," Maya said.

The walk to the car was slow.

Maya drove her black, unmarked Crown Vic North up I-95. Her father. How long had it been since she'd even seen him? Maya pulled her last memory of him out as if she were opening a scrapbook. She'd been helping her mother prepare homemade macaroni and cheese, staring through the smudged glass window of the stove, waiting to see the first bubbles of cheese and melted butter rise

up the clear baking dish.

Her father was already seated at the table, as still as a mannequin, and just as hollow. She grew to think of him as moveable furniture, paying him no more attention than she would an ottoman. In her hands was a black and white cooking timer that she wound up, then forced time forward to hear the bell ring. Each time she did this was followed by her exaggerated “Boom!”

Her mother came in, grabbed the timer out of her hands, turned it to ten minutes, and said, “Leave it be child.” Then she left the room humming, her overly-generous thighs rubbing together. Maya went back to watching the macaroni; the bread crumbs were starting to brown on the top.

She scarcely noticed when the wooden chair legs dragged across the tile. She stared in the stove's glass and watched her father's reflection. He stood up, pushed his chair in, and walked out of the kitchen.

Maya followed him, hanging back slightly, feeling very much like Nancy Drew. She watched him cross the living room and reach for front door. “Where are you going?”

With the door in his hand he turned to her, cracked his lips and spoke. “I have to leave before Colonel Ratchet forces me to hurt again.”

“Who's Colonel Ratchet?”

“He's right behind you.”

She spun, and by the time she turned back around, her father was gone forever.

Maya gripped the steering wheel. Would he recognize her? Had he changed? Or had his condition become worse? What would she do with him?

When they arrived at the hospital they noticed several security guards with flashlights were jogging along the large parking lot's perimeter, while others were ducking their heads under cars. Inside, an old woman reading a health magazine in the lobby told them that a patient had taken off. When they got to the room where her father was supposed to be, she found an empty bed with two soft

restraints dangling from the rails.

A nurse, a black woman, wearing purple scrubs shuffled past the room and Maya ran to her.

“I’m looking for Marcus Cooper. He was taken in today. I’m his daughter, Maya.”

“You just missed him,” the nurse said. “He pulled a Houdini and took off. Security is searching for him—the police too.” She looked at her pager. “Don’t worry, this happens, they never get far.”

Maya noticed the woman had a bandage on her arm. “Did he do that?”

The woman padded the bandage and laughed. “It’s not my first time getting bit by a patient, got punched last week.”

“I’m sorry.” Maya sighed and went over to the bed. It smelled of body odor and warm compost. There were pine needles, mud, and traces of sand in the folds of the top sheet. One restraint had indentations that she recognized as teeth marks. “But you’re wrong. They won’t find him.” Maya studied the random curls of dark hair on the white pillow case. “In Vietnam he was an Army long-range patrol scout. I know he’s not the same man as he was back then, but the training never left him. When he doesn’t want to be found, he won’t be.” She patted the sheets. “At least . . . after all these years, it’s good to know he’s still alive.” She bit down on her thick bottom lip.

The nurse turned to leave.

Maya put a hand up towards her. “Did he say anything?”

The nurse sighed. “He mentioned that people were after him: the government, Vietcong Cong. He said your name when he bit me, but you know how it is, hon.”

Maya nodded and the nurse left.

James took hold of her hand and led her back to the car. The parking lot was hardly lit and the little light that there was reflected off the smooth car hoods that they passed.

Maya stopped, her eyes searched the scattered humps of cars, then beyond to the woods. Blue and red flashes of light stretched from an adjacent lot. Several officers had joined the search, their

flash lights swaying in the darkness.

James leaned over placing a gentle hand on her neck. "He'll show up, Maya, don't worry."

"It feels wrong to say it, but I don't think I even *want* to see him." She opened the car door.

"You want me to drive back to Portsmouth?" James asked.

"No, I'm fine. I'll drive home." She took one last look across the parking lot. The flash lights had moved on to a thin copse of shadow-wrapped trees.

On the highway, white street lines were passing in a glowing trail while rows of orange street lamps held back the darkness. The moon followed them the whole way home.

Chapter 2

James leaned against the side of his work van, his eyes, hidden by his sun glasses, busy inspecting the neighborhood of brick houses, each designed in the shape of a barn. The house in front of him, aside from its number and a splash of graffiti about its side, was completely indistinguishable from the rest. There was a scattering of lidless trash cans tossed about the patchwork grass, as if the garbage men were too good to set foot on the tattered patch of rented land. Looming over the neighborhood was the Piscataqua River Bridge, a connector between New Hampshire and Maine, a green giant whose bent back offered escape from one state and refuge in the other. In recent years cameras had been installed on the bridge to keep an eye out for jumpers, as the 160-foot drop into one of the world's fastest currents seemed to draw out the pitiful souls who'd lost all hope.

James stepped around the piles of coiled dog shit littering the walk way. A plastic Santa Clause was lying face down in a patch of mud; the electrical cord was chewed so thoroughly that the copper wiring was exposed. A propane grill, stuffed with charcoal, was chained to the railing at the stoop, tankless, rusting through, and open wide as if it had taken its last breath.

James opened the screen door, then moved to the far left side out of habit, and reached over to knock. Inside, a dog began barking immediately and a sexless voice yelled, "Shut up already."

James took a breath to steady himself and heard the fumbling of a chain lock. A face filled the space between the door jam.

"What do you want?" the woman asked. Her eyes were red and hardly open.

"Ma'am, my name's James. I'm with Social Services." He held his ID card in her face.

She stared at the id, then tried to read James's face. "What's this about?" Her eyes were now open wide.

"Are you Wendy Reynolds?"

"That's me."

"I've come to talk to you, Miss Reynolds. May I come inside?"

The woman turned, revealing a crudely drawn tattoo of a blue star on the back of her neck.

"Give me a second, the uh, dog, just one second." She ducked back inside, closing the door hard.

The dog continued to bark a while longer. James could hear movement and the sound of glass clinking. He released a heavy sigh.

After several minutes she came back to the door, somewhat breathless. The dog had been brought to the backyard where it began to howl.

"I'm sorry. Place is a mess," Wendy said.

James said nothing as she led him to the living room. His nose was crammed with the smell of chemicals, feces, and the stale odor of cigarette ash. The air had a hazy quality, as if he were looking through a dusty bottle.

Wendy turned on the ceiling fan, squinting as she left the light at the dimmest setting. "Go ahead and take a seat on the couch if you want."

James eyed the sunken cushions. The couch was scarred with tears and escaping foam. He sat

on the edge of the sturdiest looking cushion gingerly, if not somewhat uncomfortably. A massive flat screen across from him nearly took up the entire wall.

Wendy pulled a wooden chair from the kitchen and sat across the coffee table. She was wearing dirty pink slippers and pajama bottoms. A baggy sweatshirt, the color of insulation, hung across her like a blanket. The case report had said she was twenty seven, but her face was as wizened as a rotten apple. Her baggy clothes hid her true size, but James bet that if he slid a scale under her she wouldn't weigh more than ninety pounds.

Wendy eyed the ceiling fan and rubbed her hands together, as if she were cold. James was starting to sweat in the warm stuffiness.

"What's this about?" She reached over and gathered up greasy burger wrappers and fast food cups that were spread across the coffee table.

"Were you expecting me, Miss Reynolds?"

"I sure as hell wasn't." She walked to the kitchen, stepping on a discarded barbie doll with chopped hair, causing her to swear and kick the doll to a corner.

James waited for her to return. When she did, he asked, "Do you have any idea why I'm here?"

"Is this about Terry? Listen, he don't live here no more. I kicked his ass out last week."

"Terry Leaks, he's your . . ." James spoke his name as if he reading off the police report.

"Boyfriend, well, ex-boyfriend," Wendy said. "He's gone. Screwed up his parole. I don't know where he is. I already told the police when they came looking for him." She spoke with an air of self-righteousness.

"I'm here, because we've received reports that you're shooting up, Miss Reynolds."

"I gave up that up. Been clean for months now. Court knows that, granted me custody." She rubbed the outside of her mouth and massaged her jaw. "Wait, who told you I was shooting up?"

James looked down at the tan carpet below his black shoes. Crushed chips were ground deep

into the rug, while burn marks and dark brown stains spotted the ratty material. James didn't smell it, but imagined that if he bent down the odor would be pure rot. "That information's confidential." James felt a wave of nausea running through him; the air he breathed seemed to get thicker. "May I see your arms, Miss Reynolds?"

She crossed her arms and her legs. "I just gave blood for my Hep C test. Did it at the free clinic." She shook her head. "They let the damn medical students practice on me. Had to stick me a bunch of times—in both arms—because my veins are still scarred from when I used to shoot up." She slapped the sides of her legs and looked at James.

James lifted his eyebrows.

"Fine, you can see them if you really want, but they're marked from where the dumb-ass students stuck me." She rolled up her sleeves.

James stood up and leaned down to inspect the arms. They were littered with red holes, bruises, and dark scabs. Several of the holes had puffed up and looked infected, while others had seemed barely clotted. "These are fresh."

"The clinic." Wendy reminded him.

"The clinic," James said, then stood up and peered into the other rooms. "Where's your daughter? —Oh, you can roll them back down now. I've seen what I need to see."

She considered the question, then pointed upstairs. "In her room the last time I checked."

"I'd like to talk to her, too," James said, looking towards the stairs.

Wendy hesitated, then led him up the carpeted steps. James put his hand on the railing. It shook as if the bolts were barely holding together. Wendy hurried up the steps, her head swiveling, an obvious effort to sweep every webbed corner. At the top of the stairs James loosened his tie and unbuttoned his top button.

"There's a bunch of junk up here." Wendy stepped over a milk container that had a yellow

liquid in it. "I'm cleaning out some of the closets, so be careful where you step." Stacks of clutter, boxes of clothes, and black garbage bags—tight with trash—were strewn about the hall. "Watch that there." A razor-like lid from a soup can, slicing through a garbage bag, nearly brushed James's leg. "This is what I'm doing today, going through and cleaning this mess up." Wendy said, then glanced back at James over her shoulder. She stopped in front of a closed door. "This is Abby's room." She opened the door and James searched for signs of life. Two sheet-less mattresses were shoved against the wall, a shoddy crib was shoved into the farthest corner, and thick plastic clung to the sole window, dulling the light and trapping in the heat.

James inspected the room and stopped at what he first thought were a series of dark stains on the back wall. When he got down and looked closer he saw that it was actually hundreds of tiny, shiny bodies: Ants, a whole colony of them, marching along the back wall to a corner in the carpet. "You've got an ant problem."

Wendy pulled the door closed, causing James to turn sharply. "I told the land lord about that. She ain't done squat yet."

James stood up and took a step forward. "Who sleeps in here, again?"

"This is Abby's room."

James sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Where is Abby?"

"She's got to be around here somewhere?" The way she said it was as if she expected him to find her.

James eyed the two mattresses skeptically. Stuffed between the wall and one mattress was a bottle. He pulled out a cap-less, half empty, green bottle of Jameson and put his nose close. The strong smell of alcohol triggered a swarm of memories. His father, heavy with the odor of whiskey on his breath, calling his name. "James!" His rough knuckles pounding James's soft, doughy face, shaking his little body. "I told you to listen. And what do you do? You screw up, again!" James's child hands had

shielded his face, his sobs only making his father angrier. “Why do you make me do this? Huh? Why do you make me do this?”

James put the bottle down, releasing him from the torturous memories.

“You can have some if you want,” Wendy said.

“How about we try the other rooms?” James ran his hand up his forehead, the sweat sharpening the spike of his black hair.

“How old are you?” Wendy asked, her tongue licking the corner of her lips. She leaned against the door frame.

“I’m thirty-three,” James said, then hastily added, “And engaged.”

“Huh. You look younger.” She began rubbing the door frame in a long stroking motion.

James's throat twitched.

She began massaging her meager chest. “Ever get high?” She stopped rubbing then grabbed the folds of her sweatshirt crushing them in her pale fist.

“We’re not having this conversation—Hey! Jeez—Pull those back up.” James looked away as Wendy dropped her pajama pants to the floor, revealing two pale chicken legs and a bare vagina. A c-section scar slashed below her belly button.

“I’m having it. You’re the one who’s not having it,” she said, and started to take her sweatshirt off.

James tried to shield his eyes with his hand. “Miss Reynolds, put your clothes back on, now!”

“What’re you queer?” She shrugged and dropped the sweatshirt back down and pulled her pajama pants up, as lazily as she had dropped them. With a look of distaste she turned away from him and opened the door.

“I don’t even know what to say to you,” James said, and followed her as she slipped out of the room. He made sure to stay behind her as she opened and closed doors calling for Abby.

When Wendy came to the bathroom she said, "There you are."

Abby was sitting in the dry bathtub, playing with a crushed soda can. The first thing James noticed was that her hair was matted and stuck out in every direction. She was dirty from her scarred legs to her food spattered face. Abby was shirtless, and encased in the horrid smell of shit, which was no doubt coming from her heavy diaper. Wendy lifted Abby out of the tub and set her down on the tile floor. When James bent down to get closer to Abby she stretched her thin arms out to hug him.

Wendy's cell phone exploded into crackling hip hop song and she left the room to answer the call.

James bent down to see Abby's face. "Hi, Abby, my name's James."

"Gaga ra loo."

"You can't talk can you?"

Abby laughed and flapped her arms.

"A four-year-old should be able to talk." James turned. Wendy was in the hall still busy with her call. "Don't worry, sweet heart, I'll get you out of here." James made a call of his own.

A short time later, James was walking out with Abby in his arms, escorted by a stern-faced police officer. Wendy had put up only a minor fit when he told her he was taking Abby. Wendy backed off when James mentioned the words "warrant" and "judge."

Abby didn't seem to mind being taken away from her mother by a strange man. James looked into her blank eyes. "I'm sorry, Abby. I should gotten to you sooner." She buried her face into his shoulder and hugged him. James could hear Wendy's voice behind him as she was arguing with another officer. Abby slapped her hands to James's cheeks, which for the moment, halted his grinding teeth.

Chapter 3

Two weeks later James was shoveling papers and folders into his beat up black leather suitcase. He'd already hastily changed into his basketball clothes and was trying to leave his cramped office. A final look around didn't help him shake the feeling he'd missed something, as if he had left the stove on.

Outside, flashes of sunlight poked through the raised rectangles of brick and granite that made the greater downtown Portsmouth area. Tourists in plaid shorts and bright colored polos clung to the brick sidewalks of downtown. Often times they were Canadians who crossed their borders to shop at the outlets in Kittery, Maine, or walk Portsmouth's beaches in extremely revealing swimwear.

James stood over the only vehicle in the lot: a cherry red moped, who he had grown to affectionately call Sally Jay. James bunjied his briefcase down tight, and slipped on his shades and black half helmet, which Maya nicknamed his "brain bucket." Although he would never admit it to her, the thing really wouldn't help him much if he got into an accident.

Sally Jay whirled to life with a stiff kick-start and he drove away from the downtown center. The soup can mufflers rattled. He flexed the throttle back and listened to the little engine strain and whine. The moped carved up the narrow streets lined with whitewashed colonials built right on top of the road. The shadow of a church steeple cooled his skin. The passing centuries had hardly touched the shape of Portsmouth.

As James turned a blind corner and picked up speed on the downhill, a car backing out of its driveway, pushed its backside into his lane. James clenched his teeth and pushed the moped on a hard left slant, coming within a fingernail of smashing into the back of the wide Cadillac. He looked over his shoulder, and the driver, an old woman with large round glasses hadn't even slowed. James relaxed his jaw; a quick shot of adrenaline still swimming laps in his veins.

He navigated to the edge of downtown, parking beside the granite steps, to what had been a

shoe factory in the early 1900's. The large, brick building had been left dormant to the elements for decades. Meanwhile, the real estate price rose as Portsmouth became less and less seedy (formerly boasting a red light district for the rowdy sailor boys fresh off the clippers). The building's value was eventually realized, sold, and then promptly gutted.

It took several years of renovations and convincing, but a wealthy philanthropist by the name of Theodore Monroe put up his own money for the renovation and creation of a public basketball court. The rec center had evolved over the years and now offered after-school programming for local teens. Theodore Monroe, called “Teddy” by everyone who knew him, died of a heart attack three summers ago, in 2007. James remembered Teddy as a Peter Pan; a young boy at heart with old bones.

James acknowledged the girl sitting at the check-in desk. She had one ear bud in her right ear.

“Hey, James, what's good?”

“I'm fine, Ally, how are . . . wait did you say, 'what's good?'”

“Yeah, what's good?” she asked again, taking her time speaking slower and more clearly.

“Everything's good. What's good with you?”

“Not much. Got boyfriend problems, don't get me started.” She slapped her palm against her desk. “Basically he's being a jerk. Why are all guys so dumb?” She shoved two stubby, flaking green fingernails into the right side of her mouth and began chewing them like a ground hog.

James knew her teenage dating habits. The sound of squeaking sneakers coming from the other side of the double doorway stole his attention.

“Ally, when you say 'all guys' you do realize I'm a guy, right?” James signed his name on the volunteer check-in sheet.

“You're a *good* guy. Spending your free time playing with kids is what *good* guys do.”

“Don't let those boys get to you. If this dude isn't working out, there are plenty more out there.”

She seemed to take his cheap advice for what it was worth.

In the gym, the rapping sound of the dribbling basketballs echoed. James scooped up a rebound then passed the ball back to the shooter, a skinny kid named Mustafa who had short black hair, dark eyes, and a caramel complexion.

James slipped a white headband over his own forehead.

“Want to play twenty-one?” Mustafa asked, as if he'd been waiting for James all day.

James nodded. “Go gather up the rest of the guys.”

An eclectic group of kids, boys in junior high or high school, ran over to get in on the game. There was a new kid trailing behind, who appeared somewhat skittish. James was struck by an immediate sense of kinship for the boy. He felt this way with all the kids at the center, but something seemed familiar with this kid in particular.

James was about to introduce himself when Mustafa chunked the ball, causing James to bat the ball away before it collided with his chin. Mustafa smirked and told him to break. James followed the fourteen-year-old's orders and took a shot behind the three-point line. The ball flew in a roman arc and passed through the worn rim. The net made a sharp thwip sound as the ball passed through the hoop.

James smiled. After years of being absolutely horrible at basketball, he was finally respectable at the game. Sometimes he wished he could go back in time and try out for the high school basketball team, but his father would never have allowed him that pleasure.

James drained three shots in a row from the free-throw mark. The fourth shot bounced away from the rim and was promptly tipped in by Ricky Saunders, a six-foot tall tenth grader, who had grown five inches in the past year.

“Just like that, I've got nothing,” James said.

Some of the kids chuckled at James's mock deflated look.

“I want that kid tested. He's got to be juicing. Let's see your birth certificate, Ricky. I bet you're really twenty-five.”

Ricky shook off James's remarks and concentrated on making his own free throws. They played for an hour, then Ally came in to remind them it was almost closing time. The director of the rec center dropped in and shook James's hand.

“Sorry about the sweaty hand, Brian. These kids really make me work.”

Brian's brown eyes came alive through thick glass lenses. “I give you credit. I haven't been able to play with these guys in years.” He clapped his bulbous stomach like an old friend. “How's business, James?”

“Booming, unfortunately. I'm busier than ever.”

“Yeah, everyone's hurting,” Brian said. “You hear they had to cut twelve teachers at the high school? Good teachers too, the fresh ones who actually give a damn.”

James shook his head. “I heard about that. They expect the kids to want to show up to a place like that?”

“It'll be like asking them to go to prison,” Brian said flatly.

“How about here? The center still getting funding?”

“We're okay, for this year at least. You know I'll fight like Custer to keep us afloat next year.”

“The kids really love it here,” James said. “Some like it a lot better than home, I expect. Too bad this place wasn't around when I was a kid.”

James said goodbye to Ally when he left, but she was too busy texting behind the desk to notice him. As he walked out into the cool night air, the sweat chilled under his shirt. It had gotten dark and the single street lamp turned the ground orange.

James saw a the new kid sitting by himself on the steps.

“Anyone sitting here?” James asked.

“Nope.”

The kid reminded him of someone, he couldn't pin it though. James slipped a dark blue UNH

sweatshirt over his head then said, "I haven't seen you here before. I'm James. What's your name?"

And where did you learn that sweet hook shot?"

"Kevin. My brother taught me."

"Older or younger brother?"

"He's dead," Kevin said as he rubbed a black scuff mark on his white sneaker.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Kevin. If it helps, I lost my dad when I was about your age. It hurts to lose someone, doesn't it?" James hadn't felt anything when his father died.

Kevin nodded, looking straight ahead.

"Who's picking you up?" James asked.

Kevin sighed, then said, "My dad was supposed to pick me up, but he's late." He crossed his arms over his knees.

James noticed two fresh bruises on Kevin's right shoulder. "Wowzers, look at those puppies." James pointed, "How'd you get those?"

Kevin pulled his sleeve back down. "Kids at school."

"How about those ones on your legs?" James asked.

Kevin spoke to his hands. "Kids at school gave me those ones, too."

"You tell anyone about it?"

"The teachers at our school don't care. My parents are too busy working to care."

"What do your parents do?"

Kevin shifted his expression and beamed. "My dad's a lobsterman."

"Cool. And your mom? What's she do?"

"She's a waitress."

James nodded.

Kevin looked James in the eyes for the first time. "What do you do?"

“I'm a social worker. I help families fix their problems.”

Kevin nodded, then after a few moments asked, “Do you help people keep their houses and stuff like that?”

James was about to answer but the boy's attention turned to the old, green Ford truck that was pulling up.

“There's my dad,” Kevin said, as he gathered his backpack. “I got to go.”

James followed slowly behind Kevin who ran to get into the truck. Kevin's dad unrolled his window as James came over. “Hi, I was just talking to Kevin here. He's got a heck of a hook shot.”

The man turned to the passenger seat and rubbed his son's mop of hair. “He gets it from his old man. I used to shoot around when I was younger.” He lifted the brim of his hat, which was blue and had a smiling fish skeleton on the front of it.

“I'm James Morrow, I volunteer here at the center.”

“Tucker Flynn.”

Tucker had a powerful handshake and his hand was one of the roughest James had ever shaken. James's own hands were petal soft. A distinct odor of fish emanated from within the cab. “Kevin tells me you're a lobsterman. How long have you been doing that?”

Tucker looked at his son and back at James. “All my life. I inherited my dad's boat and have been trying to scrape a living ever since.” Tucker paused then asked, “What kind of work you in?”

“I work for the city as a social worker specializing in domestic violence and child protection.” James snapped open his briefcase and pulled out a card. “If you know anyone who needs some help, tell them to call me.”

“Sounds good. Listen, I got to get going before my wife starts to wonder where we are. Have a good one.”

The Ford's exhaust pipe rattled as it left. James saw so much abuse that he was often too quick

to imagine it when it wasn't there. Still, for the second time that day, he felt as if he had missed something.

Chapter 4

“What did he ask you?”

“He wanted to know where I got my bruises.”

“What did you tell him?”

“What you told me to say.”

“Which is?”

“Kids at school.”

“Good boy. We'll stop at McDonald's on the way home.”

Chapter 5

James's office phone rang. The voice on the other end spoke awkwardly, like an unsteady hand on a stick shift.

“Hey . . . uh . . . James, I don't know if you remember me; I met you, something like two weeks back. It's Tucker Flynn—Kevin's dad.”

“Mr. Flynn, hello. Good to hear from you. What can I do for you?”

“I'm not going to pussyfoot around it. Me and my wife are having trouble with the bills. I think we might need to get on welfare or some crap. I figured, you worked for the city, maybe you might know who I should call to figure this kind of thing out?”

“Oh, why don't you come down to my office, Tucker. I'll be honest, the financial stuff isn't my specialty, but I can give you all the resources I have.”

“My rig shit the bed today.”

“Where do you live?”

“New Castle,” Tucker said.

New Castle wasn't a cheap place to live. “What are you doing tomorrow?” James asked.

“Tomorrow is . . . Saturday,” he said in the way people think out loud. “I'll be out lobstering. I mean, you're welcome to come, of course.”

James worked out the details then hung up the phone. Impulse had made him leap at the chance to join Tucker lobstering. Was it pity? Kevin's suspicious bruises? Or the need for a friend?

Chapter 6

James parked Sally Jay on the loose gravel lot and circled the right side of the building. BG's Boathouse was a local seafood restaurant and bar that was built right on Sagamore Creek, an outlet to the Piscataqua River, which dumped into the Atlantic Ocean. The smell of baking peat and drying seaweed mixed with the salty river water was pleasant. Around the backside of the restaurant there was a catwalk suspended over the fresh mud by posts. James imagined a giant hand swooping from the sky and knocking away all the supports as he leaned against the dry, splintered railing that led down to the docks. The resting boats, lined up like waterfowl, were an eclectic flock. Flashy sport boats floated alongside double-deckers rigged up for deep sea fishing. James's eye was drawn to a sleek cigarette boat with glossy, wooden frame and tight knit, green fabric seats.

The boat was the same style as his childhood friend Jeff Fahrenheit's dad had owned. Jeff had been his best friend until James had screwed up. Jeff's dad used to take James and Jeff out on the water every summer. Then, one boiling summer day, James had gotten into an argument with his friend over whose turn it was to get pulled behind on the inner tube. James could see himself, once again throwing

his friend to the deck of the boat and windmilling his own fists into Jeff's frightened eyes. Mr. Fahrenheit, a tall, naturally athletic man, had hauled James off his terrified son by his life vest and immediately threw James overboard, as if he were chum. He then proceeded to yell at James over the railing telling him to "cool off," and calling him "a little psychopath." James remembered thinking Mr. Fahrenheit was going to leave him there in the middle of the Piscataqua. Instead, he lifted James back on the boat and brought him straight home.

Before James got out of Mr. Fahrenheit's car that day, for what would be the last time, the man looked James straight in the eyes and said, "I know it's not *all* you're fault, James." James could still remember the way Mr. Fahrenheit eyed his father's squad car in the driveway. "I won't tell your dad; Lord we all know he'd probably whoop the shit out of you for this." Mr. Fahrenheit had shaken his head at his words. "But I can't have you hanging out with Jeff anymore."

James shrugged off the sour memory and looked past the cigarette boat to where Tucker's hand wagged at him. He pushed away from the railing and walked down the gang plank to meet him.

"Sorry to hear about your truck," James said.

Tucker was sitting on the railing of his boat, his hands busy mending a black mesh bag. "That stubborn, green bastard and I never see eye to eye," Tucker said. "Luckily, I live close enough to walk here."

James sized up the boat. He read the hand painted letters out loud. "*The Periwinkle*."

"Beauty, ain't she?" Tucker said, putting the mesh aside and extending a hand to James.

James once again found himself shaking the hard calloused palm of the lobsterman. He let go of the strong grip and put his own hands at his sides focusing on the boat. "She's impressive. Permission to come aboard, captain?"

"None of that 'captain' crap. Just get your ass in here, before I take off without you," Tucker said. "Wait," Tucker looked at James's briefcase and hesitated. "What the hell you plan on doing with

that thing?”

James looked at his briefcase, then back. Had he forgotten why James was here today? “You called because”

“Yeah, yeah, save the financial stuff for after. Your pretty briefcase is only going to get ruined out there. Leave it or stow it.”

James stuck the briefcase in a bin with the anchor.

Tucker got the boat's engine going and James untied the dock lines from the cleats. Taking command in the wheelhouse; Tucker drove his boat with a smooth experienced hand, gliding downriver, hugging each marker buoy like an old acquaintance.

Even though *The Periwinkle* wasn't built for speed, more of a workhorse really, it still cut the water with sharp pride leaving behind only a subtle wake. Dotting either side of the creek were luxurious homes, some half hidden, others laid out for full view, almost saying, “Judge me, I dare you.” Their well manicured lawns led down to long, sun-cooked docks whose posts were driven deep into the loose river mud. The scraggly shores weren't much to look at. Tree branches stuck out of water on either side of the river and rocks poked just above the water's surface supporting small mats of floating seaweed. Sagamore Creek linked up with the Piscataqua River, named by the Abenaki Indians. The Piscataqua River served as a natural border shared by New Hampshire and Maine that had spawned historic legal disputes over places like the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard: a source of jobs, much desired by both states, that was eventually deemed to be on Maine soil.

Behind his tinted lenses James glanced at the bold sun directly above their heads. The light scattered across the water's surface, like handfuls of pixie dust. Gulls called and beat their bent wings, or landed on the green and red marker buoys. James noticed some gulls were dropping crabs and snails onto the docks, cracking shells and the backs of crabs.

The green water below made him think of his mother. She lived for days like this. Sun bright

and warm, she would find salvation on her green beach towel, her magic carpet that carried her pale body through the breath-giving summer months. How many ungranted wishes had she asked for in those days? He could see her again, her pursed lips held a secret smile just underneath those big, round sunglasses.

James saved these good memories like so many bottles full of sea glass. Most were good, others more confusing, such as when he'd found a dark green crab scuttling sideways under a rock the size of his head. In his haste to capture the crab, he'd crushed its soft shell between his thumb and forefinger. He could still picture how he'd thrown the broken creature with its green guts spilling between the webbing of his fingers, and how he'd run to his mother crying. He could still remember how her fingers felt as they'd stroked through his hair. How she'd hugged him tightly saying, "Everything's all right, my heart. Mommy's here. We're both all right." This was before he realized that they were both far from all right.

"This was my father's boat," Tucker said. "I fixed her up and got her sea worthy again after he died. My dad was a poor New Hampshire lobsterman, and I guess, as you now know, like father, like son."

"If you don't mind me asking, how bad off are you?"

Tucker sighed. "The bank is giving me sixty days to clear out of my house. We're worse than broke. My parents left me the house along with a boatload of debt. No pun intended. The one thing they ever managed to pay off was *The Periwinkle* here." He massaged the wheel as if it were the ear of a loyal dog.

"She's a beautiful lobster boat, the finest I've ever been on."

Tucker laughed. "How many lobster boats you been on?"

They shared a laugh.

As they neared the mouth of the river they started seeing more boat traffic. They exchanged

waves with dozens of passing boaters.

“It's like we're all in some big, happy club,” Tucker said.

James felt calm. The way things moved out here, the rhythm. How the ocean massaged the land and the boats themselves. Every time he breathed in, he tasted peace.

Tucker drove down what he called the “channel,” showing James where the high tide covered hidden sand bars and rocks. He told stories of people getting stuck and running aground about the harbor. When a black cormorant surfaced thirty feet from their boat, Tucker pointed at the sea bird that shook water from its feathers, cocking its head to eye the boat. “We probably just scared away his lunch,” Tucker said.

James saw a man sitting in a director's chair on the deck of a sailboat bobbing leisurely to his right. The guy wore a captain's hat tipped over his sun glasses. There was a fishing rod resting by his loafers and his socks were hiked up half his leg. When James waved to him, the man either didn't see him, or was sleeping. Of course, he could have just been a rich asshole.

As if reading his thoughts, Tucker said, “I see that guy all the time, just sitting on that sail boat of his. I've never seen him take it out of the channel, never seen him catch any fish either. Guy probably just bought the big clipper to get away from his wife. Bet you anything that he doesn't even have bait on his hook,” Tucker said. He smiled and winked.

James shook his head. He couldn't imagine wanting to be away from Maya in such a way. Long rock jetties flanked both sides of the channel's mouth. People were fishing from their ends.

“Stripers tend to run at the mouth of the channel here,” Tucker said. “Where the ocean meets the river.”

As they cleared the jetties, cool air blew past James's face. “It's like someone turned on the A/C out here,” he said.

“Welcome to my office,” Tucker responded, stretching his hands out, his rough knuckles

spreading his fingers wide to try to hold the navy blue water that met the air force blue-colored sky.

Out here, you would never know Tucker was a man about to lose his house. The way he stood tall, eying the currents, all the while keeping an ear to sounds of the boat's engine. *The Periwinkle* seemed to respond to his careful touch, a mutual respect between man and machine.

James leaned to look at the open water ahead.

“Hold on to your hat, James. Going to give her some gas.”

He watched Tucker turn his dirty Red Sox hat backwards. James did the same with his flimsy “Life is Good” hat. Tucker eased the throttle lever down and started to make some wake. The water churned, the propeller stirring up foam like a blender. The motor took on a faster, higher pitch and the bow lifted up to ride the ocean chop.

James held his hand over the side of the boat and let the ocean spray soak his bare arm. The wind blew the clinging water droplets over his skin in long trails.

Tucker took them farther into the open water, squinting eye's searching for something, until his head locked into place. Tucker yelled over the noise of the motor, “You see them?”

James squinted, seeing only the ocean waves, and the distant islands of the Isles of Shoals beyond. See what?

Tucker slowed the boat down and pointed ahead. “You see those birds, James?”

James scanned the air until he saw specks in the distance. They hovered together, then one bird dove headlong into the sea. Others followed, their winged bodies speared into the ocean, and then, as if each were a phoenix, rose up with from the depths with a silvery fish flopping in their beaks.

“They're called terns. The birds, they're my eyes,” Tucker said. He winked again, spinning the wheel sharply to the left. “Turn where the terns turn and you'll find the fish,” he sang like a sailor's rhyme.

Tucker slowed the boat down when they were at the spot and told James to grab one of the rods

sticking out the back. He picked one that had six shiny hooks dangling loosely. A weight hung at the bottom of the setup.

“That's a good rod, it's all rigged up with sabiki hooks.”

James wasn't convinced, the thing looked as if it was one wrong move away from a tangled mess. “What kind of fish are we going for?”

Tucker turned the engine off and let the boat drift. He tossed a few chunks of something into the water. “Mackerel, of course.”

Tucker dropped his own sabiki line into the water and James followed. Tucker told him to yank the line every so often. This way the light would reflect off the lures. Within a minute James felt something tugging at his line.

Tucker laughed and said, “Here we go,” as if they were about to go down a water slide.

James reeled up his line and found that he actually had two somethings on his line. The blue and black striped fish dangling from the hooks flailed their tight bodies. James took one off the hook, while the other one shook itself free; hitting the deck hard and flapping between James's legs. Tucker leaned over and grabbed the loose fish and tossed it into a orange bucket. A second later, Tucker's rod started jumping. “We're on the mackerel; hit a school of 'em,” Tucker said.

As the silvery hooks descended, James could see dozens of blue and black mackerel swimming below, drawn to the shiny lures. “There must be a hundred of them down there.”

Tucker grinned. “There's more than that, we hit a school. I'm hoping we catch at least 200 ourselves.”

James had his doubts. Then he felt a familiar urgent tug on his line and pulled up another mackerel. They fell into a steady routine of jig, reel, toss fish into bucket, repeat. At one point James saw Tucker take a live mackerel that he had just taken off the hook, and slice it up with a wicked-looking blade. Tucker flicked the bloody pieces into the water. James followed the sinking chunks and

within seconds the hungry mackerel swarmed to eat their comrade.

Forty minutes later the first bucket was full of dead and dying mackerel. Tucker brought out another bucket and tossed two more fish in it. James pulled up one fish that was a different breed entirely. It had a sandy color and a white belly. As James took it off his hook he got a handful of slime from its wriggling body.

When he asked Tucker what it was, Tucker said, "You caught a pollock. Throw it in the bucket. Those make great lobster bait."

James nodded, realizing for the first time that they were catching their bait.

Another half-hour went by, another bucket was filled. Tucker had proved himself as the better fisherman, pulling up five fish on one line. All James could do was shake his head. As suddenly as they had come, the mackerel left them, prompting the departure of the terns as well.

"We did pretty good. That ought to bait most of the traps we pull today." Tucker shoved the buckets towards the back of the boat.

James held on tight to the railing as Tucker put the boat in full gear, steering back towards the coast. The splashing sounds of the prow cutting through the waves combined with the wind that sounded as if someone was shaking a giant poster board. The taste of the sea air gave him a rush of pleasure.

As they made their way along the coast, James could see waves crashing over small clusters of rocks draped in seaweed. Again, Tucker pointed at something ahead of them. James followed the outstretched index finger and once again failed to see what was apparently there. All he could see was a cluster of rocks rising out of the ocean to form a tiny island no bigger than a parking space. Then there was a movement on one of the rocks. A brown head lifted and swiveled. It was a seal.

"That's Seal Rock," Tucker said, squinting his eyes. "They say seals carry the souls of those lost at sea to heaven." His tone was somber.

When they passed the state beach, they both looked at the bodies spread out on the sand, greased up like hot dogs on a roller. Some of the kids flailing among the breakers waved their skinny arms towards *The Periwinkle*. James was surprised at how close to the shore they seemed to be heading.

The Periwinkle hugged the coast for a while longer, and Tucker maneuvered her around lobster buoys. They slowed down and settled into a pack of buoys, bobbing as if they were seamen waiting to get rescued. James watched as Tucker reached into a dark cabin space and pulled out a large hunk of curved metal. He dropped it into slot to the right of the boat and slid a pin to lock it in place. A chunky metal pulley at the end of the hooked shape metal swung about like a miniature wrecking ball. “The davit,” was all he said as he locked it into position. He moved back to the wheel and carefully guided his boat, telling James to come alongside him.

“See the blue and white buoy with the black 'F' on it?”

James found the buoy he was talking about.

“Lean over and grab it when it comes by.”

“Easy enough,” James said.

James leaned over, and was surprised when he could see the sandy bottom of the ocean floor. He snatched the buoy and pulled. A green slimy rope came along with it. He held the buoy dumbly as if he had just won a huge, overstuffed bear. The slack of the rope began to go taught.

Tucker's instructions came quickly. “Put the rope through the pulley on the davit. Nope, not that way. This way. Yes. Now pull. Yeah, it's slimy. Keep pulling. Try using your body and leaning back. Put your foot here. Yeah, that's the way. See the pot yet?”

James held the rope and peeked over the rail. The green cage was just below the surface.

“Okay, now keep pulling,” Tucker said. He caught the hanging trap and, with one hand, slid it along a flat stretch of plywood built along the right side of the boat. “Now unhook that line, and hook

this one. Nope, wrong way. Hurry up, we're starting to drift here.”

James grinned. He felt as if he was a kid working his first job. He hauled the rope hand over hand. The slime made it hard to hold and the salt water kept spraying in his eyes. Despite these annoyances, James heaved the rope and saw a second trap breach the surface. This time he anchored the rope by stepping on the line, grabbed the hanging trap himself, and handed it to Tucker. James reset the rope and hauled up the final trap that was linked to the other two.

For the first time he actually looked inside the traps he'd pulled up. Black speckled lobsters with undertones of green and orange were thrashing about the walls of the traps. The dark lobsters moved about, some retracting their tails violently trying to escape their prison. James counted at least five lobsters in each.

“Look at all those suckers,” James said.

“Yeah, let's see if we can get one or two keepers from this trawl.”

“One or two?”

“I'll show you,” Tucker said. He whipped out a metal tool, and pulled out a medium-sized lobster from the first trap. “You measure them by their carapace, here. This end goes in its eye socket, and the other end should be able to reach past this segment of shell. You see?” The lobster he was measuring was short by a hair. “It's short. That means this guy's no good.” He flipped the lobster over and held its tail back. He showed James the sex organs. “This guy, is actually a girl.”

It was hard for James not to feel child-like in his curiosity. “Why is one claw bigger and the other one long and thin?”

Tucker flipped the lobster right side up. “The big claw is called the crusher claw, and the other smaller one is used for tearing and stripping.” Tucker tossed the lobster back into the water, where it hit the water and parachuted away. “All right, now take out all the lobsters that are obviously too small. If there are any that look close; make sure to measure them how I showed you.” Tucker took out

some of the mackerel they had caught earlier and started stuffing the bait bags inside the traps.

James picked out the little lobsters first and flung them over the side. One little one was giving him trouble as it held on to the side with a death grip. "I think I'm going to rip its arm off, Tuck."

James realized he had inadvertently given Tucker a nickname.

"Wait, wait, here let go. If you let go, they'll let go. See? If you keep pulling, they'll hold on until they throw their claw."

James snatched the little bugger before he could back himself into a corner and sent him flying over the side with a little extra hang time. Serves the little bastard right, he thought.

"Course their arms grow back, but it takes a while. The one armed ones are called culls," Tucker said.

James was amazed at all the different things he found in the traps. Big hulking crabs, snails, sea urchins, hermit crabs, star fish, and even a couple of tiny minnows had somehow been brought aboard flipping and struggling about the wood plank. By the time James got rid of the small lobsters he was left with four that looked to be big enough. "These four look good, Tucker."

Tucker closed the three traps back up after baiting them and looked at the four James had put aside in a plastic bin. He picked one up and spread its tail. "No good, it's notched."

James looked at the small 'V' cut into its tail. "What? Like tagged?"

"Yeah, it's a female and a breeder. They notch them so that they can keep on breeding." Tucker let the struggling lobster fall into the water.

"Too bad, that was a huge one," James said.

"Even if that one wasn't notched, it would have been too big to keep." Tucker held up the measuring tool. "It can't be bigger than this second marker here."

From the other three lobsters, one was a fraction too short, and the other one was notched as well. They were left with one keeper.

“That's about a pound and a half,” Tucker told him.

“That's a lot of work for one lobster,” James said.

“Fish and Game are pretty strict about what you can keep. Makes it hard for the guys like me who set their traps close to shore, instead of miles out. Government assholes. Don't get me started.”

Tucker spoke his mind, which was helpful, because James now would have to take care in not mentioning how the assistance programs he would be talking to Tucker about would be government based.

Tucker demonstrated how to band the claws so they wouldn't pinch. He put the keeper in an orange bin and then steered the boat back to their shallow spot. Tucker moved about his boat as if her were a cook in his kitchen.

“When I tell you to, drop the first pot on the end there overboard. Try to drop it parallel to shore and flat.”

When Tucker was satisfied with the spot he said, “Go.”

James threw the trap over and watched the bricks inside carry the trap down.

“Hey, watch out for the line!” Tucker yelled.

The trap's rope coiled around James's leg. The line began to tug. “Shit!” He struggled to get the rope free and felt the line tighten its grip as it coiled around his leg like a tourniquet. James tried to pull the rope off his calf, but the drag began pulling him and he skipped awkwardly backwards. In his struggle, he grabbed the rope from over the side and tried to haul the trap back up, but with the boat still moving it was far too heavy. He was pulled to the back of the boat and brought close to the roiling water being diced up by the propeller blades. The rope was trying to drag him over the rail and under. “Help me!”

Tucker moved swiftly, cutting the engine and rushing to the back of the boat where he grabbed the length of taught rope and pulled with all his weight. The coiled rope gave some slack to Tucker's

grasp. James quickly slid his leg loose of the death grip and watched wide-eyed as the rope was carried away. His heart was trying to punch through his chest.

“Got to be mindful of where the rope is, James. One of those universal rules on any boat.”

James wiped sweat out of his eyes, still astonished at how stupid he'd been. It'd happened so quick. Tucker didn't give him any more time to think about it, setting him right back to work.

When the last trap slid into the water Tucker lobbed the buoy overboard and said, “That was one buoy. I have about 600 pots in the water.”

Was he being serious?

Tucker smirked. “You can haul that jaw back up, office boy. We're not going to pull them all today.”

“Thank God.”

They headed along the coast, pulling up more traps. After a few more James started to get the hang of it. They got some more keepers, but threw many more back. One lobster James pulled out of a trap was loaded with thousands of tiny brown eggs under its tail.

“It's an egg-er, we have to throw her back,” Tucker said. “Be gentle.”

Another trap had a big rock fish in it. Tucker called it a “sculpin.” It was an ugly-looking fish that had a huge head and giant mouth. Bulbous lumps of scaly flesh poked all around it. Tucker handed James the wicked-looking, curved knife and told him to chop the fish up for bait.

James hesitated. He breathed in and stabbed the creature directly through the head hoping to end it quickly. The knife sliced through the lumpy flesh easily. The sculpin struggled and squirmed with the blade directly through its head. James yanked out the knife and stabbed it again. It didn't die. He stabbed it a third, and fourth time and the fish still squirmed and puffed its mouth.

“Whoa, easy there, *killer*,” Tucker said.

“It won't die.” James was huffing, suddenly out of breath from holding it so long.

“Yeah, they're stubborn sonsofbitches.”

James watched as Tucker sawed the creature's head off with the knife blade. He chopped the remaining fat chunks into pieces and stuffed them into the bait bags. The severed head's mouth was still opening and closing within the mesh of the bag.

Every trap brought something new. There were flat flounders in a couple; they too, were hacked up and used as bait. James took care of that part, this time using the sawing method he'd seen Tucker use. They pulled up a huge lobster that had killed and eaten several smaller lobsters in the trap. James held it up with two hands. The claws were massive, and its legs shifted like a giant insect. The lobster was far too big to keep, but Tucker told him it was probably about twenty-five-years-old, by its weight.

By the time the sun started sinking, they'd caught several buckets full of decent-sized keepers and thrown back more than double that amount. “It's got to be tough catching so few keepers per trap,” James said.

“On top of that, the market price has dropped,” Tucker said, then added, “A lot.”

As Tucker guided *The Periwinkle* on to other spots along the coast, James noticed that Tucker seemed to be driving the boat in circles.

“Tell me if you can see any of my buoys.”

James looked, but didn't see any sign of Tucker's gear. There were several other buoys around the area. One buoy had a long post and a circle floater in the middle. It reminded James of an old style of bobber. A sloppily painted blue 'B' was painted on it.

They looked around for a little longer and James asked, “Maybe it's under the water?”

Tucker shook his head. “There's plenty of line to adjust to the tide.” His eye brows were knitted. “There should be three buoys in this spot.” He gave one last look and left the spot uttering a, “Fucking-A” under his breath.

James thought about asking if he was sure he had checked the right place, but thought better of it. Tucker was silent for a while after that.

When Tucker's voice finally broke the air he said, "There are two things that could have happened to those buoys. One, the pots washed ashore. Which is unlikely, because the weather's been good and the water has been reasonably flat since I checked these pots last time."

"What's the second option?" James asked.

Tucker didn't even hesitate saying, "Somebody cut the buoys; either by a propeller, or by hand."

"What?"

Tucker looked back at him from the steering wheel. "Oh, yeah, it happens. Someone feels like you're putting your pots in their territory, or too close to theirs, they will cut your buoys."

James looked away from the scattering of buoys and into Tucker's eyes. "What would you do if you caught someone cutting your buoys? Go to the coast guard?"

"I would sink their boat," Tucker said, the seriousness of his tone didn't escape James's attention.

James hoped that the traps had truly washed up on shore. Good a time as any to change the subject. "So what is this mechanical-looking wheel by the davit here?"

Tucker's serious expression melted away, and his smile reappeared. "Oh, that's the winch."

"You have a winch? How come you don't use it?"

"I use it, but I wanted to make sure you roughened up those soft paper peeling hands of yours." He burst into heavy laughter.

All James could do was smile back at the bastard. It was true. James's hands were bright red and raw.

They used the winch for the rest of the traps, which made the process much easier. When the light began to fade they headed back. Tucker told James to take the wheel. James's hands worked to

find the right touch, while Tucker cleaned the deck, stowed the lobsters and the remaining mackerel in the hold. *The Periwinkle* tried to buck off course with each passing lumpy wave and James had to fight to keep her in a steady line. James slowed down as they got to the channel and followed behind another fishing boat.

He was alarmed when a gray and orange coast guard boat speared its prow in their direction. James instinctively slowed the boat to a crawl and pulled a little off to the right as if he were on the highway.

“Tuck, I think the coast guard is pulling me over here.”

Tucker, who had been bent over the side scrubbing bloody scales off the knife, stabbed the knife into the wooden plank, and took over at the wheelhouse. “What the hell do these jerk-offs want now?” He steered alongside their boat. The men aboard wore blue coast guard uniforms and bright orange life vests that seemed to inspire a sense of urgency. There was another man standing at the coast guard boat's railing, a Fish and Game officer, who wore a forest green uniformed shirt and army green colored pants. They threw balloons over the sides of their boat and James tossed them the boat lines. One coast guard man and the Fish and Game Officer came aboard.

“You been lobstering or fishing today?” the coast guardsman asked.

Tucker stuck his boat into neutral and answered the question. “I've been lobstering all day.”

“We had a report that your boat had been driving recklessly,” the man's eyes were hidden behind gold-framed, tinted lenses.

“Must be another boat, we've been driving fine.”

“Can I see *both* of your boating licenses?” the coast guardsman asked.

Tucker showed him his. “This is my boat. I've been driving it all day. This is a friend of mine. He's been helping me haul pots.”

“I saw *him* driving, so if *he* doesn't show me a boating license, *he* is going to get a citation.”

While still looking at Tucker the coast guardsman pointed right at James's chest.

“The hell he is! He took the wheel for a second, while I put a fucking bucket away.” Tucker's fists squeezed at his sides.

Meanwhile, the Fish and Game officer busied himself by inspecting various parts of Tucker's gear. He seemed disgusted as he made a visual inspection of *The Periwinkle*. He snapped his fingers at Tucker and asked, “Where's your catch?”

Tucker, who hadn't finished his argument with the coast guard yet, turned on him and pointed at the hold. “They're in there. I put them away when I asked my friend here to take the wheel.”

“Show them to me.” The Fish and Game officer scratched his brown mustache.

Tucker's movements were quick and jerky as he got out the keepers from the hold. The coast guard took James's driver's license and promptly wrote him a ticket. Tucker tried to reason with him, but the man ignored him.

“Tucker, hey, don't worry about it . . . ,” James said.

Tucker swung his hot face at James, who felt himself put his hands up and take a step backwards under the angry glare.

The Fish and Game officer pulled out a lobster and flaked out its tail. He stood up and held the lobster tail inches from Tucker's flaring nostrils. “You see that? This one's notched.”

Tucker's mouth hung open. “Are you insane?” Clearly it wasn't an honest question. “That's a crack in the tail. Doesn't even have a shape to it!”

The Fish and Game officer ignored Tucker's protests and took out a pad of his own.

Tucker's voice shifted to a mocking tone. “Couple of big, tough guys here. I've been lobstering since I could walk, I know a notch when I see one.”

“There's really no point in arguing.” The Fish and Game officer took a picture of the lobster and then cut its bands. He set it free back into the channel.

“What the hell is this really about officer . . . Bender is it?” Tucker said with his fists digging into his hips.

The Fish and Game officer handed Tucker a pink piece of paper. “*Colonel* Bender. We're trying to stop poachers. Even you should be able to understand that.”

Tucker tore the paper in half and let fall to the wet deck floor. He was fuming now. “I'm going to fight this! That was not notched!”

The officers smiled as they pushed their boat away from *The Periwinkle*. Tucker stormed into the wheelhouse; he spit over the railing as the coast guard boat drifted away.

It took him a while to calm down, but when he did, he told James he was sorry about the ticket, and promised he would pay for it, somehow.

James shrugged. “I was driving without a boating license. It's not like you made me. Plus, I'm engaged to a detective. She'll take care of it.”

“It's ain't right, those guys . . . it just ain't right.”

“Do they stop you often?”

“The coast guard's always prowling around. They check to make sure you have enough life vests, or lights, or some stupid shit, but I've never seen them with a Fish and Game guy on their boat like that.”

James shook his head and sympathized. “They don't make it any easier on you.”

Tucker shifted his hat. Frown marks sprouted between his eyes. James could tell Tucker was still arguing with them in his head.

Back at the dock they tied off *The Periwinkle*. Tucker hosed her down and stowed all the loose gear into the darkness of the hold. He waved to a woman, who walked down to the dock to meet them. She took a long drag from her stubby cigarette.

Tucker set down the buckets of lobsters and said, “James, this is my wife, Melanie.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she said, shooting smoke out the side of her mouth. “Looks like Tuck worked you to the bone today.”

James hadn't thought about his appearance. His tee-shirt and shorts were soaked, covered in fish guts and green algae stains. He smelled like seaweed and mackerel. “Tucker worked me good. I'll have some good blisters tomorrow.”

She laughed, which sparked a short hacking fit. She cleared her throat. “Did he invite you for supper?”

“He didn't. I would be happy to come if you'd have me.”

She nodded and cleared her throat again, her fist covering her mouth.

Tucker stepped off the boat and slapped James on the back. “He did great, lifted damn near ninety pots by hand. Then I decided to be nice and tell him about the winch.”

“You *would* do that,” Melanie said.

They put the buckets of lobsters into the trunk of Melanie's blue Buick. Tucker took out three lobsters and put them in a separate cooler. He told James they would stop off first on the way home to sell the keepers.

James agreed to follow them on his moped.

“You drive a scooter?” Melanie shook her head smiling. “You sure about this guy, Tuck?”

Tucker took the keys and started the car. “He's a good dude, honey.” He pointed to James. “Follow me. I don't live too far away so you won't freeze to death on that little red rig of yours.”

James abruptly realized he hadn't brought a change of clothes.

The ride back was cold. They stopped at a restaurant where Tucker brought the buckets of lobster in through a side door. He came back counting bills, which he stuffed into his pocket and got back into the car.

They drove down windy roads. Past rows of cattails that grew taller than a man. James saw a gray heron wading among the peat in a salt water marsh. Its stick-like legs made it look awkward, while the bird's spear-like head inspired a sense of majesty. James listened as the cattails rattled and swayed in the wind. Stone walls threaded around small cottages.

It took a near collision for James to notice how the Flynn's rear break lights didn't work. James kept his distance as they passed over the bridge to New Castle. The Wentworth by The Sea, a grand hotel, famous for the signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth that ended the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, shone almost as if it were a glorious white castle.

They eventually turned off Wentworth Road and settled their car in the driveway of a humble one story cottage; halfway down a narrow dead-end street. A rusting basketball hoop hung over the driveway. James noticed Tucker's beat up truck sitting in the driveway.

Tucker stowed some gear in the garage and James followed Melanie inside. He took off his squishy sneakers and soggy socks. Melanie ducked into a bedroom and came back with a handful of folded sweats and a fresh pair of balled socks. "Here, these are Tuck's."

He thanked her and she waved him in the direction of the bathroom. James walked barefoot across the green shag carpet into the bathroom. There were clam shells and other nic nacs all about the walls of the home. In the bathroom a big conch shell sat atop the toilet seat. James was tempted to try to blow into it like a horn.

Instead, he stripped and put on the dry clothes. He rolled up his sleeves, soaped up his hands from a clown fish dispenser, and ran them under the hot water, letting the water get really hot. It splashed over his bare arms the warmth working into his muscles and bone. For the first time that day he inspected the cuts and scratches along his forearms. No wonder Tucker was so rugged.

When he was done he walked out into the living room. He heard Tucker and Melanie talking through a clattering of pots and pans in the kitchen. James held his damp clothes in a pile in his hands,

and let himself wander around the common room. The center of the room had a wooden lobster trap coffee table. Along the right wall, a cuckoo clock ticked away. He stepped off the shag and onto the thin, tan carpet of what he figured was the mudroom. There were a collection of old brown chairs and a battered antique love seat. The television was large and had wood paneling. James hadn't seen one like it in years. James saw a stack of board games on a shelf. He walked over to them and saw a sad face drawn into dust that collected on top of "Mouse Trap."

He felt the wet clothes in his hands vibrate. He dug out his cell phone. Two voice mails were waiting, both from Maya. He listened to the first one.

"Hey, babe, just wondering what the plans are for tonight. I know you're probably out lobstering with that client friend of yours. Give me a call when you're back so we can figure out dinner plans."

The cuckoo clock's hands showed it was 8:30.

He listened to her second message. "James, still no word from you. I'm wondering where you are. It's getting dark. If I don't hear from you I'm going to go out with a couple other detectives from work for a drink and some dinner. Let me know if you're going to be back or not." There was a hint of frustration in her voice, as if talking to his voice mail was a forced conversation with someone she didn't like.

Although the message was an hour old, he gave her a quick call. When she didn't pick up he left a message letting her know he'd be back late and not to wait up.

"I'm glad to see you're a Patriots fan." Tucker's voice came from behind him.

"Holy crap!"

Tucker laughed, bending over slightly to keep it together.

James took a second to recover then looked down at his own borrowed sweatshirt, and saw the red, white, and blue logo streaked across his own chest.

"I never asked you, do you even like lobster?" Tucker asked.

“I do, though I haven't had it in years, might have to refresh me on how to eat it.”

“No problem. Let me grab those dirty clothes from you. I'll throw them in the wash.”

Tucker opened a closet and put the pile in a washer adding his own clothes. In the kitchen a large pot was on the stove heating. The three lobsters were crawling on the kitchen table, each releasing frothy bubbles from their mouths.

“I wonder if they know what's coming?” James's stomach growled.

“Looks like your stomach knows what's coming,” Tucker said.

“Your house is beautiful.” Let's hope we find some way to keep it, James thought.

“Thanks,” Tucker said. “We love it here. I'm not one of those guys that needs much. Being close to the sea is all I want.”

James left the room and found his briefcase. He opened the case on top of the lobster trap coffee table as if he was about to pitch Avon. Tucker took the chair across from him.

“If it's okay with you, I brought some information for you to look at.”

Tucker stood up, left the room, and returned with a small pile of folders and a spiral notebook. He and James sat down on the couch and James watched as Tucker spread out statements and tax forms. Tucker opened the notebook and James saw pages full of chicken scratch calculations and lists.

“When my dad died, two years back, he left my mom and me with all his debt. Don't ask me why, but he never believed in life insurance, and the funeral came out of our pocket. He left the house in my name. My wife and I, who were living in the condos down the road from here, moved into the house with Kevin. My mom, she loved my father. She let herself go after dad left us, we buried her alongside dad.”

He bowed his head for a moment then continued, “My dad had always been a proud man, but a poor man at that. When I saw how much he was in the hole on the house I knew I was balls deep in the muck. At this point we owe more than the house is worth. It's the taxes, you see here?”

James looked at the offered paperwork and saw the list of taxes owed that Tucker had highlighted. Together it accumulated to a large sum.

“Over the years my father was making minimum payments. We have had to refinance the mortgage a couple a times, and it's still hard. The bloodsuckers at the bank know we're in over our heads.” He paused and looked away. “Even if we wanted to sell the place—which we don't—we would still owe a bundle since the house has lost resale value with the way the housing market's dropped. Together, me and Melanie don't make enough. All we've been able to do is pay the minimum and keep food in the fridge.” Tucker shook his head and opened a folder handing James a legal looking document. “Here's the notice of foreclosure.”

James took the notice in his hands. It had obviously been crumpled up and then flattened out again. Making James think about that pink ticket Tucker had ripped up earlier. “So between you and Melanie, how much do you both make yearly, combined?” It was a personal question, and he didn't relish asking it, but it would be useful to know.

“That's the thing, up until this year, I've been the bread winner, pulling in bout forty kay a year. Between selling lobsters in the summer and the marina—I do boat and engine repair— life has been manageable. Then my boss at the marina canned me. Guy says he can't afford to have an unlicensed tech on staff this year, but I know he's just hurting for money and was looking for a reason to fire me. Now, all I got is the lobsters, and once it gets too cold, and the lobsters head out to deeper water, I don't even have that.” Tucker rubbed his furrowed brow as if he were trying to rub off a permanent stain. “If that ain't enough, the prices of lobsters dropped this summer more than half, while fuel prices shot up. Plus Fish and Game has a stick up their ass and puts more and more regulations that I got to pay for.”

Not the first sob story James had ever heard. There were always a way out, only catch was that Tucker would have to be open to change. “What's in this notebook here?” James asked.

“The numbers of keepers I've been getting. I record how much I sell them for, against the price

of bait, gear, and gas costs. I've averaged out the number so far and it's been one of my worst seasons in ten years. I just can't catch a break. I've lost more gear and caught so few keepers, that it's almost not even worth going out." He shook his head. "Thank God for Melanie. She's working her ass off waiting them tables," Tucker said, loud enough so Melanie could hear.

Melanie appeared from out of the kitchen, and sat down on the arm of his chair. She began massaging her foot, in a way that another person would unconsciously stroke their chin. "We've had a bad luck streak running for a while now." She switched to the other foot.

"I'm not going to call it bad luck, I mean there's plenty other people worse off," Tucker said. "But right now we're just kind of . . . stuck."

James looked over the stack of paperwork. "What do you guys own?"

"We own the boat, all the gear, those two cars, although they ain't worth crap. My parents left some antiques in the attic," Tucker said. Tucker looked around trying to think of anything he was missing.

Melanie added, "I've got some gold and silver jewelry of my own and some equipment I bought a long time ago to make jewelry. Back when I had it in my mind to open my own shop." She had a far off look and there was a longing in her voice.

Tucker patted her knee. "She used to make sea glass jewelry, and sell it at local craft fairs, that kind of thing."

"Did they sell pretty well?"

"I used to make a little extra money off it, but it was more of a house-wife hobby," Melanie said.

It suddenly occurred to James that Melanie Flynn was an attractive woman. Initially, he'd been put off by the cigarette perched on her lips. At the docks her facial features had been hardened and carved like granite. But now, her face seemed softer. Her hazel eyes that sat atop her lids seemed more

determined. There was a sense of vitality about her now, not the same as Maya's playfulness, but more of a parrot allowed out of its cage. The sense of pure freedom and release was marred only by the hindrance of clipped wings. James noticed it in the little ways she quickly flashed her face at James or Tucker as they spoke. It was visible in the way her hair, tied back in a loose ponytail, was laced with small spindling curls that ached to be sprung loose. James could imagine her letting the hair down and dancing alone in a club, her body a puppet to the music's rhythm, her mind high on the lights and shadows playing across her dilated pupils. Tucker had done well in tying down a wild mare like her.

Tucker himself appeared rugged for all the world, smothering his good looks under a dirty ball cap, scruffy beard, dingy tee-shirt, paint-stained jeans, and work boots.

The couple were only a few years older than James and Maya, but lived completely different lives. The Flynn's had Kevin, who was already in the seventh grade, and the other mysterious son that Kevin had talked about; the one that had died. James thought again about Kevin and his bruises. After spending a day with Tucker, James didn't pin him for an abusive man; however, James had learned that abusers never had a common face. He could never rule out Melanie. Women could be just as vicious as men. For now, James was giving them both the benefit of the doubt. He always did, until he found evidence. Sometimes he wondered if he was supposed to be the detective and Maya the social worker.

"Your son goes to Portsmouth Junior High?" James asked.

"Yeah," Tucker said.

"Does he like it there?" James asked.

"He complains about as much as I did when I was in school. We Flynn's aren't really known for our scholarly abilities," Tucker said, almost routinely.

"Is he on free-reduced lunch?" James asked.

"What's that?" Tucker asked.

James went into the food program options and handed them the necessary forms.

“When you called me, Tucker, you said the house was in jeopardy. Everything I brought with me today is geared to lower bills and cut costs, that way you can put money into the house.” James paused. “Did you know that the state will cover the costs of electricity for families who need assistance?”

Melanie shook her head, Tucker crossed his thick forearms. The fork-like artery of his forearm wrapped around the muscle like a length of p-cord. Since Tucker's hands seemed unable to receive anything, James handed these documents to Melanie.

“I also included the same paperwork for heating assistance,” James said. “But probably not a big concern for you guys right now.”

Melanie looked interested. Tucker was quietly listening.

James picked up the crinkled foreclosure paper that Tucker had given him and scanned it briefly.

“The bank that lent you the money for the mortgage is Bell Light Atlantic,” James said. “I know a manager at that bank, she and I exchange favors from time to time. I'll call her tomorrow and see if she can offer some sort of extension for the time being. If that works out, maybe you guys can sit down and explain the circumstances and work out a repayment schedule.” James paused and scanned the papers more for effect, then said, “For right now an extension will give you more time.”

Melanie's hands were folded together, as if she were praying. A look of relief crossed her face. Tucker was chewing his bottom lip with his front teeth.

“More time is exactly what we need,” Melanie said.

James nodded. “I have some more suggestions. You don't have to do them, but they would most certainly help.”

Tucker and Melanie looked at each other for a moment, then Melanie urged James to speak further.

James looked Tucker in the eye. “What kind of jobs are you looking for?”

Tucker crossed his arms. “I do odd jobs and landscaping sometimes, but I don't really have any other skills aside from boat engines and fiberglassing,” Tucker said. His round shoulders sunk.

“I have a contact at a security company,” James said. “He's always looking for reliable people. The best part is they have all sorts of shifts.”

Melanie, who'd been bobbing her head, stopped and spoke to Tucker. “It's not like it would be hard labor, Tuck, and you could take my car since your truck is broken right now. I wouldn't need it if you worked nights.”

Tucker uncrossed his arms and rubbed his knees. James wished he could read his thoughts.

Finally he said, “I'm interested.”

“Great, I'll call him tomorrow and put you two in touch.”

James turned the attention away from Tucker and towards Melanie. “Melanie, can I have a look at that jewelry you make?”

She sprung to her feet, spun around, and rushed out of the room. When she came back she was clutching an array of sterling silver rings, necklaces, and bracelets.

James examined the pieces. “I have to say these don't look too small-time craft fair to me. They're beautiful, Melanie. I think you can really sell these,” James said, while rubbing a ring with his thumb. He felt the smoothness of the metal and examined the symmetry at several angles.

“I know a lady who runs a local thrift shop, who would probably be willing to sell these on consignment. Maybe you could even sell them online?” James said.

Melanie's skin around her neck started to blotch red. The blush rose to her cheeks. Her words came out in hiccups. “Really, wow. I mean, wow. The thrift shop sounds great. I don't know . . . about the internet, we don't have a computer, and I . . . wouldn't know how to go about selling them—online I mean.”

“Well, you have the library. It's really easy once you get started. I bet your son could help you out,” James said.

Melanie smiled and nodded like a pleased old woman.

“I mean this work is really wonderful. This is the kind of stuff my fiance Maya would wear,” James said.

Melanie thanked him for the compliments. She made herself small in her chair and looked to Tucker. There was a pause. James relaxed his jaw and they all turned as the cuckoo bird flew out of its tiny yellow painted door. It was 9:00

Tucker shifted himself in his chair and leaned forward, trying to get closer to James. “I appreciate the help. I'll be honest, I didn't know what made me call you, or what I expected, but I'm sure glad I did.”

“I'm only showing you guys what's already out there,” he continued. “Between lobstering and working security, you'll be working a lot of hours.” James crossed his legs feeling more relaxed. “I've seen too many people overwork themselves to get by, and that puts a strain on the family. I'm sure you know that Kevin is affected by financial troubles too. Kids are like antennas.”

“That's why we got him involved in the rec center.” Tucker said. “Kevin loves basketball. His older brother, Jacob, loved it too. I ain't no Sigmund Freud, but I think it's Kevin's way of keeping his big brother alive.”

“Kevin looked up to Jacob so much,” Melanie added weakly. Her eyelids puffed up like twin dams. Tucker put a hand on her shoulder and rubbed her back in slow circles. James was a stranger to their intimate sorrow; it made him feel a pang of discomfort. Melanie sniffed and wiped her eyes. The dams held.

The sound of an overflowing pot lid bouncing in the kitchen caught their attentions.

“Oops! Boiling over. Let me go put the lobsters in.” Melanie dried her eyes on her shirt sleeves

as she fled the room.

Tucker and James went to the kitchen to see the action. Melanie's mitted hand lifted the cover releasing steam that rose in a rush of heat that hit the ceiling and spread like the arms of an octopus.

James regarded the three banded lobsters on the table moving as slow as a herd of tortoises. Melanie scooped them up one by one, and before the creatures could realize it, they were hanging over the metal rim of a bubbling hot spring. They lifted their arms in protest, but it was too late. The last lobster went in on top of his brothers and reached out for the last of the light as the lid was slid over his stainless steel tomb. There were some small squeaks coming from inside the pot.

James pointed towards the stove as if he had just found Waldo. "Is that the steam making that noise?"

"It's the lobsters screaming," Tucker said, then smiled wickedly, his lips peeling away to show his teeth.

"I'm melting, melting, oh what a world," James said, spinning his head and lifting his hands. It made Tucker chuckle. Melanie either didn't understand the connection, or it wasn't her type of humor.

The tiny screams went away. A short time later the cover was lifted and the bright mars-red crustaceans were revealed in their boiling pool. Tucker microwaved the butter and James tried to help set the table.

Tucker offered James a beer, but James turned him down saying, "I don't drink."

"What are you some sort of angel, man?" Tucker asked.

"Hardly, my dad had a drinking problem. Died of kidney disease. So I don't mess with the stuff."

"Sorry to hear that," Tucker said, with what sounded like genuine sympathy.

"It's fine. He passed away when I was a kid," James said, finishing with a shrug.

“Was he a social worker like you?” Tucker asked.

“A cop, when he wasn't drunk or slugging my mom and me.” James hadn't meant to say the last part; it just slid out, as if he were singing the last few lyrics of a song on the radio. “Sorry, I must be tired from lugging all those lobster traps. My dad had his problems like everyone else. He made me the man I am today. I just, you know, like helping people.”

Tucker quietly nodded his head and took a long drink of his beer.

James continued, “There's so much awfulness out there, there has to be somebody promoting the other side.”

“You're a better man than most,” Melanie said, eyeing Tucker, as she sat the lobsters on their plates.

As they sat down at the table, Tucker placed a bowl of water and a bowl of butter for each of them and brought James a lemonade. He poured his beer into a glass, while Melanie just drank tap water.

“Where's Kevin anyways?” James asked.

“At a friend's house for a sleep over,” Tucker answered. “You know that kid Mustafa . . . something or other.”

James smiled a sharp grin. “I know Mustafa. He's a great kid. Natural leader. Your son picked a good kid to be buddies with.”

Melanie appeared pleased. She raised her glass saying, “Here's to you, James. I'm glad Tuck met you.” Her smile was full, lit by the kitchen light suspended feet from their gathered heads.

James could feel his own face redden. “Here's to new friends and fresh lobster,” James said hastily. He raised his lemonade to meet Melanie's iced water.

Tucker was last to lift his drink, whose golden pallor held rising bubbles. “Here's to the dead, may we honor the love ones lost, and forgive the mistakes of the damned.”

There was a brief clinking of glasses then they each sipped. James thought Tucker's toast seemed out of place in the lighthearted atmosphere. Some people don't deserve forgiveness.

The lobster on his plate reminded him of a big, red ant. He eyed the crackers, tiny fork, and curved little spear-like instrument placed on a folded napkin beside his meal. With crackers in hand, he searched for a good place to start, fumbling in his efforts to crack the shell. He felt their stares before he saw them. Tucker's and Melanie's faces were both filled with stifled amusement.

“Okay you two, how do I go about eating this thing?”

Chapter 7

At 11:00, the night sky was bulging with the weight of stars. James opened the door to his apartment only to find darkness awaiting him. Before he'd left the Flynn's home he'd put in a call to Maya. The raucous bar crowd had made it hard to hear what she was saying. All he could understand was that she said she would be back in an hour.

He set his briefcase down in his room. It had lost some weight at the Flynn's, yet it still felt as if it weighed 300 pounds in his sore arms. In the shower the hot water scorched away the lingering smell of dried seaweed. Shirtless, wearing nothing but basketball shorts, he sunk deep into his corner of the couch. He flicked through a couple of movies and ended up settling on the news. He was getting drowsy when the sounds of jingling keys started working the lock.

“It's open,” James yelled.

Maya's dark skin hid her features until the pale light of the television rose and flashed across her face, her brown eyes watching him.

“It's dark in here.” She brushed her long fingers over a panel of switches.

James squinted against the light and watched her move about the apartment. “Sorry, I didn't get

a hold of you sooner, babe. Turns out I don't have reception on the water. Spent the whole day hauling traps with Tucker.”

Maya slid her keys and phone across the counter and joined him on the couch. “I was annoyed at first, but I'm fine now. As long as you make it up to me.” She crossed her legs and moved her body to face James on the couch.

James took her hand and rubbed his thumb in small circles, massaging her fingers. He told her about his day with Tucker, and when he mentioned the tickets and the coast guard, she rolled her eyes. She took a look at the ticket and held on to it.

“What did you do tonight?” James asked.

Maya curled into James's shoulder and her head settled by his neck. “I met up with a couple of the detectives at Kelly's Rowe over there in Dover. Sam asked how you were doing.”

James kissed her forehead with dry lips.

“Sam said you called some complaints in to the department. Said you were pretty fired up about the way they were treating a kid,” Maya said, without looking at James.

James shook his head remembering the boy's parents telling him about the way they'd treated their son. “I don't like the way some of the cops treat the kids. I've seen the hand cuff marks.” He knew he was crossing lines here. She was almost as loyal to her department as she was to him. “It was just a small weed possession charge, honestly, treating the kid like a criminal? Someone has to complain.”

“You don't know the whole story, James. The guys on our department are softies compared to other departments. Believe me, you should see these detectives out of Boston. Now they're real pieces of work: total brutes.”

They both looked at the TV anchor woman as she started a new story. “A man in Lawrence attacked his mother and two sisters tonight with a machete, killing the mother and one of the girls. The

youngest child is in critical condition in Mass General.”

James watched as they played interviews with the neighbors. One of them said, “I can't believe it. I see him every day. He's always been such a nice guy.”

“They always say 'he's the nice guy,’” Maya said. “But those are the ones you have to look out for.”

James tasted a sourness in his mouth as he listened to the way the report tried to reconstruct the scene all the while thinking about Maya's comment. “Hey, I'm a nice guy, you don't see me running around on a killing spree.”

The anchor woman droned in the background; all of a sudden Maya became excited. “Turn this up, James! Turn this up!” Maya leaned closer to the TV.

A young man with a square jaw began a news story. He was broadcasting beside the busy Mass turnpike. “Massachusetts and New Hampshire state troopers have been on the lookout for drug traffickers supposedly bringing heroin across the border in large quantities. The two states are working hand in hand with detectives and drug task force teams on both sides of the border who are trying to halt the spread of this dangerous drug.”

A scientist-type spoke next. “Heroin is derived from the poppy plant. It is highly addictive and can easily be lethal if introduced to the body.”

The anchor woman spoke next. “At a public conference, held today in New Hampshire, the Portsmouth Police Chief Gary McCourt spoke out about his plan to combat the trafficking and illegal sale of heroin.”

Chief McCourt's face came to focus. He was flanked by police and detectives. He spoke into five different microphones. Maya jumped out of her seat and scrambled over to the television. She rubbed the screen to draw James's attention to a figure cut off at the edge.

“That's me. I was standing right there!”

James laughed at her excitement. He could make out her hair and the crease of her face.

“I’m on TV!” Maya said. Her enthusiasm heightened as the camera panned out and showed her in full.

Although they weren't friends, he had met Chief McCourt several times. The man was a slow talker who always dressed well. His face was clean shaven, save for a neatly trimmed mustache. When he changed his expressions four long trenches sprouted across his forehead. His thinning hair was much like the men around him, cut military standard, high and tight.

James listened to the tail end of what the chief was saying. “This is a war, one that is happening all over the country. The best thing that we can do is to spread the information that we have so the public is aware of the dangers of this and other drugs. At this time we are working very closely with several police departments and are confident in our plans to halt the spread of this highly addictive and lethal drug.”

The news flipped back to the anchor room. “You should have been a movie star, babe,” James said.

Maya settled back on the couch, curling up into his chest, and they shared a kiss. James could taste the hint of wine on her breath. He was surprised that he actually didn't mind the flavor. He kissed her again hard, this time savoring the taste.

James held her sleepy gaze and felt a sudden sexual urgency rise from his toes, to his head, and back down again, settling just below his waist. Goosebumps prickled about his skin. Maya's sleepy eyes opened larger; she released her hair out of the tightly-coiled, messy bun. The dark brown hair fell over her face transforming her into a wild creature. The warmth of her hands smoothed his chilled skin and stirred his nerves as she massaged his thighs. Wordlessly they began stripping until they were both vulnerable. Her chest rose and fell with each breath. His palms rubbed while fingers groped her two soft mounds of breast.

They took their time, exploring each other with their lips and teeth. When they could no longer resist James slowly eased his body into hers. Their two bodies thoroughly tangled within each other. The couch was as good a place as any.

They found refuge in each other, throwing themselves into thrusts and enjoying every caress. Passion unfolded as new fertile land was plowed, only to be turned over, and repositioned. Maya cooed and James sucked in air greedily. Fighting for dominance and struggling in a battle of lust; it was Maya who released the first sigh and James's followed shortly after.

He put his arm around her and they both breathed the damp air of their hotbox apartment, whose open windows offered only humidity. They lingered on the couch, both their bodies were slick. They relished the fading sensations, still within, among the velvety cushions of the couch sharing salty wine kisses.

James was suddenly woken when Maya tore away from him. "What's is it?"

"Shh!" Maya said waving a hand at him.

She was sitting up and her arms crossed over her breasts. The news flashed a face on the TV. "Authorities are saying that this man, Marcus Cooper, is suspected of killing a dog in Seabrook, New Hampshire." James blinked and sat with Maya. Maya's father's face filled the screen, his black skin was hidden behind the nest of overgrown, black, steel wool hair. His eyes were very much the same as Maya's, but were filled with deep condemnation.

Maya hid her face in her hands and turned away from the TV. "Look at his face, he has no idea what's going on . . . like he's living in a different world."

James held her tight, his arms shielding her bare skin. He gave his future father-in-law one last look, then smoothed Maya's hair. "We're the only family we'll ever need," James said.

Maya nodded and dried her tears.

Chapter 8

It was 5:45 the next night when James walked into the Monroe Recreational Center. He left the office later than usual and hadn't thought to change into his gym cloths. Ally sat at her desk locked in an argument with her boyfriend. She pulled the glowing cell phone off her ear, left it on the desk, and asked how James was doing.

James said he was doing just fine as he bent down to sign the paper. The sound of a voice living in the green cell phone's speaker seemed to grow louder. Ally spun the phone a few times toying with the frustrated guy on the other end, then put the phone back to her ear with a roll of her eyes.

As he walked away he heard Ally's hushed voice. "It was a guy at work. Oh, my God, he's like forty or something. I'm definitely not hooking up with him. Jealous much?"

Forty? Really? James walked through the court. The boys were clustered together. The basketballs were silent on the ground like balloons after a party. The boys' hushed chattering seemed odd. James didn't see any staffers around. The boys looked at James. He saw several unmistakable frowns of concern. He acknowledged them with a dead wave.

The restroom was in a small hallway right off the basketball court. He pushed the moldy colored green door and stepped into the bathroom. The walls were encased in thousands of square inch porcelain, white tiles that over the years had cracked and yellowed. Even the urinals, scoops out of the wall, were lined with tiled skin like the scales of a massive snake. James heard a shuffling of feet in one of the stalls. He went into the big handicap stall at the end of the row, unzipped his duffel bag, and pulled out his gym clothes. There was more movement in the next stall over.

A body pushed against the wall accompanied by a voice. "Shit."

A small object hit the ground and skittered its way into James's stall. He stared at the wicked-looking syringe at his feet. The small plastic plunger was pushed all the way to the bottom. The black

lines striping its side indicated it could hold five milliliters. Underneath the plastic there was an amber brown film, left over residue. The metal needle at the end had an ugly, cold, metallic shine.

James instinctively kicked the viscous-looking instrument. It settled in the farthest corner of his stall, where it blended into ages of unswept dirt and shadows. He ducked his head down and saw there were two sets of sneakers under the next stall.

James froze. Maybe it was for insulin? The thought felt as false as wooden teeth, but he held on to the idea as he stepped out of his stall and knocked on the one next to his. "I saw the needle, open up boys," he said, with what he hoped was the correct level of authority in his voice.

"Hey man," a boy said, desperation shaking his voice. "That thing was already on the ground when we—I mean, I, was in here. I was just kicking it out of my stall."

James knew what the boy wanted. He wanted James to go away. James wished he could. He already pictured the consequences lining up in his head. "Open up, this is the last time I'm going to tell you," James said, trying to sound like a drill instructor.

"I'm shitting, man. I'm shitting! Don't come in here. Oh, fuck!" The voice changed from aggravated to surprised as one of the boys fell to the ground. It sounded as if someone dropped a heavy piece of prime rib onto a stone cutting board. A sickening crack of bone meeting hard tile. James ducked down and saw a boy's face motionless on the ground. There was blood oozing from his mouth. His still body forced into an awkward angle.

"Open this door right now! He's hurt!" James felt anger and adrenaline burn through him as if fire burning through a gas line. James heard the lock slide and the green stall door folded inward. The boy who had unlocked the door was bent over trying to wake up his friend.

James made a quick assessment. He asked the conscious boy what had happened as he fell down to his knees, his knee caps scraping against the lines of the tile. The kid's hands were shaking and his freckled face went white. He tried explaining, but he stumbled over his own tongue. His bloodshot

eyes were scrambling for a way out. Thin lanky bones stretched over his blanched skin. James had seen him around the center before. He couldn't think of his name. The boy who was face down on the floor was more familiar. Derek Fanning.

Derek Fanning was a good kid, a kid who seemed more an adult in his humor and his way of talking. He was immature, but lived a carefree existence most likely because his teachers liked him. Derek knew what was expected of him. He'd been around the center for years. He didn't play basketball, but he would hang out in the game room, or sit on the bleachers and listen to music. James always liked to strike up philosophical debates with him, challenging Derek's smarts. Derek Fanning *was* a good kid.

James pointed at the conscious boy. "Go call 9-1-1, and get another adult in here fast."

The kid stepped over Derek's body and ran out of the bathroom. James slid out his own cell phone, dialed 9-1-1, and pressed the speaker button. He grabbed Derek by the shirt and gently rolled him onto his back. He was limp and showed no signs of life. James grabbed his collar and dragged him out of the stall into a clear patch of floor. James heard the phone ring over the speaker.

"9-1-1 dispatch, what is your emergency?"

"Listen. I'm at the Monroe Recreational Center, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I've got a kid, a boy, I think he's fifteen. He's unconscious, I think he OD-ed, I mean overdosed."

James heard the dispatch woman's voice come alive on the phone. "The Monroe Recreational Center, yes. I'm going to send emergency personnel there immediately, please stay on the line, sir. Can you tell me if he's breathing?" Her question echoed off the tiles of the bathroom.

James moved Derek's long, scrubby hair out of his face and put his own face next to the Derek's bloody mouth. The mandatory CPR training he'd taken in the office two summers ago was slowly coming back to him. He put his fingers on the boy's neck to find a pulse. He jabbed his fingers around feeling nothing but clammy lifeless skin. James got his face so close to Derek's cold purple lips that his

own cheek brushed against them.

“Sir, is he breathing?” the dispatcher asked.

“No, he isn't breathing, and I have no, well, I'm pretty sure there's no pulse. Should I do CPR?”

James asked.

“Yes, I will talk you through it. Give him two rescue breaths, now.”

James wiped the fresh blood off of Derek's face with his shirt sleeve. He blew into the open mouth. The chest didn't rise. Was it the blood? No! Wait. He clasped Derek's nose with his thumb and index finger and blew two breaths, which each caused Derek's Metallica shirt's red lettering to rise up.

James looked at the phone and shouted, “Compressions now right? Thirty and two?” He was eager to start; he felt as if he was wasting time. Where was the rec staff?

“Yes, thirty compressions and two breaths until he shows signs of life or the medical personnel relieve you. I will be on the line. Don't worry, the ambulance and police are already on the way. They will be there soon.”

“Okay,” James said.

James found the spot on his chest, clasped his own hands and counted out loud with every compression. “One, two, three, four”

When James got to thirty he gave two more quick rescue breaths. Derek's lips were cold and had become a splotchy, blue color. The same color was taking over his face. The chest was rising, but Derek wasn't. James continued giving the compressions. Finally, someone came in. It was Brian. He slid to his knees beside James staring as James was pushing down on the meager chest.

“Jesus Christ, it's Derek. What the hell happened?”

James didn't answer him until he got to his next thirty, too afraid to lose count; he didn't want to screw up.

Derek's ripped jeans were rolled up at the bottoms. He wore gray converse sneakers that shook

every time James pushed down on his chest. James blew in another two rescue breaths and yelled at the phone. “When is that ambulance going to get here?”

The voice on the phone resurfaced. “They're two minutes out.”

“I'll go show them how to get in here,” the director said and took off running.

James pumped Derek's chest. It was quiet in the bathroom. The sound of James's efforts were the only noise. As he gave compressions he tried to work up a prayer, but nothing came to him. Any second now. He's going to cough and snap out of it, just like in the movies. Come on, come on, come on!

It was as if he was pressing down on a lifeless fish. James was a solitary pale silhouette under the halogen lights. The tiles dug hard into his knees; he could feel his arms start to tire and get heavy. He blew in another two breaths. James knew he was losing the battle, yet he struggled on.

“One, two, three, four . . . damn it! Derek, you can't die. I won't let you!”

James heard the shoes thrum across the court. His final moments with Derek. He pushed hard, trying to get his little heart going. Derek's face showed no signs of life. His long hair was parted down the middle and fell backwards limply. His cold face was peaceful, as if he were sleeping in the snow. The few trace freckles that were stamped under his eyes and over the bridge of his nose revealed his innocence. The dark blood coming out of the hole in his left forearm was something else. Something evil that was polluting his young fragile body.

“Derek, I need you to wake up. Don't give in. Don't die! Please.” James heard himself say after he blew another two rescue breaths.

“In here. He's in here!” Brian held the bathroom door open as the blue-uniformed EMTs funneled through the door. Two men and one woman who came down beside James. One of the men put down a big plastic machine with wires and electrodes. He prepared the machine as the woman came over to James and put her gloved hands on his shoulder. “Sir, we have it from here.”

James didn't stop.

“Sir! You need to move aside.”

The woman pushed her way into position, shoving James, and took over compressions. James felt his face boil. His only thought was to throw her across the room. A thick forearm locked around James's chest and pulled him away.

“I'm fine. I'm fine! Let go.” He shook Brian's hold and held his own left hand. He watched them as they cut open Derek's shirt and started sticking electrodes on his body, while another man hooked up a bag valve mask to an oxygen bottle.

“How long has he been unconscious?” the woman asked.

“I don't know. Eight or nine minutes?”

“You know what he was doing?” the man working the bag-valve mask asked.

“There was a needle, and his arm, I think he OD-ed.”

They slid James's glowing cell phone out of the way. Suddenly he remembered the dispatcher. He grabbed his phone off the floor. “The EMTs are here, they took over CPR, what should I do?”

“They will take over from here, thank you for your help.” She disconnected and James stuffed the phone into his pocket.

Brian's eyes were wide, enhanced by his thick lenses.

James felt dreamy and light-headed. “The other kid—I don't know his name—red-haired kid. I sent him to get you. He uh . . . I don't know, he was in there and part of it. I think it's heroin.”

Brian put a hand on James's shoulder. “You should go out in the gym, police are here and they'll probably want to talk to you about it. Just head out there and take a seat. You did a great job, James. We're lucky you were here to find him.” He put emphasis into his words.

The EMTs moved away from Derek's body. “I'm clear, your clear, we're all clear,” the woman

said.

“Delivering shock,” the other EMT said, as he pushed a button.

Derek's body shifted for a second, shaking itself under the power of the electricity. The EMTs jumped back into CPR, hunching over the pitiful form.

The director put a hand on his shoulder, but James shook it off and left the bathroom. He felt as if he were being lifted out of his body. His shoes felt awkwardly loose, the sides scraping his feet, the bottoms rough against the soles of his feet. The basketball court was empty. The kids must have been ushered out. James went to the nearest wall and put his back to it. His body slid down till he reached the wooden planks of the floor. Two policemen came through and propped the doors open in the court and again in the lobby. James could hear the sounds of idling diesel engines outside. The two policemen started walking in long, deliberate strides in James's direction. When they were close James looked up in time to see them head past and push down the hall where the bathroom was.

James looked down at his hands. He could hardly recognize them as his own. They shook like maple leaves in an autumn wind. He tried to calm himself with breathing, but found that he couldn't rid himself of the shaking. In the bathroom, the EMTs were still trying to restart Derek's heart. James put his hands on the back of his neck and slumped forward between his knees.

“James.”

James rubbed his temples with his eyes closed. He thought he heard someone call his name. Was it in his head? He wasn't sure. It didn't matter.

“James, honey, look at me. Are you all right?” It was Maya's voice.

He saw her standing there as if summoned up by his imagination. She was dressed in a gray suit. Her blouse was tucked in and the black handgun strapped to her waist came into view when she bent down to get close to him. James knew her as no one else on the police department knew her. He knew her secrets, her fragility, her tenderness, and her touch. She wasn't a hardened detective right

now, she was his concerned lover. The better part of him, his partner for life.

“James, are you hurt?”

Hurt? Why would he be hurt? He remembered the blood on his sleeve. “It's not my blood, it's . . . Derek's.”

All at once his only desire was to get out of the gym. He rose backwards and leaned his shoulder blades against the wall to steady himself. He looked at Maya, feeling a wave of nausea. She was so beautiful, her eyes were sharp.

He tilted forward to draw her close to him when another EMT entered the gym pushing a stretcher. Its wheels spun over the gym floor towards them. The man nodded at James, who must have looked awful, and then at Maya who for the EMT was just some detective dealing with a witness. He, too, pushed past them into the hall heading to the bathroom. James heard orders being barked.

Thirty seconds later, Derek came out, riding the stretcher attached to a web of wires, a plastic tube sticking out of his mouth that the bag-valve mask squeezed air through. They continued CPR as they wheeled him out of the gym and to the ambulance. Too much time.

Maya embraced James. James's own body felt as stiff and cold as a cadaver. He fought off the feeling of revulsion and focused on reading the plaque hanging on the wall behind Maya. “In loving memory of Theodore “Teddy” Monroe, 1940-2007, who established the Monroe Recreational Center as a safe haven for the youth of Portsmouth.”

James let go of Maya and told her he wanted to go outside. He put his shaking hand in her firm grasp as if they were on a date. They walked out together. The evening temperature was in the seventies, yet James was freezing. He stopped to sit on the outside steps. The ambulance had already left; he could hear the sirens in the distance. After a minute they faded away completely.

The police cars remained. Several passing policemen glanced at him, waiting, and watching. They would want some answers. James would have very little to say to them. While he was with

Maya, they didn't approach. He looked down at his own unfamiliar palm. It shook, while the other, in Maya's grasp, was the only thing keeping him connected to the world. The world of blue and white flashing lights. Of police cruisers and yellow tape.

Chapter 9

James gave the Portsmouth detectives a detailed story of what had happened. He retold the same events to three different detectives until they were satisfied. They told him they wanted him downtown so they could get another account of the report there. Maya stepped in telling them that he was done for tonight. One detective, Wade Copley, made to argue with her, but she gave him a look. Standard protocols didn't apply here.

Maya told him to leave his moped behind; they would pick it up in the morning. James argued that he was fine and the ride would help him clear his head. His hands were no longer shaking. Her face still appeared concerned, but she agreed if she could follow him home.

He listened as the engine worked. His half helmet had a loose neck strap that smacked James repeatedly in the face. He barely felt the sting as it worked his cheeks over. He did, however, feel memories crawling up into his skull. In an effort to cast the images away, he shook his head, as if the memories were as real and physical as rain in his hair. The twisted face of his father. A man long since dead from rotten kidneys. James knew it wasn't just his kidneys. Every part of the man his father had been was rotten. He heard his voice, which even when sober was slurred and thick with anger. Especially when he called James's name. "James! Get your ass down here."

James had always looked at the man as garbage.

His father recognized the look. "What the fuck you looking at, retard? You got something to say to me?"

James was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. He couldn't stop the looks though. His face had always given him away.

“Going to need you all Saturday, Sunday, and Monday,” his father had said.

“I've got school Monday.”

“Nope, you're going to be roofing the house and garage with me.”

At this point his mother would step in. “Jim, he needs to go to school. Can't you do it yourself Monday?”

James remembered how his father would turn on his mother. The air around his father would be like a flash-over. The vein on his father's head would appear, an ugly root that cracked up his scalp like lightning. Whenever the vein showed up James imagined crushing it in between his thumb and index finger.

James's palms were sweating on Sally Jay's grips. He felt as if his Adam's apple had become a lump of coal. His mirrors showed him that Maya was still behind him, protecting him. His eyes were forced to see another home movie memory.

His father's heavy backhand always seemed to catch his mother off guard. James would try to stop his father as he began working her face over with blows that would smash and bruise her delicate skin. His father had been a police officer. His attacks were quick and punishing, made to subdue. James would step up to his father's thick, stocky frame to defend his mother and his father would lift him up by his shirt, tossing him to the floor. A knee would pin James to the kitchen floor. The yellow, linoleum tiles, whose floral prints became engraved on James's face, were crushed into his cheeks. The more James struggled the more his father would force the knee into his spine. James would yell in pain and shift his body, trying to get away, but it always made the pain worse. Then his mother would try to help, trying to pull her berserk husband off. She would take the bastard's attention from James long enough to let him to squirm away.

James slumped over Sally Jay's handle bars and began tilting towards the yellow dashes striping the road. Headlights and a furious engine rushed past in the other lane. James pulled himself up and straightened Sally Jay out.

James's father never spoke a word when he was beating them. It would be a rather odd scene to someone who'd just walked into the room. James's father's face would shake, eyes bulging above his red cheeks. The vein on his forehead beating faster. His whole visage twisted into a hard knot. After his first couple of beatings, James recognized that there was something inside his father, tormenting him. James could see another person in his bloodshot eyes. A sinister man who inhabited the forty-two-year-old cop like a vessel. James knew the look well, as a cow knew the feel of a brand. Even after they'd thrown clods of dirt on his father's coffin, his memory remained, looming over James's shoulder. Sometimes James turned around and expected to see the old man with fists balled like twin mallets.

James almost drove by his street. He turned onto his road and parked in front of the apartment. Maya pulled in behind him. When they had moved in the landlord thought it was great that they had a cop in her building. Her words had been, "People feel safer knowing there's a cop on the street." James had wanted to laugh.

In the dull glow of their apartment James found Maya's hand. She looked at him and appeared to hesitate.

"What?" James asked.

"I got a call from the medic. He didn't make it."

"Oh," James said.

"I'm so sorry, James."

"I'm going to shower now."

"Want me to join you?" Maya asked.

“No.” He hoped he didn't sound mean.

Hot, gushing lines of water combed his body. He let the water collect in his mouth and swished it around, then spit it out, hitting the knobs like a sharp shooter. James hoped he would cry, or vomit in here where no one would see him. It didn't happen. It still didn't feel real.

He turned the hot water knob a full rotation to the left. It was so hot that he could feel it burning away the dead skin. Steam rose and he lingered in the scalding water, completely ridding him of filth, as if a metal rake being dragged across his body. He thought of the lobsters, the way they'd screamed when they were immersed in the boiling water. Were they screams of pain or pleasure?

When he turned the water off and drew the curtain, he stared into a thick cloud of steam. James hadn't bothered to turn the light on when he'd come in the bathroom. He looked into the heart of the mist. James swung his hand through the sheet of steam. He tried to clasp the trailing wisps, but they escaped him.

When he flicked the light switch the fan kicked on as well. He tried to see his reflection, but the mirror was completely fogged up. James lifted his fingers and drew in two eyes about where his eyes would have been. He thought of the image drawn on the dusty board game at Tucker's house. He drew a sad mouth where his mouth would have been.

From the bedroom he heard Maya's humming in the kitchen. Whenever Maya cooked she hummed as she said her mother used to do.

When they were dating, James had told her how his father had been an alcoholic and used to hit him and his mother. He'd told her these things with little feeling. How his mother had seemed to wither in the years that followed his father's death. James had thought that with their abuser gone, that they would both flourish. Quite the opposite. James put off going to college a year just to stay with his mother and comfort her. After a year, he gave in to her pleas to go to college. He went to school locally at the University of New Hampshire and stayed in his childhood home to watch over his mother. His

mother was glad he was in school, but sad that he wasn't being able to fully live the college life. James said he didn't mind. He'd sworn off drinking and parties.

His mother died of cancer in his senior year. Doctors said she'd had it for years. Too late for treatment. James knew it was more than her body; her will to live was fading.

James changed into sweats with a zip-up sweat shirt. He walked over to where Maya was cooking steak tips and boiling potatoes, giving her a hug from behind. She had changed into tights, and a long sleeve-shirt with the sleeves pulled up. She put her wooden spoon down and stroked his arm.

"Aren't you still on the clock?" James asked.

Maya turned to face him. She gathered up his hand in hers. "Sam covered for me tonight. I take his morning shift tomorrow. I can take you in with me and we'll get your story down so you can be done with it."

"Thanks, babe. I'm lucky to have a girl like you."

"I'm lucky to have a boy like you, baby." She ran her hand through his damp hair and down the length of his neck. Her nails dragged down his back and came back up. They kissed and he told her he wasn't very hungry. She made him up a plate with steak, mashed potatoes, and corn. He ate it dutifully.

When she was asleep, James stole out of bed and to sit outside on the steps of his apartment complex. He looked up at the stars and once again saw Derek's lifeless body on the tile of the bathroom floor. He saw the dirty needle on the floor and the dark blood oozing out his arm with each compression. The blue lips that he had separated to try to get Derek to breath again.

James felt the steak and potatoes heave in his stomach. He stood up and ran over to the end of the resident parking lot and kept going until he was in a small grove of trees. Bent over, leaning an arm to steady himself on the trunk of a white birch. The contents of his stomach felt like thick tar, and he tried to will his throat to heave the mess out of him. It grew heavier and heavier.

“Get out of me. Damn it! Get the hell out of me!”

His body began to shake and tears fell into the moss covered ground. He punched his stomach three times, each time harder than the last, causing a fit of dry heaves and coughs. It made the pain go from bad to agonizing. He dropped to the ground clutching his stomach and curled up like a grub; he concentrated on breathing. When that didn't work he focused on the night sounds. One ear to the canopies and the other to the ground. He heard crickets rubbing their legs together. Other nameless insects tossed their rhythms into the night. The sounds grew louder and then he heard a twig snap at the edge of his grove where the forest grew deeper. The insects went still, as did his own heart.

“Who's there?” He threw the question into the dark trees. A shadow separated itself from a tree and retreated.

Another bout of pain erupted from his stomach. He bent double. His ear to the ground felt the earth move, footfalls from the dark figure. Was it his imagination or was that a person? The insects resumed. James stayed curled up in the grove for an hour before he went back into his apartment where he cleaned himself up, and he eased himself back into bed.

Maya woke when his weight shifted the bed springs. She put a hand on his cheek.

“Baby, you're cold,” she said.

James shed his sweatshirt and sweatpants and pulled the covers over himself. “I'll warm up.”

“Are you all right?” she asked.

James thought about the question. He got closer to her and held her warm body against his. Maya preferred to sleep without any clothes. James loved her for that. He had never imagined himself loving another person as much as he loved her. He kissed her cheek lightly and whispered his answer. “As long as I have you, I am.”

Chapter 10

Tucker lifted the trap out of the water and slid it down with the other two traps of the trawl. He popped the boat in neutral and flipped the top of each trap. His hands worked quickly, flipping out the lobsters that were shorts from the keepers. He filled the bait bags and closed the lids on each pot. He'd been working nights for Winchester Security Incorporated. They had him placed in a hotel. Just as James had said, it was an easy job. Tucker made his rounds at night and on occasions had to quiet some drunk college kids. Tucker got along with the other people working in the hotel. They all seemed to fill their time reading or playing games on their cell phones.

Not Tucker, though. He knew if he sat down for too long he would fall asleep. Lobstering in the day and working at night was taking a toll on him. By week's end he was ready to sleep for days.

Tucker put the boat in gear and scanned the water for a likely spot. He tried to put his pots in the shallow, rockier places that other boats didn't dare. He turned the boat sharp, banged a u-ey, then dropped the pots off in his wake. The season was finally picking up. Tucker looked at the five keepers he got from the last pull and banded them as his boat slowly trolled out.

When he rounded the bend there was another lobster boat bobbing about a clutch of buoys. Tucker noticed several men milling about the deck. Tom Braxton's boat. Tom had been in the lobstering business since Tucker's father's day. Braxton was ornery as a bull kicked in the junk.

Tucker wondered if he would become like Tom in another twenty years. If he worked this many hours and lost this much sleep, he might not have a choice in the matter. Still, as tired as he felt and crappy as Tucker's life might be, he and his family were getting there. Were making payments on the mortgage again. The bank manager had been a kindhearted woman. She suggested they try to sell the property at a loss. Tucker explained that it was his family's home, and that they aimed to keep it to pass on to Kevin.

They wanted to start hacking away at the debt as much as the bank did. One payment down.

“Hundreds more to go,” Tucker said out loud.

Tucker was taking Melanie and Kevin to the beach all day Saturday. Melanie and Kevin would collect sea glass and boogie board, while Tucker was going to lie on the beach with a cooler full of beers and swim only when he got too hot.

Tucker guided his boat closer to his traps. He looked up and spied suspicious gray clouds. Tucker got closer to Braxton's boat whose name—*The Water Angel*—was painted in black, sloppy letters above its keel. It always annoyed Tucker to see such an ugly paint job for such a beautiful name. Tucker had never figured Tom for a deeply religious type. Braxton could call it *Satan's Cock* for all Tucker cared, but at least give it a good paint job. As he got closer he saw one man on deck holding a knife turn to watch *The Periwinkle* approach. That man notified his companion, who spun around to stare right at Tucker. *The Water Angel* probably had five-feet on *The Periwinkle* and a few more in girth. Tucker saw Tom in *The Water Angel's* wheelhouse, but he didn't recognize either of the guys that he had working for him.

No one acknowledged Tucker as he inched around them to locate his own buoys. Tucker found one of his blue and white buoys drifting in his direction. He reached down and snagged it. Tucker almost fell over, expecting to encounter the usual resistance. The line had been cut. He let the buoy clatter across *The Periwinkle's* deck. “I hope this is some kind of coincidence,” he said to himself. The fact that it had not yet drifted away was a clear sign that it wasn't. A small surge of adrenaline rolled through Tucker's limbs.

He saw the other buoy he'd left in this cove. It bobbed its way around the end of *The Water Angel*. Tucker could already tell that it was moving too freely in the water to be attached to a pot. He got right up next to the buoy and gave the guys in Braxton's boat a wave. He snatched the buoy and the men froze in place watching him. The buoy came up light and Tucker made a show of studying the straight cut end of the line.

Tom Braxton started to put his boat into gear to drive off.

Tucker hollered at his broad backside. “Eyo, Tom!”

Tom pretended to not hear and the men on his boat turned their backs to him. Tucker couldn't tell what nationality the men were. His best guess was Mexican, but he was never good at that sort of thing. He'd never seen anybody like them working traps out of Portsmouth before.

Tucker pushed the throttle lever down for a second, then let up, and steered alongside *The Water Angel*. Tom was now forced to notice him.

“What the hell you want, Flynn?” Tom was dangerously overweight. His second chin shook as he barked at Tucker.

“Wanted to see if you knew anything about my two buoys over here. Both of them cut, seems like it must've been just minutes ago,” Tucker said. He let his anger show.

“Wouldn't know anything about that, Flynn,” Tom said. “There was a boat in here when we came, sport boat, whizzing all over the fucking place. Kid driving it, maybe you should take it up with him. Little fucker drove towards the beach, if you're interested.”

Tucker looked at the men who were now staring right at him. They all held the same dry expression: glazed, dark eyes that didn't offer anything.

“Cut the shit, Tom. You know as well as I do that these were cut intentionally. What the hell you cutting my buoys for?”

Tucker felt *The Water Angel* start to drift away from his boat, so he took a line and wrapped it around a cleat. They two boats rocked against each other, peeling paint away as their sides rubbed.

Enough to get Tom to move his bulk out of the wheelhouse and stand in Tucker's face. “Why don't you go find that sport boat, Flynn? 'Cause if you're gonna stick around here and piss me off there's going to be more than lines cut.” Tom's hands were on his wide hips. The men on his boat got closer.

Tucker reached under the rail and scooped up the gaff. The pole was aluminum and light, but at the end was a fierce hook that was plenty sharp. Tucker had used the gaff to pull up large stripers, blue fish, and tuna. This was the first time he contemplated using it on a man.

The men aboard *The Water Angel* looked at the gaff Tucker held like a staff. They didn't seem intimidated. Tucker felt another surge of adrenaline hit his toes and then fire back and slam into his stomach. "Just because I don't want in on your greasy deals doesn't mean I'm going to be pushed around by you, or any of your friends, Braxton." Tucker's voice getting louder as he spoke.

Tom leaned closer to Tucker. His bulk swayed his own boat causing it to rub deeper against *The Periwinkle's* side. "You're the only guy not involved now, Flynn; it makes the rest of us worry. Guys are nervous, Flynn, so we got to let you know what will happen if you don't join up." Tom's fat face got wider when he smiled. He had a grizzled beard. The hair on his head had the same gray and looked like a bird's nest within the red netting of his hat. Tom eyed the gaff then drew a gun from his pocket. It was a revolver with a snub nose that stared at Tucker's chest.

Tucker's heart raced, but he stood his ground. He watched Tom's eyes; they went back to staring at Tucker's gaff.

"Put that thing away, you look like a fucking farmer with a pitch fork."

The foreign men behind Tom snickered, crossing arms and squaring up.

Tucker couldn't say anything; he just kept eye contact with Tom, waiting for it to be over. His hackles stood up.

Tom slipped the gun back in his pocket casually. "You know it doesn't have to be this way, Flynn. I knew your father. He would have jumped at this deal if he was still around. You know it's true. How much you still owe on that house of his? More than it's worth I bet. Join us and you'll have that debt clear in a matter of weeks. You could buy that wife of yours some nice jewelry instead of having her hawk hers."

Tucker gripped the gaff tighter. His legs were trembling. No words came to his lips; he willed himself to speak, but his rage and his fear kept his jaw locked into place.

“If you change your mind, and decide to make the right choice—for your family's sake—you know where to find us.” Tom turned around and headed back to his wheelhouse. One of the foreigners cut the rope connecting the boats, and Tom dropped his engine back into gear. *The Water Angel* started pulling away. Tom called back to Tucker. “I wouldn't waste my time checking your buoys off Seal Rock, if I was you.”

Tucker threw the gaff down in disgust and pounded his fist against the rail. He collected the cut buoy and snapped it in half over his knee. “Mother Fucker! Piece of shit, fat, fucking fuck, shit, fuck. Fuck. Fuck!” He slammed the butt of his fist down on the rail with each word. His boat remained in the cove, bobbing, without a purpose. The storm clouds were now right above his head and the wind was blowing over the dark waters, stirring a light chop. Instead of going back in, he went to check his last five buoys near Seal Rock, despite Tom. He wasn't surprised to find his buoys missing.

The rain spit on his neck at first, then the clouds delivered unrelenting rain that made the sea bubble and foam. Tucker had it in his mind to go find Braxton's boat, pour a bucket of gasoline on it, and burn it to ash. He held on tight to this plan the whole way back to his mooring. As he tied up his boat to the dock he saw Melanie waiting for him under an umbrella. Seeing her waiting in the rain reminded him he had more to lose than just himself. He hugged her tightly and abandoned his crazy idea. He said nothing of what had happened out on the water.

Chapter 11

James woke up groggy. Three days now separated him from Derek's death. The morning after Derek's death he'd gone down to the police station with Maya. James answered their questions,

repeating each answer several times from every angle.

Derek's death had made the news. James had grimaced at the front page head line: "Local Boy Dies of Heroin Overdose at the Monroe Recreational Center." Would parents stop sending their kids there because of this incident? James suspected some would. The whole situation made him feel guilty.

Maya had noticed; he was sure of it. She wanted him to go to the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing meeting. James was resistant, but decided he might be able to get some answers there that would help him put Derek's death behind him. Only the people directly involved with an incident were allowed to go to these meetings.

James looked over to Maya's side of the bed and saw she wasn't beside him. He heard the shower running and thought about slipping in with her; instead, he turned over and fell back asleep.

He woke up to Maya shaking his shoulder. "James, get out of bed. I don't want to be late to this meeting."

"Five more minutes."

"James, I'm serious. You need to get your ass out of bed so we can get going."

"When you put it so nicely," James said, rolling off the bed.

James got dressed in jeans and a gray tee-shirt. He slouched in the passenger seat of Maya's unmarked police car. James felt like a grumpy kid. He was completely aware of how his mood annoyed Maya, yet couldn't bring himself to care.

When they arrived James followed Maya's lead. She'd been to these sorts of meetings before. They entered a conference room and James smelled coffee. He had the sudden realization that he had forgotten to put on deodorant. An itchy anxiety crept over him. Being around all these people didn't help.

He followed his nose and spied the tiny orange light indicating hot coffee; beside it was a

vegetable platter.

James was filling a small paper plate with celery and carrot sticks when a woman slid in beside him. “Mhm . . . coffee. Nector of the gods,” she said, followed by a childish giggle. The woman was surprisingly perky for 8AM.

James sipped his coffee, then immediately recoiled his tongue. “Careful, it's hot,” James said to her.

“I'll keep that in mind,” the woman said. Her voice carried a steady tone of a karate sensei.

James couldn't tell how old she was. One of those women that could be either fifty or seventy. Her face looked young, although there were telling wrinkles surrounding her eyes. Her body was stringy, but she looked like a sturdy woman. “I didn't see you at the incident. Are you a nurse or doctor?” James asked, waiting for her to fill in the blank. It was awkward referring to Derek's death as “the incident.”

“I'm a doctor of sorts: a psychiatrist. But, no. I wasn't on scene. I'm Carol.” She offered her thin and veiny hand and gripped his hand with a firm intensity. “I lead these Critical Incident Stress Debriefings. What a mouthful that is to say every time, huh?”

Her sudden interest in him made James feel cornered. Had someone told her that he was the guy who found Derek, the sorry social worker who'd never held a boy's life in his hands. He wondered if she had latched on to him purposely. “It *is* a lot to say. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to take my seat. Place is starting to fill up.”

Carol smiled at him, her light touch of red lipstick stretched.

He wandered back to his seat nodding and giving little, quick smiles to the men and women milling about the room. He recognized the EMTs that clustered together in one part of the room and saw police officers mingling back and forth between the firefighters and detectives. James's chair had been usurped by a familiar looking face of Sam. Maya's back was to James as she leaned in to speak

with Sam. He was the only other black person on the Portsmouth Police Department. Sam had always been friendly and kind to James. He'd actually helped James with a few cases in the past. Some other cops closed their ears when James was arguing for kids. Not Sam, he always listened.

"All right, everyone please have a seat. We're going to start." It was Carol who had taken a place at the head of the linked tables.

James took a seat next to a young guy in a white polo. The logo on his polo read, "Portsmouth Fire Department." He was the EMT who had wheeled the stretcher across the gym floor. James stuck a carrot in his own mouth.

The EMT must have recognized James, as he asked how James was doing with an air of familiarity.

With the carrot sticking out the side of his mouth he answered. "I've had better weeks, but hey, it's a crazy world we live in, right?" James felt like Rodney Dangerfield with a carrot cigar.

"Seems like it sometimes," the EMT replied.

James bit down on the carrot, snapping it in half.

Carol spread her hands wide. "I want to thank you all for coming to this Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Carol Wayneright, and I'm a licensed psychiatrist. I help the state conduct these debriefings. I also run my own private office, right here, in Portsmouth. I'll leave my cards in case anyone would like one."

Carol paused for a moment and then said, "We came here today because there was a traumatic event for us as Emergency workers and normal everyday folks alike."

James didn't see Brian anywhere. Probably dealing with the legal issues on the center's end. James pitied the guy.

"At this point I would like to let you know that I have been given the information of the incident, no names, but I'm aware that it was with a young man. I want you all to know that we are all

bound by law to keep whatever is said here private.” She paused as if to let the confidentiality settle over the group. “My goal today is to go over some important parts to managing stress.” Carol went on to talk about stress, and how a young untimely death could be more stressful than a elderly person who has lived a long life. She talked about stress and the body's response. How it could lead to sleep problems, depression, anger, and addiction.

“Does anyone have any ideas on what are the top causes of stress?” Carol posed the question.

James perked up.

“Divorce,” a firefighter said, which supplied some light laughter from the room.

“Yes, divorce is definitely top five,” Carol said.

“Medical bills,” the EMT next to James had offered up. The other EMTs nodded knowingly.

“Yes, anything medical, injuries, overwhelming bills. Definitely up there. What else?”

“Public speaking,” it was Gary McCourt, the police chief. James hadn't even noticed he was here.

Carol gave a fake wipe of her brow. “You bet ya. I'm sweating bullets right now.”

This prompted a round of chuckles from table.

“Death of a loved one.” It was Maya who had spoken.

Carol nodded. “Are there any couples in the room by chance?”

The detectives and cops looked at Maya and back at James. He raised his hand dutifully and Maya followed.

“That's great. Yes, Maya, you got the number one cause of stress. Losing a spouse.”

“We're not married yet,” Maya said sarcastically.

“—Engaged,” James said, amending the situation. He felt the sweat forming under his arms.

What a day to forget deodorant. Was this place air conditioned?

“Well congratulations you two. Yes, this leads into how stress can interfere with relationships.”

Carol led into the next portion and James felt the eyes leave him.

His legs felt restless. He sipped his coffee and then pushed it away. Caffeine probably wouldn't help calm his nerves.

“... And this can lead to a lack of sex drive,” Carol said.

He wanted to look over at Maya, but was too afraid she would be looking back at him, thinking what he didn't want her to think. He locked his eyes on Carol and listened.

“My last portion is to talk about managing the stress that you now know how to recognize. Here are my suggestions.” She gave a Mr. Universe pose. “Go out and exercise. When you work out or do something active your body releases endorphins, which we all know makes us feel better. Smile, because even if you don't feel happy, the act of smiling also releases endorphins.” Carol showed everyone in the room what a smile looked like, which was silly, but James counted more than one of the cops in the room who might actually benefit from her demonstration.

“Have a beer. I know all the medical people in the room probably know that alcohol is a depressant, but one or two beers can actually be good for relieving stress. Of course, as with many things, if done in excess it can have negative effects.”

She concluded the meeting and left her business card out at the end of the table.

James went around the table to meet Maya. He thanked Carol and swiped one of her cards off the table, nonchalantly slipping it into the safety of his pocket.

Back at their apartment James asked Maya what she wanted to do.

Maya let her hair down. “There's only one exercise I want to do with you,” Maya said, grasping James below his belt buckle.

They made love several times that day, a sure sign that things were getting back to normal.

Chapter 12

The paddle's blade, which cut through the water's surface, left miniature whirlpools spiraling in his wake. The sea kayak was more streamlined and narrow compared to the fatter river kayaks that James was used to. The long craft seemed to glide over the top of the water as if he were skating on ice. The kayak rental shop, which was a stone's skip away from BG's Boathouse, put him right back on Sagamore Creek. It'd been a festering thought that grew into a plan: with Maya at work and him with the day off, why not try kayaking?

James waved at two fishermen, a father and his yard stick-tall son, standing at the edge one of the passing docks. The father's rod suddenly bowed like thistle in the wind. Once he had the fish hooked, he thrust the rod into his son's chubby hands. The boy reeled the line in wildly, his tongue shoved out and to the corner of his mouth. The father cheered his son on and helped him lift the mackerel as it was now suspended above the water. The fish hit the dock and flapped its shining body, catching swatches of the sun on its silver belly. The boy giggled and tried to grab hold of the slippery fish.

James pushed his shades back up to the bridge of his nose and then put his paddle blades back to work. He stopped when he got to a section of the creek that opened wide. Under the water, he could make out the shapes of rocks, covered with seaweed, and some scattering of shells amid the mucky bottom. Once, James spotted a small school of minnows, most of them shorter than his pinky. Suddenly a dark shape appeared below him. It was a fish, as long as James's forearm. It cruised by James slowly, as if making a leisurely patrol. James watched its body shift back and forth, propelling the fish through the water. The signature black stripes along its side and the silvery white scales told him it was a striper. James tried to follow the thick bodied creature. He eased his paddle into the water so as not to scare it, and let his momentum bring him back to speed. The fish suddenly veered towards shore, then, as if it realized it was being followed, the striper shot towards deeper water, vanishing like

a ghostly leviathan.

The whir of an engine behind him made his ears lift. He could hear the voices clearly, as if they were only a few feet away. This was a trick that the water played.

“Go faster, go faster . . . he landed it!” The voices were coming from a speed boat. James saw a teenager at the wheel: a skinny kid with a helmet of brown hair and no shirt. Another kid, who looked much the same, was giving the driver the play-by-play of their buddy who was at the end of a tow rope. The wake boarder was carving the water, shooting through the air across the boat's wake. The driver's eyes met James's and the kid immediately smiled. James recognized something in that look, and decided he was too close to the middle of the creek for his liking. With quick windmilling strokes, he paddled towards the shore. The boy veered the boat towards James and turned sharply away.

The crooked teeth and wild eyes of the wake boarder were locked in the image of a lunatic as he used the centrifugal force and launched himself over the boat's wake that was just reaching James. James saw the front of his board reach eye level at its peak. The boy had miscalculated. James saw it in the sudden flash of horror in the kid's face, he'd jumped too soon.

James twisted away from the incoming board, and the kayak came with him. A fist full of seawater was immediately forced down his throat. Upside down and under the water he felt the tangle of the paddle and the awkwardness of his life jacket. He pushed the paddle away from him, shoving it into space. He was encased in cloudy water and a furious stream of his own bubbles. He heard the hurried thrum of the sport boat's propeller blades slicing the water; the sound rapidly faded away.

James wriggled trying to get out of the kayak. Something wouldn't let him. He was stuck. It was his foot, jammed. He would have to roll himself back to the surface. James had flipped a kayak over before, but this was his first time in an ocean kayak. His lungs began to plead for air. His mind was overloaded with frantic images and rapid half-thoughts. Survive. He tried flipping himself back

over. He felt the kayak rock, but not enough. He tried again. No good. Once more he tried shaking himself out of the kayak's grasp. The plastic cut into his leg. In his panic, steely silverfish crawled into his blurry vision. There was no one to help him. James rocked some more, starting to feel light-headed. He thrashed trying to pull his leg out. That's when he saw him. Derek Fanning. His white face submerged under the green water, his long hair floating, fully clothed in the same Metallica shirt and ripped jeans. Derek started swimming towards James. James struggled away.

He gathered the last of his strength and leaned hard and sharp with all his weight, using his hands to push against the water. The kayak rolled with him this time. His mouth momentarily breached the surface. The air came into his mouth and he forced it into his lungs before he was dunked back under. Derek was there, under the water waiting. James flipped again and got another breath of air. Then he felt his lower half release, and the kayak let go of its hold on him. He surfaced and breathed raggedly, coughing up brackish water.

With his strength drained, James let the life vest hold him up. He paddled weakly over to the flipped kayak, grabbed hold of the grip at the front and began dragging it along as he kicked towards shore. He found the paddle floating close, and he flopped his wet body with the gear on the sandy bank. For a while he lay there, eyes closed, grateful to suck in air. Derek had seemed so real. It made no sense, had he been that close to death? Some sort of oxygen deprived hallucination? He wiped the water out of his eyes and realized he'd lost his sun glasses. After so many years, he had finally lost them.

“Ahoy, there.”

James recognized the voice and looked up, his hand shading his eyes. Tucker shouted through his hands from the deck of *The Periwinkle* as he came towards James's small patch of shore.

A short time later, James and his kayak were aboard Tucker's boat, and he was telling him about his near death experience.

“Shit, man,” Tucker said. “Damn kids.”

James was about to go into it more when Tucker suddenly said, “Did you hear what happened to that kid at the rec center the other day?”

James was unexpectedly turned back to the image of Derek. “I did.”

“He overdosed I heard. You know the kid?”

“I knew him.”

“It's a damn shame.”

“It is,” James said. “I've heard things are going well for you.”

“You're damn right. Working my ass off. It's nice to have a steady paycheck coming in again.”

“How's Kevin?”

“He's been a bit mopey since the center closed down, but he's going to try out for the school basketball team once school starts back up in the fall.”

“Closed down?” This was the first news James had heard about the center. “Only for a few days or so though, right?”

“You didn't hear? Awe, man I'm sorry to be the one to tell you. The mother of the kid who died is suing the center. Turns out they're going to close down indefinitely.”

“Shit,” James said. He'd been so caught up in his own bullshit that he hadn't realized the center was in so much trouble. Out here on the water, it didn't feel right to try and grapple with the news.

“Hey, I don't know what your plans are, but I'm going to hit up the bar at BG's after I dock. You should come along.”

James agreed almost without realizing.

The restaurant was loud and packed with families in flip flops and shorts eating outside under the blue and white striped canopy. In the bar there was a collection of guys taking up a few tables in the back. They were loud and drinking pitchers of beer. The red and white checkered table clothes

made them look as if they were at a picnic. Waitresses rushing by with piles of fried seafood made James realize he had eaten very little in the last few days. Tucker and James claimed two stools at the bar.

“Two tall boys, Ingrid,” Tucker said to the bartender.

Ingrid was a brown-haired woman with a Norwegian look, who wore too much make up. James guessed she was in her mid thirties. When she smiled at Tucker she flashed her teeth, which were jagged and sharp.

When she turned around to get the beers, Tucker leaned in close and said, “Dated her in high school.” He spoke even softer saying, “Really good in the sack, but I just couldn't get over that snaggletooth, you know?”

James nodded.

Ingrid came over with the beer cans. James looked at the one she laid in front of him. The sound of her popping the top made him think of his father. He was about to push it away, deny it, then he thought of the psychiatrist's advice. What the hell? I almost died today. He lifted the can to his lips and felt the layer of froth lift for an undercurrent of heavy, amber beer. His eyes swelled for a moment with the momentary bite. He licked his lips clean.

Tucker looked at him. “Thought you didn't drink. What's the occasion?”

“Doctor's orders.”

“How'd you meet Melanie?” James asked.

Tucker took a long swig, finished his PBR in two gulps, and signaled for another. He let out a small burp before he started. “High school. Melanie got pregnant when we were young. I asked her to marry me like a good Catholic boy. Nine months later my first son showed up. Just like that, we

became a family.”

James nodded. He wanted to ask Tucker about what happened to his first son, but couldn't bring himself to ask.

Tucker's nail picked at the wood on the bar. “You know when I saw my wife holding our boy I think it finally hit me. It's not about me and my petty bullshit anymore. This little guy, this baby, was like life telling me, 'hey! You stupid prick. Get over yourself and start living for somebody else for a change.'” Tucker's voice had developed a slur.

“So you don't regret having kids? I only ask because I'm not too sure if they're for me.”

“You kidding? You'd be a great dad. As far as regrets. Fuck 'em. I pity the man that has time for regrets.”

James looked at Tucker, then away. “Hey, I got to confess something to you.”

“Shoot,” Tucker said, then sipped his fresh beer.

“The first time I met Kevin,” James said. “This is going to sound stupid.” James shook his head.

“Out with it, man!” Tucker dropped his beer can to the bar top.

“This is before I really got to know you. But I thought Kevin was getting abused.” James put his hands up. “I know, I know, it's stupid. But I saw some bruises, and that's the kind of stuff I see in my job.”

Tucker stared back at James. “You think I beat my kid?”

“No, no, no. You got it all wrong,” James said. “The bruises on his arms and legs, I thought they were from some bad parent, it's the social worker in me, the first sign of abuse and I turn into a hound dog.”

Tucker pushed his beer away from him. “Well what do you think now?”

“I think you and Melanie are wonderful parents.” James scratched his neck.

“You,” Tucker began, “Are a lousy drinking partner, pal.” He clapped James on the back.

James exhaled.

“Still,” Tucker said. “From what you've told me about your own past, I figure you ought to have the right to look into crap like that.”

James nodded then gulped the remainder of his second can of PBR. Or was it the third? He got up to leave. “You know what they say about old habits and all.”

Tucker grabbed James's wrist. “Hey, wait. We're going to take the boat out and have a picnic at Odiorne next weekend. Come out with us. Melanie wants to meet your girl.”

“I'll make it happen.” He clapped Tucker on the back of his green plaid shirt. “Have fun at work tonight.”

Tucker rolled his eyes. “Thanks. Someone has to patrol the hotel halls looking for crime.”

Outside BG's, a strong breeze blew against the door and closed it with a sharp bang behind James. The drive home was sobering. He had to work hard to keep his moped from getting blown off the road with the unrelenting wind. The alcohol traveling in his veins brought with it a numbness that circled the edge of his senses.

At home he was folding laundry in the bedroom when a curled up bit of paper fell onto the bed. It was Carol Wainwright's business card.

“I'm home,” Maya said from the other room.

James shoved the card into his wallet quickly and went back to the laundry. He grabbed her black thong from the pile of unfolded clothes, stretched it and fired it, like a slingshot, as she stepped into the room. She laughed as she defended herself from the flying lace.

Maya dropped her cuffs, gun, and badge into a lock box bolted on top of her dresser. She shed her jacket on a hanger and moved close to kiss James. After they came apart she puckered her lips.

“Have you been drinking?”

“I had a beer.” There was a look of concern on her face. “I went kayaking today and met up

with Tucker. We stopped by a bar after and had a drink.”

“I’ve never seen you drink before. I thought you were against it?”

“I’m not against drinking. I’m against abusing alcohol. That psychiatrist said a beer would help release stress.”

The hand she put on her hip went along with the look she gave him. “Yeah, I heard her.” Maya matched a pair of James’s socks and rolled them together in a ball. “Is everything okay, babe?”

“Everything’s fine, why?”

“You’ve had a lot of stress lately, and I’ve been consumed with work. Just want to check in on my man.”

James started to speak. “I—”

Maya interrupted. “Oh, look! It’s a little baby sock.” Maya held up the shrunken, white sock. above the pile, offering it to James.

James looked at the tiny bit of cotton and hesitated. No regrets, right? She dropped it into his outstretched hand and he looked at it curiously. Maybe he could handle this after all.

Maya pursed her lips then said, “We have to find the other one. It’s got to be somewhere in this pile.”

Without hesitation James said, “One at a time, babe, one at a time.”

Chapter 13

“I thought I might see you again.”

The chair he’d chosen to sit in was a big, brown, leathery brute. It felt new and the cushion he sat on sunk deep under his weight. James tried to make his body fit to the mold. His arms, wrapped around the chair’s arms, made him feel as if he was sitting in an oversized tea cup. It was hard not to

feel small as if he were a child in his father's work boots. Pins and needles begin stabbing at his finger tips. He let go of the chair's arms and laced his fingers together over his knee cap.

"I beg your pardon?" James asked.

"It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you too, Dr. Wainwright."

"Please, call me Carol."

What am I doing here? How did I get here? James thought. The silence tucked in around him; he sank deeper into his chair. It pulled him down to the carpet. She appeared to be waiting for something, hadn't he done his part in calling and scheduling a meeting? Wasn't it *her* job to get this thing started?

"What brought—"

"Tell me—"

Their words collided.

"Ladies first," James said.

Carol smiled. "What I was going to ask was what brought you here today?"

"I needed someone to talk to . . . not my fiancée, and not a friend."

"I'm honored you chose me. What's on your mind?"

James had tried to prepare his words before he came here. He'd phrased the questions so well in his apartment, and said them out loud to himself on the ride over here, but somehow the words had slipped out of his head.

"To be honest I'm not sure." Maybe he was wrong in coming here. "Maybe, I just need someone to talk to."

"All right, let's talk," she said. She switched to crossing her other leg and held her chin with her left hand.

They talked about work and Maya and exchanged tidbits of their lives. It was all light until Carol said, "I've noticed you hadn't mentioned anything about your own family or your childhood. I'd love to hear about how you grew up."

This is where he would have to step carefully. The glass was all around his bare feet now. "I grew up in Portsmouth. My family was lower middle class." He paused.

Carol gave him a look that said to go on.

He obliged. "I was an only child. As good a kid as any really. Not spoiled or needy or anything like that. I avoided trouble for the most part."

"Tell me about your parents."

"My parents have both passed away. My father died of kidney disease and my mother passed away a couple years later to cancer."

"What were they like?"

"My mother was a kind woman, she would help anyone out if she could. She was beautiful inside and out. My father and mother were both from Massachusetts. They met each other on vacation—a sports bar in Florida. They fell for each other, got married, and had me."

"Your mom sounds like a gentle woman. What was your dad like? Was he like her?"

"He was strict, but then again, his father was a mean son of bitch, so I count myself lucky." He was certain she was waiting for him to get to the point. She wasn't an idiot, and James wasn't fooling anyone. He'd taken her card, called her office, set up an appointment, and agreed to pay the fee. Might as well tell her. "From time to time he would give me and my mother a ride when he was drunk or pissed off."

Carol wasn't visibly moved at this. "You think that might have something to do with why you're here?"

Of course this is why I'm here, he thought. "It might have something to do with it."

“How did you feel when your dad was hitting you and your mother?”

James sighed. What he wanted to say was that he felt pathetic, useless, as if he'd done something wrong. Or how he'd felt worthless, and grew to hate the world, hate his father. “I didn't care much about myself, but I hated when he hit my mom. She was a small woman, and he was a pretty strong guy.”

“Go on.”

“I felt mad and angry. I'd just see red, you know? Problem was that I was too small to fight him off. When I tried he would put me in my place real quick. They got to know me pretty well at the hospital.”

“What did you tell them at the hospital?”

“*He* told me to lie. So I did. I told them I was practicing to be a wrestler, like Hulk Hogan.”

Carol nodded her head and a glimmer of a smile revealed itself through a slight curl of her lips. The legal notepad on her lap fell forward at an angle where James could make out neat, cursive ink marks on the page. What did those notes say? He glanced up at her eyes. Her glasses had slid down her nose. She must have noticed him peeping at her notepad, because she shifted it to a higher angle.

“James, an abusive parent has the potential to deeply scar a child. It's completely normal to want to leave these memories buried. I, on the other hand, have always been a firm believer that we are the products of our memories for better or worse. They make us into the people we are. Owning and understanding the traumatic times in our lives is very important. There is no way we can realize this as children, but we can deal with our memories as adults. Every day people come to me, seeking closure, or to understand these times of anger and confusion. I work with them, sometimes prescribing medications, but not without first trying to work through the emotions. Any doctor can push drugs, but real healing comes with dealing with our memories head on. I like to think that we are actors in a play. The important scenes help to build our characters. Trauma is drama, and violence and tragedy tests the

will of any hero.” As Carol spoke she used her hands like a true orator. “It’s very important not to downplay incidents and moments in our lives that impact our psyche.” Carol’s voice was strong, and yet very calm.

“I *want* to own my memories. But, *his* genes are still in me.”

“Even if we were simply products of our genetics, don’t you also have your mother’s genes in you? The gentle woman you described before sounds like she had a hand in creating the fine, young man I see before me today.”

He rubbed the back of his neck.

“The question I have for you, James, is, are you willing to relive some of the bad memories and share them with me? To better understand what really was happening?”

James had taken the first step through the glass. He was nervous and hesitant, but beneath that superficial layer was a determination. His words were the truest to his heart. “Where do we start?”

Chapter 14

Maya leaned over the top of her cruiser, her .38 Sig handgun already drawn and aiming at one of the front windows of the whitewashed colonial. She shifted her chest trying to readjust the vest beneath her shirt and blinked rapidly. Her eyes were burning. The last few weeks were catching up to her. Gathering information and the late night planning for this raid on the Vasquez brothers’ stash house. Nothing seemed usual lately. Finding James at the scene of the drug overdose. Seeing him there, with his office clothes all rumpled. His mouth open and lost look stuck in his eyes. She’d never seen his hands shake as they had. There was little that she could have said to comfort him, less she could have done, but hold him close and bring him home. Love has no place on a crime scene.

She had to be strong for the both of them. Maya’s own mother had been a strong woman,

raising Maya and her younger brother once her father left on his permanent mental vacation. His body was there, sitting in the chair or spooning soup past his stiff lips, but she could tell he was still living the horrors of the war. “A husk with no corn in it,” Maya's mother had said once.

Maya remembered the fear she'd felt when she would wake to find him in her room. Through the thin cracks of her eyelids she would watch him. She remembered thinking how horrible it was to be afraid of her own father. He would stare at her sleeping form, his own body a silhouette against the dull glow of the night light. Although he was blood and flesh, he was more of a malfunctioning machine that still glowed, but served no function, but to eat, sleep, and exist among them. He hardly moved, never spoke anything more than garble, like pieces of radio chatter. Often she would make out the sound of his teeth grinding or his jaw popping in and out, as if chewing tough bamboo.

The sound of the battering ram smashing reminded Maya that it was time to be alert. She rubbed her eyes and focused on the swat team charging through the front doorway. A dog started barking immediately from inside.

“Police! Police! Warrant!” The men yelled as they quickly shuffled into the house. Maya watched the last man rush through the doorway, and then she and her fellow officers charged past the chain link fence towards the porch steps. The distinctive sound of a shotgun fire set off a chorus of popping gun fire and confused shouts from inside. Maya followed, her strength of will was tested with each step closer to the shooting. She wasn't a firm believer in God, but she did believe in her gun and her strength; she was counting on them both to keep her safe. She welcomed the adrenaline that opened her eyes wide and awakened every cell of her body. She was aware of the two policemen running just behind her, and behind them more were yelling, “Go, Go, Go!” She was first among them. Inside, she put together the scene in an instant.

There was a dead German shepherd lying in the middle of the living room carpet. Its fur was matted with dark blood and parts of its pink insides were visible. There was a piece of clothing in its

clenched jaws. The air smelled like a shooting range and there were blood and bullet holes sprayed about the walls and furniture. The furniture was tacky, old, as if it belonged in the fifties.

One of the SWAT team was lying on the floor, his arm was a bloody pulp. He'd been the one who took the first shotgun blast, and he held the shattered mess of beef with his good arm, while a fellow SWAT officer and the two policemen immediately rushed to his aid. He moaned as they helped him up.

The man who'd shot him wasn't as lucky. His face and body were completely torn up like a pinata. The SWAT team itself was halted, forced to bunch up behind a wall towards the back of the house. The distinct rattle of what had to be an AK-47 forced the SWAT team back.

"He's bunkered down in the room at the end of the hallway!" the SWAT captain yelled with a hand over his right ear.

Maya stood well behind them and watched the captain pull off a flash bang grenade and throw it like a baseball down the hall. A moment later an explosion of light and sparks shook the end of the hall. The shooting stopped and the SWAT team ran headlong down the hall. Maya took their place, peeking around the corner. A man was yelling in Spanish at the other end tucked away in a bedroom. The men funneled into the room, passing walls that were peppered with bullet holes. She could hear their shouts.

"Jump on him!" the captain yelled.

"Stop resisting, you fucker! Stop resisting, damn it!" another SWAT team officer yelled.

As Maya looked down the hall, she saw a peculiar thing happen. A section of the wall opened up and a man with a submachine gun stepped out and immediately made for the room where they were restraining the shooter. Maya stepped out in the hall and took aim at his back. He approached the door and Maya yelled. He turned around and swung his weapon. Maya watched him align with her sight and fired four shots in rapid succession. The man fell away as all four bullets pierced him. Three hit his torso, and the recoil of her gun caused one of the bullets to fly high and travel through his cheek.

He dropped like a bag of concrete mix. The SWAT team swarmed outside in surprise and raised their guns at Maya who was still looking at the man she'd killed. One of them asked, "Where did that dirty fucker come from?"

Maya nudged her gun at the section of wall where he'd come through.

"Jeez, damn spics crawling all over this place. Like rats hiding in the walls," the same man said.

The rest of the SWAT and police that had gone farther into the house came back letting everyone know that the rest of the house had been cleared.

Maya holstered her weapon and exhaled the breath she'd been holding. She walked up to the body of the man she'd killed. She recognized him from his mug shot to be Ellario Vasquez. Blood was leaking out of him and staining the carpet. She'd done the right thing; she'd followed her training and probably saved their lives. But now here was this dead man at her feet. With holes that she'd put in him. His eyes were still open. She forced herself to look away and went into the next room.

Hundreds of shells lay all over the floor, some smoking on the rug. An AK-47 rested on the carpet, the banana clip removed, and a full magazine wasn't far away. There were three SWAT officers on top of the stunned shooter, Ricky Vasquez. They worked hard to restrain him, even in cuffs he was hard to handle. He spit on one of the SWAT officer's shoes. Seeing the bloody phlegm on his polished boot the man tucked in his lower lip and then swiftly kicked Ricky hard in the ribs. To further insult him he started rubbing the spit off his boot and on Ricky's face saying, "You like that?"

"That's enough, you!" She pointed at the man who'd kicked him. "Get out of here. Someone read Ricky his rights and put him in a squad car."

The officer stopped, giving her a look as if he'd just bitten into a rotten pear, then looked at his own captain.

The captain nodded to his man. "Do as she says."

The offended officer shook his head and nudged his shoulder against Maya as he passed.

“Don’t make me sorry that I saved your life,” she said.

Maya pulled Ricky up off the ground. “Since none of you can seem to handle this, I’ll take him in.” She led Ricky out.

Ricky saw his brother lying dead. “You’re fucking dead, bitch.”

“Where are the drugs stashed, Ricky?” Maya asked.

“Up your black ass, you fucking slut!”

“You kiss your mother with that mouth, Ricky?” Sam said as he came over and grabbed Ricky by his other elbow. Together they led him out of the house. A small crowd of neighbors and spectators had gathered; a ring of squad cars and police kept them at bay. A reporter with a “press” vest was snapping pictures from across the street. A news crew was trying to get a camera set up just beyond the yellow tape.

“You just made a lot of enemies,” Ricky said.

Maya ignored him. They crossed the porch, went down the steps, and led him down the walkway.

Sam began reading him his rights.

“Do you understand?” Maya echoed.

Ricky lunged backwards, twisting his body, and tried to bite Maya’s neck. Sam pulled him away, and he turned on Sam, headbutting him. Sam fell backwards clutching his forehead. Without hesitation Maya tripped Ricky and slammed him to the ground. With his hands cuffed behind him, he had no way to buffer his fall. Maya dropped her knee into his back. This time several officers came to her aid. They lifted Ricky up off the sun burnt lawn, his face and mouth oozing fresh blood and dirt. They hauled him into the nearest squad car. From behind the glass Ricky began laughing as he wiped his bloody face all over the inside of the window.

The captain of the SWAT team came over. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Maya said. "When he calms down have the medics patch him up."

"Listen, I'm sorry for how Jacobs acted. He was a shaken up. He was right behind Paterson when they popped out with the shotgun. A guy sees that and it screws him up. He was still in attack mode. Don't worry. He'll be dealt with. You have my word on that."

Maya looked at him coldly. "I'll be filing a complaint of my own. That was sloppy."

"We found where they were stashing the drugs. There was a drop down attic. Found several packages of marijuana, pills, and cash. There were more guns under the mattresses. It's definitely a major stash house."

"Think they knew we were coming?"

"It seems like it. Ricky was hunkered down tight, and his brother that you dropped had enough time to hide in the wall. Never seen anything like that before."

"How's your man . . . Paterson was it?" Maya asked. "How's his arm?"

"They took him off in the ambo. I don't know the status of his arm. It was a mess when I saw it."

Maya looked around, thinking about what to do next.

Her chief stepped out of a car. He took command of the scene the second his shoe touched asphalt. "I want the bodies covered. Someone scatter those people and tell the press to call me for an official report. Let's get the drug dogs on scene." The police that he'd appointed ran off to do his bidding. He rubbed his neat mustache and came over to Maya. "Maya you and your unit go through the house and make your report. I want everyone else off this crime scene. Get some lights set up, it'll be dark soon."

He took her aside. "Heard you discharged your weapon. You all right?"

"I'm fine."

“It's all right to admit if you're not. Even seasoned guys get pretty shaken up over that sort of thing,” he said.

“Sir . . . ,” Maya said.

“A paperwork nightmare,” he said.

Maya spoke up louder. “Sir, I'm going to be filing a complaint against one of the SWAT officers. He kicked and antagonized the man I arrested.”

The chief sighed and wiped a hand through his thinning hair. “Listen, Maya, I'm going to need you to let that go. The SWAT guys deal with their own. A complaint is just going to screw up our relationship with them. There's far worse things than a kick to a man resisting arrest.”

“Sir, I don't think—”

He put a hand on her shoulder then said, “Drop it. I will make sure it gets dealt with. Right captain?”

The SWAT captain who'd been quietly waiting to speak just nodded a slow emphatic nod.

The chief clapped his hands and rubbed his palms together. “It's settled. Now, let's go see what they were protecting in this house.”

Maya couldn't help feeling wronged. Her chief had always proved a fair man. He would make sure that this wrong was corrected in his own way. She watched him move up the walkway with a purpose. She didn't want to go back inside. The adrenaline had left her, and she knew the man she'd killed was still in there. Her training helped her pull the trigger, but she was hardly prepared with the end result. He was dead. She was a killer. No. Not today. She couldn't appear weak, not now, with all the men watching her.

She bit a chunk of her cheek, wiped her eyes, and caught up with the chief as he strode confidently into the house.

Chapter 15

“Go ahead and pull us in,” Tucker said.

James followed the order and began pulling the bowline up into the sun-warmed shallows of the small beach.

“That's close enough.”

Maya, Melanie, and Kevin took that as their cue. They stepped out of *The Periwinkle* and walked the shallows until they were on the beach.

Tucker dropped the anchor overboard into the sand. He nodded towards Maya and Melanie. “Looks like our ladies are settling in fine.”

Maya and Melanie had already stripped into their bathing suits and were lying out on their blankets chatting as if they'd known each other their entire lives.

“Women,” Tucker said.

“Yup,” James acknowledged.

They'd spent the first half of the day out at the Isles of Shoals. Tucker had shown them the various islands that made up the cluster ten miles off the New Hampshire coast. They'd gotten off the boat and walked about the smaller Smuttynose Island. There was one man living there, the island's steward, who greeted them saying, “You're in luck, you've picked the worst time to come to the island.”

They soon discovered the truth to his remark as they walked the trails. The other island residents, vast numbers of nesting seagulls, had picked this week to have all their eggs hatch. Little gray, puff ball chicks were peeping about their ground nests as their ticked off parents dive bombed *The Periwinkle's* little party of adventurers.

The current steward, a man with a graying beard and spectacles, was a self-proclaimed history

nut, and told them about the murders that had happened on the small island. The infamous Smuttynose Murders had occurred in March of 1873. James had heard the tales before. The theory was that a desperate man, Louis Wagner, was thought to have rowed a boat from the mainland at night and stumbled upon some of the island's women asleep. From what James could remember, Wagner was suspected to have killed two of the women with an axe, except for Maren Hontvet, who got out of the house and hid in the shelter of a cave at the other end of the island. There had always been debate and speculation whether Wagner had really done the violent crimes.

After the Isles of Shoals they trolled for stripers and blue fish. They didn't catch a thing, and they collectively agreed to head straight for Odiorne's Point.

James laid out his towel, and then ran back into the water. He dove in headlong and let the water envelop his body. His open eyes searched the blurry water. Odiorne's Point, at the mouth of the harbor, was a small sanctuary for boat enthusiasts. It was a thin stretch of beach that was guarded from the ocean's wrath by a rock jetty. As close to a tropical beach as you could get in New Hampshire.

James swam a little deeper and plunged himself under the water again. As he kicked he suddenly felt something latch itself to his leg. James bucked violently. The thing held on for a moment then let go. James swam as hard as he could towards Tucker's boat and glanced behind to see a masked face bob to the surface. Kevin coughed seawater in his fit of laughter.

"You little maniac! You scared the crap out of me!" James stood up, the water only reaching his chest.

Kevin swam closer. "Maniac? Who says that? Weirdo."

James closed the gap. "Hey, Kevin, I've been meaning to ask you. Are you still getting trouble from those kids at school?"

Kevin turned his head sideways giving him a queer look. "What kids at school?"

"Remember the bruises you had—on your arms and legs— you told your parents, right?"

“Oh, yeah. The time we talked on the steps.”

“Exactly.”

“No bruises now.” He held up his arms and did a hand-stand in the water to show his legs.

“So what happened to the kids?”

“What happened to the kids? What happened to the kids? You sure do like to talk, Mr. James.”

Kevin splashed him.

“Nothing wrong with asking questions . . . hey! Cut that out! Oh, now you're in for it.”

They got in a splashing fight. Kevin's little arms slapped the water, causing an annoying cutting spray, while James tried to displace the most water he could in broad sweeping splashes. Kevin laughed, causing water to fall into his mouth, which halted the game.

Kevin said he was done, but not before he went under the water and kicked a fountain of water on James.

James watched Kevin swim back towards the beach where further up he could see Maya and Melanie still talking, beside them the sleeping form of Tucker. James let himself just float about the shallow cove. Water ran into his ears. He tuned in to the underwater sounds: a distant motor dicing up the channel, the heavy splashes of big rocks being lobbed into the water by kids off the jetty. Above it all was the sound of his own breathing. He breathed in, then out, then in, then held.

“That's right, James. Look down the sight then breath. In, then out, then in, then hold . . . now shoot it!” James had been spooked by his father's urgency just as he'd pulled the trigger, making him shoot high above the beer can target.

“Damn it, haven't you been listening to a thing I've told you, James? Clean the fucking wax out of your ears and pay attention. Hold your breath, your body needs to be still as a fucking tree. Then you need to slowly squeeze the trigger. Not pull it like, like, I don't know, you're damn finger's on fire or something.” His father's voice trailed as he let the bottle of Jameson perch on his lips, then he

leaned back and the dark fluid poured into him. “This time, do better. You hear me? Shoot the fucking can. We're not leaving till you do.”

James nodded to his father. The revolver was heavy in his twelve-year-old hands. The handgun had a kick that worried him, but not as much as his father's wrath worried him.

James spied the can propped up on a tree stump fifteen yards away. James's father had brought him shooting as a reward for doing a good day's work with no “fuck ups.” James saw the sand pits as a crummy reward, and the fact that he was alone with his father, with liquor and a gun, made him so nervous that shooting the gun seemed almost less stressful. This time he would hit the can. If he did his father would smile and he could go home.

James pulled back the hammer and held the gun the way his father had shown him. Breath in, breath out, breath in. He took aim, praying that the bullet would follow his sight and then caught his breath.

“Shoot!” his father yelled.

James closed his eyes and felt the bullet leave the barrel. When he opened his eyes the beer can was gone.

“Good shot. Guess you're not retarded after all.” It was high praise. “Now hand over the gun.”

James looked at the gun in his hand. The steel was still warm from the shot. There was a hint of sweat between his palm and the rough handle. He saw the gun in his hands and then saw his father. If he could hit the can at fifteen yards . . .

“You hear me?”

James shuddered and handed the gun back to his father, who yanked it out of his hands. He capped the bottle and they loaded themselves into the truck. As the truck bounced on the washed out road, James looked back thinking how, like the can, he could have made his father disappear too.

As he floated in the cove, James suddenly shivered. A cold spot must have found him. He

reflected back on the memory that had surfaced. They were occurring more and more frequently now. Sometimes the memories came in fragments or other times they were like blurry home movies. Carol had said that it was good for him to think about the confusing moments of his childhood. They helped him understand his past. This memory couldn't hurt him. It just made him see his father. He wanted to understand the man. Understand his violent nature and figure out who his father really was.

His last session he told Carol about seeing Derek when he'd almost drowned. She told him that as long as he understood what was real and what was in his head, the hallucinations couldn't hurt him. She claimed it wasn't all that abnormal to hallucinate someone shortly after their death, especially due to the circumstances and James's mental status at the time, almost dying himself.

James waded back up the beach and let the warm sun heat his back. He hadn't told Maya about his sessions with Carol. Although, Maya was the one having trouble sleeping as of late. She was wound up tighter than a rat trap.

Still, it felt as if he was cheating on her by sneaking off to spend an hour talking to Carol. In many ways Carol saw through his bullshit. She knew just how much to shove James, and when to sooth.

James walked over to where Kevin was building a sand castle. "You know the tide will take it away if you build it that close," James warned.

Kevin ignored him.

Tucker and Maya were in the middle of a conversation when James fell onto his towel next to Maya.

Tucker pointed at Maya. "I thought I recognized you from the news. That was wicked awesome. I've never seen a woman toss a man like that. You dropped that guy on his ass!" Tucker spoke with an child-like excitement James hadn't seen before.

Maya laughed then said, "Ah, you saw that?"

James knew what they were talking about. Maya's department had made a big drug bust. The news had said 350 pounds of marijuana seized, worth a quarter of a million dollars. They also confiscated ecstasy, around seventy thousand dollars worth.

Maya continued, "It wasn't the bust we were looking for, but it's good to get those drugs off the street." She put a hand on James's shoulder.

James napped, waking up a short time later scratching drool from his dry lips. The sun had begun its daily commute towards the western horizon. He put his elbow in the sand and held his head up to watch Maya. She was helping Kevin defend his castle from the rising tide. She laughed as she and Kevin dug a moat to try to divert the water away from the main structure. The sand was soft, and was on the verge of sliding into the approaching waves.

Kevin must have realized the futility of it all, because he kicked away the castle spire. Maya laughed and joined in the destruction. Together they stomped it into a lumpy hill and ran into the water to get the sand off their bodies. James rarely got to see her this way, so carefree and goofy. She caught him watching her and gave him a mock serious face.

The beach had mostly cleared out and Melanie was starting to shake sand off the towels. Tucker was doing something aboard *The Periwinkle*. James imagined himself sleeping here overnight and waking up to the sound of the gentle surf and the gulls, warmed by the morning rays of the summer sun. If only tomorrow wasn't Monday.

James got up and shook out his own towel. He could feel his rough shorts against his chaffing legs. Maya came over to meet him. She grabbed his hand and they kissed. Her lips were warm.

"Ready to get out of here?" Maya asked.

"No, but let's go anyways."

"Lobsters at the Flynn's house?" she asked.

James stuck his arm out at her.

“What are you doing? I don't get it.”

“Here's my arm, go ahead and pull it.”

She tugged his arm, nearly pulling it out of its socket. “You really are a tool, you know that?”

“That may be, but I'm your tool. You've got the ring to prove it.”

“We should get married on the beach,” Maya said.

“I like that idea.”

“Are you saying you are willing to do more than talk about it?” Maya cocked her head to the side.

“I'm saying I want to be with you forever. I'm saying why don't we set a date?”

“Really? How about right now?” Maya's teeth gleamed.

“I think we need a Justice of the Peace, sweetheart,” he said, and kissed her again.

She grabbed his face and brought it an inch from hers. “How about next weekend?”

“Wow. You're ready for this.”

“You have no idea, James.”

“Before summer's over, babe, you and I will be hitched,” James said.

Maya hugged him tight, the damp bikini top cooling his skin. “You promise me, James?”

“Cross my heart.” He made the motion of crossing his heart.

“And hope to die?”

“And hope to die.”

The kitchen table of the Flynn's house was littered with food. Lobster rolls, lobster stew, and potatoes. Kevin opted to eat some fish sticks and a mountain dew for his dinner. The dinner conversation was light and full of laughter. Tucker drank more beer, and James sipped a can as well.

“Tucker, I hear there are territories on the water. Trap wars. Is that true?” Maya asked.

“There can be, to some extent. I mean, there are guys who've been laying pots their whole lives who would be pretty steamed if some new guy came in and plops his pots on top of theirs.” His thick arms tangled in the air to show the effect. “I get new guys tangling their gear in mine every now and then. I try save their lines if I can. I'm not the oldest dog out there, but my dad kind of grandfathered me into the business. People remember him and give me more slack. I know just about every guy out there fishing in Portsmouth and Rye.” He bit off a mouthful of lobster roll and spoke through his bites. “I'm not out there to be a dick, you understand. I just try to cover some territory before the summer's over and the lobsters move back out into deeper waters.”

“I remember hearing a story about one guy who got so angry he shot the other guy's motor. Wasn't that last year or the year before?” Maya asked.

“That happened last summer,” Tucker said, putting the roll down.

“You ever seen anything like that?” she asked.

He picked his teeth with a finger. “Not really, I steer away from trouble and don't cross the ornery guys.”

Maya sprinkled some pepper on her mashed potatoes. “Have you ever seen anything *suspicious* going on in the harbor?”

“What do you mean?” Tucker stopped eating and set the beer down that had been glued to his hand most of the evening.

“Oh, I don't know. Ever seen anything out of the ordinary at the docks? New faces? Shady business?”

“Can't say I have.”

“Nothing at all?”

Tucker looked at James with a smile. “Am I under arrest?” He asked then laughed.

James came to Tucker's aid. "I know, seriously. Maya, he said he hasn't seen anything."

Melanie excused herself to go to the kitchen.

Maya took a bite of the potatoes. "I'm *only* asking. Every now and then we like to check out the docks to see that everything is legit. Never hurts to have a man on the inside."

Tucker went back to attending his beer and took a gulp. He scratched the back of his head. "I can't say I've seen much worth talking about. But if I do, I can let you know."

"See?" Maya pointed at James. "That's how crimes are solved. The public usually knows more than we do. It never hurts to ask."

"Makes sense," James said.

Melanie came back with a glass of water in her hands.

"We're going to take you both out to dinner next," Maya said in a cheerful tone.

"Sounds like a plan." Tucker got up and cleared some of the dishes away.

The two couples talked under the glow of the kitchen light long after Kevin went off to bed. They laughed and exchanged stories. When their eyes began stinging, James and Maya said their good byes and left the Flynn's home.

Maya put the key into the ignition of her cruiser. James watched Maya whose eyes were fixed on something across the street. "Are you going to start the car, babe?"

"Huh? Oh . . . yeah." She turned the key, lowered her window, and put on her seat belt. James watched as she looked back again through her open window. A street light hanging off a telephone pole lit the patch of road. Behind the pole a dark, dense tangle of thin, scraggly trees and bushy undergrowth grew almost up to the road.

"You want me to drive, Maya?"

"No, I'm fine. Thought I saw something. Probably a bird."

"Birds don't fly at night," James said.

“No, they don't.” She drove off down the street and they headed back to their apartment.

The figure hiding behind the bushes waited till the break lights faded and the cruiser turned onto the main road before it lifted itself out of the darkness, shying away from the warm glow of the Flynn residence. The shadows of the night clung to the figure, while the sounds of hundreds of crickets chirping blended with the croaking of frogs in a nearby marsh and completely swallowed up the sounds of the dark figure's retreating footfalls.

Chapter 16

The window from the break room gave James a chance to watch the left over rain from the storm. A true Nor' Easter, which meteorologists had predicted would be taken out to sea. Instead, the storm pounded its way up the eastern seaboard with a purpose: a real mid-summer swashbuckler that seemed to rally off the Cape and forced itself upon the Eastern part of New Hampshire and Maine.

James sipped his coffee as he watched the channel nine news reporters spit information at him between his thoughts.

“An alarming amount of trees have fallen, leaving hundreds of homes without power, and many homes and vehicles destroyed.”

Maya had been working straight since the start of the storm. She'd told him that she'd abandoned her regular duties to respond to calls concerning fallen trees and downed wires.

“Over eight inches of rain with gusts of above seventy-five miles per hour from the Portsmouth weather station. The surplus rain has put many rivers over their banks, causing flooding and road closures across the eastern side of the state.”

James was lucky that their apartment complex was built on high ground; they didn't have to

worry about dragging out a sump pump for a flooded basement.

“This video shot at the height of the storm is from a local Rye man. The video shows record sized waves as they go well beyond the seawalls.”

James watched the angry waves shooting over the concrete barriers where they flooded streets and parking lots. Was Tucker okay? There was no way he would have gone out in such a storm, but what about his traps?

The anchorman looked at his fellow anchorwoman with tacked on sense of empathy and said, “Truly a record-breaking summer storm that has battered the Seacoast, leaving many residents shaken up, but ready to pick up the pieces.”

The rest of the day dragged like a lame leg, which prompted him to call Tucker's house, to see how he'd fared the storm. “Melanie? Hi. It's James.”

“James. What do you need?” Her voice sounded rushed.

“Nothing. I just wanted to see if Tucker's traps were all right. The storm and all.”

“It's not good,” Melanie said.

James pushed a little more. “Do you think Tucker needs some help?”

“I don't know. Ask him yourself!” Melanie was plainly irritated talking to him.

“Mom . . . I need you.” Kevin's voice in the background fell into the phone.

“One second, honey.” Melanie sighed. “Listen, James. Tucker left early this morning and has been gone all day. Try calling back tomorrow. I'm sorry, but things are a little hectic around here.”

James apologized and told her he would call back tomorrow.

The next day the sun came out and revealed the land ravished by the summer storm. Trash littered the streets. Orange-vested public works crews were bent picking up debris and clearing the roads. Scattered cones lay fallen in puddles, waiting to be retrieved. The old colonials dripped rain water from leaks in their gutters. Cars splashed through the pools on the road.

James looked at the clock in his office. He waited till it was noon to call the Flynns. After two rings Kevin picked up the phone. "Hey, Kevin. It's James Morrow. Is your dad around?"

"He said he would be gone all day again. At the beach."

"Are his traps all right?"

"I don't know, and don't care." His voice was full of attitude.

"At the beach, you said? Which beach?"

"Probably all of them."

James heard a voice say something in the background. It was too muffled to understand.

"I have to go."

"Hold on one second, which—"

"I have to go, bye," Kevin said as the phone disconnected.

James looked at the clock again. He could take a long lunch.

James swerved Sally Jay around the flooded potholes. He cleared the downtown area and headed towards the coast searching for Tucker's truck.

At the first beach he passed, a state beach, he got his first view of the waves. Large rolling dumpers splashed white water over the dark blue, glassy ocean surface. The waves would fall, then regather their strength and reform yet again, until they sped over the dark brown stretches of sand. James saw two dozen surf boards bobbing joyously among the eastern giants; black wetsuits, making them resemble seals instead of people.

On the beach, head-high piles of debris, mostly filled with lobster traps, were stacked like unlit bonfires. James squinted, his eyes searching the colored buoys twisted among the crushed black, green, and yellow traps.

Coming up to the next beach, he spied Tucker's truck. It sat alone in the parking lot neatly in between the yellow lines of the parking space. James got the sudden impulse to drive past it, forget the

whole thing. But curiosity was too compelling.

He crested the top of the small rise of sand overlooking the beach. Standing amid the knee-high beach grass and clumps of crushed weeds beside his feet, James scanned the beach. The waves were much more tame here; no surfers had bothered with them. Seagulls strutted in wet sand like wind up toys, leaving trails of webbed foot prints that were washed away with each passing wave, stopping only to crane their necks and cry out at the sky. What were they saying?

James couldn't overlook the mountain of traps that had been dragged out of the sea and left in the dry, gray sand just beyond the high tide mark.

Then there was Tucker, sitting alone in the damp sand, a stone's throw from the waves staring out at the ocean.

If there were anyone around aside from a scattering of indifferent seagulls, James knew he would have looked out of place. His black leather shoes sank three quarters of an inch into the soft, shifting sand with each step; black pant legs that pulled taught at the knees; soft pearl blue shirt, his favorite, tucked smoothly under his belt. His solid black tie flopped like a fish out of water. His black hair was growing shaggy and was trying to invade his ears.

As he passed the tangle of metal cages, he tried, but couldn't look away from the painted buoys amid the tangle of ruined traps. Most of them were were Tuckers, big fat F's staring at him as he passed.

Any onlookers watching from the row of beach-side houses just above the rock wall would see James and probably think, is this guy going to drown himself? Maybe he was. Tucker might save him the trouble.

Tucker's powerful shoulders were sunken forward. James cleared his throat and swung around wide to see Tucker's face. "Hey." It was all James could think to say.

Tucker blinked several times and seemed to wake up from a dream. "Oh, hey, James." Tucker's

voice sounded ragged. He coughed a short harsh hack and licked his lips, then said, “What the hell you doing here?”

“I could ask the same of you.”

Tucker lifted a buoy that had been partially concealed by his bent legs. He held it up by the post, stuck it in the soft sand, and began spinning it like a bow drill. James half expected smoke to start curling out of the hole it was making in the sand. The black 'F' on his two-toned, Styrofoam buoy spun around. As it spun faster, the 'F' blended into a black mark.

Tucker breathed out a sigh and James thought he heard him say something, some small flex of vocal chords that sounded like the word “cursed.”

James started to speak when Tucker cut him off. “Gone man, one storm. Poof.” Tucker grabbed a chunk of damp sand and tried to make it fly off as if white dust from a magic act. It proved too moist to fly for him and stuck to his fingers. He flung it away in disgust. “I ain't never seen a storm trash this many traps. Never.” As he spoke he seemed to be talking to the sea, instead of James.

James suddenly felt uncomfortable standing so high above him. He kicked away a patch of kelp and cautiously sat down in the wet sand next to him. There was no pretty way to do it.

Tucker seemed unwilling to speak with the rhythm of a normal conversation. He was quiet for a while. James didn't look at him; instead, he stared at the ocean. The sea that had spawned ancient beasts and had been a never-ending expanse to early explorers. As he looked out at the wonder of the world, he could only think about how the wet sand was starting to soak through to his boxers.

The wind blew across their faces. Their hair shook under the strength of the ocean breeze. The traps were simply too close to shore. He'd gambled and lost.

“How many traps do you have left?” James asked.

“Fifty, if I'm lucky.”

“Oh,” James said, feeling the blow of the number. Nine-hundred traps times seventy-five dollars

a piece? James couldn't do the math in his head, but he knew it was over 50,000 dollars. "If there is any way I can help you out—," James started.

"—Stop. I'm through taking charity." He let the buoy drop. It fell and rolled in an arc towards the ocean, then fishtailed to a halt. "I'll think of something. I'll figure a way out of this mess." A change came over Tucker's eyes. His concentration was interrupted by the shade of a passing cloud that slid past the sun like a pulled curtain.

James nodded his head. "Can I at least help with hauling these traps off the beach?"

"Thanks, but no thanks. These are mine and my father's traps. It's only right that I put them to rest." Tucker left the buoy lying abandoned on the sand.

James stood up with him and glanced at his watch.

When James looked up Tucker said, "You better get back to work."

James felt as if he ought to say something but couldn't think of the proper words. He settled with, "Give me a call if you need— I mean, *want*, to talk."

Tucker nodded and turned away from James to face the ocean, as if dismissing him.

As James passed the heap of traps for the second time, the bent and twisted cages seemed to him to resemble the bars of a prison cell.

Chapter 17

Maya reclined in her stiff office chair and thought about how the chief had described the drug bust as a heavy blow to the dealing community. Weed and pills weren't what she was after.

—Where was the heroin coming from? How was it being brought in and distributed? Recent leads turned into nothing but dead ends. She suspected that the drugs had gone underground in response to recent media attention. Her thoughts turned to the boy who had helped his friend overdose at the rec

center. The red-headed juvenile turned out to be the only son of a wealthy, local business man: Fred Hanson, the type of man that rubbed elbows with the town councilmen. Hanson had delivered his son to the station so as to turn himself in, but not without a lawyer strapped to his side.

The boy's trial would be drawn out; more than likely he'd settle for a plea bargain. Lady Justice seemed to lift up her blindfold and wink at the aristocracy. Maya had to remind herself that leaks happened; it just took patience and the right pressure.

She sipped her stale coffee and rubbed her eyelids. She'd completely surrendered her free time to preparations for the wedding, enlisting the help of a wedding planner by the name of Carmen Vega. Maya gave Carmen their budget and the heavy Mexican woman, who looked like she belonged in a cartoon, nearly fainted. Maya liked Carmen's flair and attention to detail; the woman was pure spice.

James's mood had returned to normal and he was becoming very involved with his work, sometimes leaving to meet with clients after hours. Lately, James and Maya had been discussing honeymoons. The idea of a week away on a Caribbean island doing nothing but having sex and drinking out of coconuts on the beach made them both drool.

"Am *I* invited to the wedding?" The voice behind her severed her thoughts.

Maya put a hand to her chest and turned away from her computer screen. "Wade, jeez. I just lost two years of my life."

"You're too edgy," he said.

"You're too hairy."

Wade looked down at the tuft of chest hair that was exposed from the unbuttoned top button of his shirt. She turned, giving him view of her back. Wade remained. After a few moments he asked, "So what did we ever end up getting out of the kid?"

Maya looked up from her keyboard. He was leaning over her and close enough that she could smell his aftershave. She wrinkled her nose. No small wonder why his ex-wife had moved to

California.

“I can't invite the whole department, Wade.”

Wade backed off. “Yeah, yeah, I get it. No room at the inn for Wade. The kid though—the kid. You were in there with him. He say anything?”

“What kid?”

“The freaking kid! Hanson's son. The OD case at the rec. What do you mean what kid? Don't play me for a retard.”

“Jesus,” Maya said in a hushed tone. She rolled her eyes, and her fingers busied themselves typing up the overdue narrative.

“What? Mad Dog Maya can't handle talking shop with the boys?” He sat on the corner of her desk, picked up a small stack of paper, and started thumbing through the pages.

The guys in the department had been giving her a heavy dose of credit for the way she took down Ricky Vasquez. Someone had recorded the news footage and gone as far as to set up a little TV in the station. Every badge on the department stopped to watch her toss Ricky to the ground. They had replayed the footage dozens of times, hooting like excited howling monkeys each time Ricky was dropped. She would be lying to herself if she said it didn't give her satisfaction. As a result, the nickname “Mad Dog Maya” had been floating around the coffee pots. Maya hadn't bothered trying to figure out who had started it.

“You know—a killer like you—ought to be able to answer a simple question.”

Maya stopped typing. She gave in and turned on him. Wade's face was hidden behind the papers he was pretending to read. “What did you call me?”

“A killer.” Wade tossed the stapled packet towards her. Wade hammered on. “You're a sharpshooter. The bust—the other day—or did it slip your memory?”

If he was trying to soften his comments, he was doing a miserable job. She looked into his

dead-pan face then at his dark blue shirt. A small grease spot on the collar caught her attention; she'd noticed the stain countless times before. His outstretched khaki pants were too wide for him, and the belt he wore was on too tight, which caused the front button to fold down underneath his belt buckle. With olive skin and black hair, Wade liked to think of himself as a gift from the old country. A gold class ring with a blue sapphire was handcuffed to his pinky.

“The kid—” Maya started.

Wade's bored expression came to life and fuzzy caterpillar eyebrows sprang up as if they'd been caught sleeping on the job.

“—Told us nada. We won't get another shot at him till the trial.”

“Who knows when that will be?” Wade said. It was less a question and more a statement stuffed with genuine melancholy.

Maya's fingers began tap-dancing across the keyboard again. As Wade walked away, he hummed a familiar tune: *Here Comes the Bride*.

She was glad he hadn't put up a bigger stink about not being invited. There were few in the department who didn't make the list. Wade was her fellow detective, but they'd never been close. The brass were infatuated with him. She never understood how they could endure that in-your-face attitude that he so loved to flaunt.

Maya stopped typing and let her lids refresh her stinging eyes. She squinted at the glowing screen and read the last lines she'd entered.

At approximately 12:35PM I pulled my gun (.38) from the holster, shot, and killed the suspect, Ellario Vasquez. Four shots were fired. The first three slugs entered Ellario Vasquez's left and right upper torso and the fourth slug went through Ellario Vasquez's right cheek. I killed him, because if I didn't he would have killed me. He's dead because of me. I killed him. I killed Ellario Vasquez. I am a murderer.

As she reread the words, they became blurry. Maya sniffed, released a shudder, then latched her finger

to the backspace key until the page was wiped clean again. With her head down, and her face buried in a tissue she rushed to the bathroom. She wouldn't let them see Mad Dog Maya cry.

Chapter 18

With one arm hanging out her Buick, Melanie burned her last cigarette down to the filter. She flicked the stunted butt out the open window and dug through her bulbous leather purse to see if there was another pack that she may have overlooked. There wasn't.

The gas station sign eclipsed the pink and purple hues of the setting sun with its yellow, neon glow. A cursory glance across the gauges of the dash let her know that the car would soon be as thirsty as she was hungry for more tobacco. Melanie parked by the pump and split open her wallet. She withdrew a thin wad of folded one dollar bills: the meager tip money from another slow Monday night. Inside, the clerk looked at her with a I-could-give-two-shits stare when she handed over the cash for a fresh stack of cigarette packs.

When she got back into her car, she was reminded of the gas gauge. The gas stopped pumping when it reached \$7.00, enough to get her to and from work tomorrow.

When she got home, Kevin was there to greet her. Right away he broke into complaining about some neighborhood boys. She let him tell her the whole story as she shuffled around the kitchen. He finished around the time she found a box of angel hair, the top held closed by a loose piece of tape that had lost most of its stick.

“Spaghetti again?” Kevin's tone was thick with disappointment.

“You want cereal instead?” she asked.

“We don't have any milk, mom.”

“How about yogurt?”

“Out of yogurt, too,” Kevin said.

“Then spaghetti is the only option tonight, Kev. Take a look in the garage. There might be a bag of meatballs in the freezer.”

“Nothing in there, but stinky, old mackerel, mom.”

She sighed. “How was your day?”

“I already told you. Awful.” Kevin took a seat at the kitchen table as if exhausted by the conversation.

Melanie checked the freezer. In the back she spied a carton. “Looks like we have ice cream. If you eat all your spaghetti, you can have that for dessert.”

“I don't think it's any good. There's little icicles growing inside.”

“Freezer burn.” Melanie sighed heavily. Her eyes flicked to the clock on the microwave. Tucker would have already left to go to his security job. “How long ago did dad leave?” Melanie asked.

“About an hour ago.” Kevin's chin mounted his folded hands.

Melanie boiled the pasta and sat down at the table with him. She slapped her palm to her forehead and pulled it slowly up to her hairline, then rubbed her temples. Her feet felt as stiff as driftwood. “Did you clean your room like I asked?”

Kevin looked up from the table blankly.

“Didn't think so. Get to it, mister man.”

He sulked away. She left the boiling pasta alone to check on the state of her own room. It was clean—except for some of Tucker's things—which were tossed about in an apparent scramble to get out the door. Melanie picked up the Tucker's clothes, but stopped when she noticed his dark blue security jacket hanging over the back of the only chair in the room. Had he been in that much of a rush?

Melanie had the habit of stockpiling her cigarettes in a shoebox tucked away in the closet that she and Tucker shared. There were several blank shoeboxes and she pulled the one she thought was

right. When she cracked the lid, the chain-pull light above showed the contents, which weren't cigarettes at all. Her hand touched a familiar texture of an unfamiliar weight. She pinched the dull, brown rubber band that wrangled together the thick stack of bills she was cradling in her hands. Melanie flipped through the stack and was amazed when she saw Benjamin Franklin's face on every bill. She stared at the dead inventor, his thick lids, receding hair line, and the tight-lipped knowing expression. Even he wasn't talking.

What was this money from? Did he sell his truck? No. This was more than Tucker's aging, rusty, gas guzzler was worth. She took a rough count of the bills. Near \$10,000 just sitting in their closet as if it was no big deal. Tucker loved *The Periwinkle*, but she knew he would sell her if it came down to keeping the house. It was a shame to see him make such a sacrifice. Where else could he have gotten this much money?

The sound of water spilling onto the burners broke her thoughts. The pasta! She hastily returned the mysterious money and ran back to the kitchen. Her hand grasped the metal pot handle and slid it to the next burner. "Shit! Sweet Mother of Mercy! Ow. Ow," she howled as she let go of bubbling pot and threw her hand under a stream of cold water from the faucet.

"Mom . . ." Kevin's face appeared, while his body was hidden by the dividing wall.

The cold water washed over her palm. Already a red mark, the shape of the handle, was puffing up. After a few minutes of soaking, Melanie retrieved a plastic medical kit under her bathroom sink. She shook her head at the sad contents: spider man band-aids, a half-rolled tube of Neosporin, and a broken tongue depressor.

She squirted the remainder of the Neosporin tube across her palm. Using her teeth she ripped a dishtowel, producing a rough cut strip of loose fray material that she wrapped around her hand. She told Kevin to get her tape and he came back with duct tape. Once her hand was taped tight, she regarded her work. "Perfect, *just* perfect."

With Kevin's help she made him up a plate of spaghetti and pasta sauce. Melanie sparked up a fresh cigarette, her face grimacing.

Kevin frowned at her.

"I know, I don't normally smoke at the dinner table." She puffed a thick plume of gray smoke out the side of her mouth away from Kevin. It rose and floated harmlessly past the meek smoke detector. "Today is just one of those days, honey."

Kevin nodded silently as if he knew what it was like.

She ignored the plate of cooling spaghetti in front of her and took another drag off the cigarette. She rolled the smoke in her mouth and began to think more about the money. Melanie pulled out her cell phone and dialed the hotel where Tucker was working security. The call was answered almost as soon as Melanie put the phone to her ear. Melanie perked up. "Hi, I'm looking to get a hold of my husband, Tucker Flynn. He works security at your hotel."

The voice on the other end belonged to a young girl, a summer hire, no doubt. "Um . . . Tucker doesn't work here anymore . . . at least—I'm pretty sure."

Melanie pictured her as a nineteen-year-old blond chewing gum and tugging at the sorority letters across her chest. "Excuse me?" Melanie said.

"I think it was one, two . . . three weeks ago. Yeah, that sounds right. Hold on let me verify that date. One moment, ma'am." The voice cut off as Melanie was placed on hold.

The girl wasn't making sense. A mistake, made by a flighty airhead. She'd probably mixed up his name with another guy's.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm told Tucker was let go three weeks ago. The security company made some lay offs and he's no longer with them."

"That can't be right," Melanie said.

"It's true, ma'am. Actually, I'm really not supposed to talk about this kind of thing. So was

there anything else I can help you with?"

Melanie hung up the phone. She stared at Kevin's face for answers. He was toying with the spaghetti. He had only eaten a few bites.

"Finish it up and I'll take you out for ice cream," Melanie said.

"Really?" Kevin's face glowed as if he had just strode into the spotlight.

She nodded mechanically and watched him shove a few quick fork loads past his pink lips. What was going on here? She ducked back into the bedroom and peeled a fresh hundred dollar bill out of the stack and then returned the rest.

Where was he? She felt a sick feeling in her chest and hacked some of it up in a coughing fit as she walked with Kevin out to the car.

The Ice House was always crowded in the summer. The marsh supported mosquitoes that came out in droves to bite bare legs under the lights. High school kids piled in and out of shiny new convertibles to hang out and order Nor' Easters or thick, colorful scoops smothered in jimmies wrapped in chocolate-dipped waffle cones. Melanie watched a reedy, blond-haired girl in front of her order a small vanilla frappe. The girl timidly unclipped her little purse, but the shaggy haired youth a half-inch shorter beside her flashed a twenty dollar bill and shook his hair as if it was nothing. Melanie regarded the boy's face that was full of hormones and acne and under as much construction as the girl's teeth, which were laced with silver rebar and roped off with colorful bands.

They reminded Melanie of when she and Tucker were in high school and used to come down here. Melanie was anything but timid in those days. She'd been the wild one, screaming something obnoxious in the passenger seat as Tucker laughed and peeled out in his beat-up, hand-me-down truck.

The ice cream girl in a tie-dye shirt leaned forward through the porthole. Her large breasts hung at eye level, then when she leaned further they came to rest on the counter. The girl looked right into Melanie's eyes in a way that made her surprisingly uncomfortable.

“Hi. What can I get you two?”

Kevin hopped on each foot undecidedly, prompting Melanie to order a mint chocolate chip in a kiddie cone just to buy time. In the end Kevin went with a large cookie dough with a cone in a cup. Melanie handed over the mysterious currency. The flies chased Melanie and Kevin all the way back to the car, where they took shelter. Melanie finished her ice cream quickly. An idea that had started as a seed was now beginning to take root. “We're going to swing down by where dad moors the boat, sweetie.”

Kevin gave her the “okay,” concentrating his energy on mining the chunks of cookie dough out of the hills of vanilla.

Melanie found herself racing through the dark, windy road, tilting the gas pedal farther forward. She didn't realize her speed until she caught sight of a police cruiser resting in the parking lot of the New Castle Library. She pumped the breaks, eying the white glow of a laptop that reflected the outline of the policeman who wasn't paying any attention to her.

She busied herself with lighting another cigarette. The sounds of Kevin crunching on parts of his cone that he nibbled off like a rabbit made her smile through the cigarette.

Melanie crossed the singing bridge that connected New Castle island to Portsmouth and turned into the lot beside BG's Boathouse. Her headlights illuminated Tucker's green Ford that materialized from out of the darkness. She instinctively cut her lights. There were two other trucks, much nicer and newer than Tucker's, which flanked the Ford on both sides. She silenced the Buick and told Kevin to wait in the car. Outside, she walked along the edge of the lot. The only sound was the gravel crunching underneath her flats.

Her elbows found familiar grooves on the railing overlooking the creek. She'd spent a small lifetime here, waiting for her husband to return from his day at sea. The dock below was lit by a solitary lamp, whose stale light rippled lazily across the water. Melanie looked past the gang-plank to

where *The Periwinkle* usually rested and found only a vacant patch of dark water. First the traps, then the boat. She wanted to cry for him.

From both sides of the wooded banks, down the stretch of dark, starlit water, she could make out the sounds of crickets playing night songs. With no sign of Tucker, she could do nothing, but go home and wait for him. She broke away from the rail but was turned around at the sounds of boat motors gurgling in the distance. Three dull boat lights glowed above the otherwise calm stretch of water. All three seemed to be heading towards the docks below her. Melanie glanced over her shoulder at the car.

Kevin was fidgeting in his seat. He opened the door and said, "Mom, what are we doing here? Is dad here or something?"

She made a sound like a hiss to be quiet.

A confused look crossed his face. He closed the door angrily.

Melanie immediately felt bad and went over to the car and explained to him that she was checking on something; they would be leaving in a couple minutes. She asked him to stay in the car and be quiet.

He gave her a queer look, but did as he was told.

Back at the railing she half hid behind the girth of a supporting post. The boats were much closer now. Voices skipped like stones over the water. When they got close enough, she recognized the white outline of *The Periwinkle* following two other boats. One of them was coast guard and the other was another lobster boat. The three boats pulled up to the dock and men in dark clothes stepped off the decks and helped guide the boats gently into the mooring with practiced ease. Boots and sealed white buckets scraped the brittle surface of the dock as the men began offloading.

Melanie watched Tucker as he made sure his boat was settling into the mooring the way he liked. She suddenly felt like an intruder: not wanting to be caught there when the group of men walked

down the length of the dock and up the gang-plank. She ducked her head down and bent her knees so she wouldn't be seen. When she turned away from the railing and back towards her car, she was met by a set of blinding high beams.

She let out a short scream of shock and covered her eyes. Melanie backed away instinctively towards the railing and instead of the reassuring weight of the wood; she felt the soft, warm chest of a human being. She wheeled around and looked up at the face of a fat fisherman.

The headlights lit up the hungry eyes and grizzled jowls that shook as he said, "What the hell we got here?" He set down the two white buckets he'd been carrying and made as if to grab her.

Melanie stepped back half turning away; the headlights had been dimmed. She recognized the glow of the laptop light from before.

The fat fisherman backed away as the policeman stepped out of the running squad car and walked right up to her. He tilted his head to the side and gave her a curious look. "Evening, ma'am. Is everything all right?"

Before she could say a word, Tucker's voice cut the night air in half. "Jesus Christ! Melanie, what the hell you doing here? Kevin? Jesus Christ—Melanie."

She coughed and hacked into her bandaged hand. Tucker dropped the buckets he was carrying and ran up to her. "What's happened to your hand?"

Melanie began rattling off an explanation. "Tucker, I uh. Called you at work. They said you'd been let go. I took Kevin out for some ice cream and passed by to see the boat."

"Oh, man," Tucker said.

The cop stood squarely and watched the situation unravel. More men came up from the gang-plank carrying similar white buckets along with fishing gear.

"What are you doing out here this late?" Melanie asked shakily.

She looked at the men who seemed disturbed by her presence. They looked at each other

without speaking, their shadowed looks clearer than words.

Tucker said, "I hadn't gotten around to telling you that I had been let go from my job, but I got a new job, baby. Me, and the guys here, have been chartering deep sea fishing trips. We just got back from a six hour trip past the Isles of Shoals."

Melanie looked at the fishing gear skeptically. Tucker dropped a bucket and unscrewed the lid. One man, a dark-skinned guy, knitted his eyebrows in concern. Tucker popped the lid open and the familiar smell of mackerel wafted into the air. The striped scaly bodies were piled high within.

Melanie let the air she'd been holding in her throat slide out.

"We caught tons of them today," Tucker said. "Couple stripers too, but they were too small to keep."

"I can confirm that." A friendly-looking man, a Fish and Game officer by the looks, strode through the darkness with a tight-lipped marine patrol officer in tow. "We were following these guys in, checking out the catch." He smiled at her and walked past her to shake hands with the policeman. "Wade, how are you?"

The officer leaned into the hand shake. "Good, just wanted to catch you before your shift ended."

Tucker screwed the lid back on the bucket and pulled her aside. "I'm sorry you had to find out like this, honey. I can explain it more to you at home. How about you head back with Kevin and I'll meet you as soon as we bring the mackerel to the bait shop?" His face still reflected a shadow of doubt.

She took one last look around. The officers were chatting away, and the other men were sliding white barrels and fishing gear into open-tail gates. "I'll see you at home."

"Great. Great," Tucker said. He tossed a glance at Kevin and ushered Melanie back to the car.

She collapsed into the driver's seat, where she tore her purse nearly in half to get a cigarette.

The lighter appeared in her left hand and the butt's end was sparked and glowing in a New York minute. She blew out the smoke in uneven huffs and started her car. It roared to life and then settled down to an idling hum.

Melanie smiled weakly at Kevin and glanced back at the men busy loading up the gear into the truck beds. The officers turned to her and the Fish and Game officer waved her off. The police officer said something and they all started laughing. Tucker walked over and joined their ring and started speaking right away. They seemed interested in what he had to say.

Tucker looked back at Melanie and flashed a half smile. She turned the key and the ignition squawked angrily back at her. The cigarette popped out of her wide open mouth and fell into her lap.

“You already started the car, mom.”

“I know! Ouch, oh. Shit.” Her wrapped hand fumbled around and she snatched the hot butt from where it had burned a mark into her jeans. She stuck it back into her mouth, threw on her lights, and backed her way out of the lot. Melanie didn't look, but she could feel the eyes watching her as she drove from the shifting gravel to the smooth asphalt.

Chapter 19

From the back seat James found himself drifting in and out of the conversation between Carmen and Maya. He opened the window of Carmen's BMW half-way and leaned against the door. The smells of ocean salts and warm beach sand flooded his nostrils. They'd passed through Portsmouth by turning onto Route 1A and were driving the beginning stretch of Ocean Boulevard that hugged the coast through the town of Rye, a small coastal community that was pinned between Portsmouth and Hampton. The car hovered over The White Bridge, named simply after the color of the whitewashed paint spread over the beefy, wooden structure. Beyond the road, were long stretches of open salt-water

marshes that flanked the creek. The way the long marsh grass grew astride the sunken creek beds resembled parted hair. The brown grasses matched the color of the muck it grew from; the whole expanse strangely made James imagine rice patties.

The tide was on its way out. Long green cattails tossed in the wind as Carmen put the German engineering to the test. Carmen and Maya were of the same breed. Together they tended to forget James was there—which he didn't mind—except when he had an opinion and they practically buried him with criticism. After suffering several tongue lashings he began pocketing his thoughts. A calm had come over him since he had willingly submitted to the wedding; his mind finally felt right.

Roving packs of runners and bicyclists clothed in spandex hedged the forest of Odiorne State Park, which was made of thick stands of vine-strewn trees, riddled with briars, and cut back enough to reveal a network of twisted hiking trails. In World War II, this area had been a tactical position for US defense. Giant shell casings and the thick concrete bunkers that had housed some of the military's big guns were the remnants of a patch of history. The trees here were gnarled, but strong enough to deal with the harsh sea winds. James vividly remembered running through the trails as a boy with his mother lagging behind.

Carmen slid the the car left through the gap in wooden fencing, paid the fee, and parked between two mini-vans. James stepped out into the sun and stretched his back like a feline. Maya bent over to pick something up off the ground, and he took the opportunity to reach over and grab her from behind. She was startled and then pleased when he reached around for a kiss.

“Ah, lovers in love. Quick now!” Carmen said. “Maya, Mr. Morrow, there is much to see.”

“Why do I feel like she's our chaperone?” James asked, still holding Maya close.

“Maybe because she is.” A wild look flashed across her eyes. She trotted after Carmen; her swinging butt cheeks pumped left and right like pistons. James was wishing they were back at their apartment. The things he would do. . . .

“—Mr. Morrow, let's go. We don't need you to guard my car; I have an alarm for that.” Two quick electronic chirps backed up her statement.

Odiorne Point State Park made up the south end of the harbor where the Piscataqua River and the Atlantic ocean met. James looked over the small seawall and saw the dark blue surface of the ocean. Boats were plowing to and from the harbor. White sails billowed with the favorable wind. Above all of this, the sun was alone in the cloudless sky, warming his shoulder blades through his earthy brown tee shirt. Red picnic tables stretched across the trimmed lawns. He passed a father applying sun screen to his baby while mom busied herself handing out juice boxes and sandwiches to the rest of her flock. In the distance, children raced down the rocky beach screaming, eager to wade among the tide pools. Farther along, James saw a small clutch of teens skipping stones and tossing hair.

Carmen steered them left towards the Seacoast Science Center. Beside the building there was a huge, white tent. Through the clear plastic walls, James could see the tables being set up; white table clothes were being spread, adorned with candle center pieces.

To the right of the tent they stopped to watch three people locked in a tense discussion about how the chairs should be set up with the aisle. The aisle looked as if it would face the sea; the blue water and light sky would serve as the backdrop.

Carmen said, “Just imagine, there are rows and rows of white chairs, with everyone watching Maya as she makes her way up the white carpeted aisle draped over the grass. You both will stand in front where that man is standing right there.” She pointed at a man staring at the ground, his thumbs hooked in his front belt loops. “And you'll say your vows at the footsteps of the ocean.” Carmen folded her short, fat arms; the bracelets on her wrists clattered while her pink lipstick-polished lips shifted to reveal her bleached white teeth. “Magnificent.”

“It's amazing, Carmen,” Maya said. “The perfect wedding.”

James had to agree. It was fitting, just around the bend from the beach where he'd finally decided to set the date.

They explored the science center. James dipped his hand into the tide pool exhibit picking up an urchin and felt its spines flex in his palm. His attention shifted to the other end of the tide pool exhibit, where a little boy holding a star fish was staring at him, his face almost forlorn. James waved. The boy waved back, his broad smile revealing two missing front teeth.

Once again, James found Maya staring at a lobster; this one was blue.

“Something about these guys, I don't know why I'm so drawn to them,” Maya said. She shook her head and turned away from the glass. “Can you believe it?” she asked.

“What? That we lost Carmen?” James said.

“No, that we're getting married,” Maya said. “Carmen's in the bathroom by the way, so if you want to make a run for it, you have my consent.”

“This is what I want. To be with you. We deserve this,” he said, and brushed her cheek with his lips.

“Long overdue.”

James leaned in and kissed her lips hard. “Come with me. I want to see something,” James said. He grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the Science Center. They walked out to where the small scattering of chairs and the aisle had been set up. The three people who had been there before had left for the moment.

James and Maya walked to the imaginary dais, overlooking the beach and the sea. Maya turned towards him and he turned towards her.

Maya put her hand on James's chest. “Before you say anything, I need to tell you something.”

James laughed. “What is it, babe?”

“Okay, all right. I'm just going to say it—I'm pregnant.” Maya winced.

James's felt his eyes open wide. He put his hands on his hips. "Wow."

"Good wow?"

"You're pregnant. Are you sure?"

"All the tests say 'yes.' What are you thinking?" Maya asked. "I can't stand not knowing."

James blew out a long exhale. "I'm thinking . . . that I'm going to be a daddy."

"The best daddy."

"I'm going to be a dad," James said louder, then laughed. He held his hands up to hold the sky and then back down to Maya. He hugged her tight. "Babe, we're going to be a family." James wiped tears from the corner of his eyes.

James held her hands. He spoke out of the side of his mouth, "Do you, James, promise to love, honor, and respect Maya as long as you both shall live?" James wiped a tear from her cheek and said, "I do." Again, speaking out the side of his mouth, he asked, "And do you Maya, promise to love, honor, and respect James, for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do." Maya spoke clear and firm, her eyes locked onto his.

"You may kiss the bride." James's hands held Maya's head, the way she liked, and they found each other's lips. "See." James rubbed her shoulders. "We're already married. This way, neither of us will get cold feet."

Maya giggled. "I love you, James, but you're not getting out of a ceremony in front of our friends. I look too good in that wedding dress not to wear it."

Carmen caught up to them, huffing in an over-exaggerated manner. "There you two are. I use the restroom for one moment to freshen up and you disappear."

"Sorry, James wanted to get in some extra wedding practice."

James flashed a grin Maya's way.

"Mr. Morrow needs all the practice he can get."

“They don't come any sassier than you, Mrs. Vega,” James fired back.

“Someone has to be. I was lucky to inherit it from my mother, but . . . enough. I wanted to tell Maya, there is something going on. There was some yelling, and I don't know, it was all really confusing. A man ran inside and called 9-1-1.”

Maya's face turned serious. “Wait here. I'll go check it out.”

James joined her. Once again, they left Carmen behind. As they got closer to the massing crowd at the entrance to the trails they found themselves jogging.

As they rounded the Science Center they were met by a confused group of voices, chattering away like a family of sparrows.

Maya ran up to the group. “Who called 9-1-1?”

“That guy, he was just here. Says he'd been biking. Says he saw a body up them trails a ways.” The man who spoke had parted white hair; he was wearing a baby blue polo that was tucked into khaki shorts that, like his socks, were pulled up too high.

“Which guy, sir?” Maya asked.

“Here he comes, behind you.” The man pointed eagerly.

The man running towards her was in cargo shorts and a white tee-shirt, and must have at some point ditched his bike, because he still wore the helmet. He was amusing to see, but there was nothing funny about his face, which was a shade of gray and appeared as hollow as a dead tree.

Maya stepped up and waved him over. “Sir, I'm a police detective. Tell me what's going on.”

The man looked at the Science Center, then back at Maya. “I just called you guys, how'd you get here so fast?”

“I was already here. What's going on? What's the problem, sir?”

“I just saw a dead guy. I saw him—middle of the trail—ran right back here to get help. He was wearing a uniform. His throat had been cut—so much blood. Flies. Buzzing around his head. He was dead—I'm sure of it.” The man gathered his breath then said, “I would have tried to help him if I didn't know he was already dead.” The man was clearly spooked, his eyes darted wildly.

“Where?” she asked, a sense of despair already building.

“Up the trail. A ways in. I was biking, like I always do—going pretty fast—and I see this body just lying across the trail. I almost ran him over. Had to pull off into the pricker bushes, got all scratched up.” He showed Maya and James the scratches on his arms.

Maya heard the sirens coming. The man did too. He looked like he was ready to bolt. Maya touched his shoulder. “You're going to stick with me, sir. I need you to help show us where you saw the body.”

“All right,” the man said. He didn't look happy about the thought of going back down the trails.

“What's your name?” Maya looked at his flailing chest. His Adam's apple kept twitching.

“Henry, Henry Zimmerman.”

The first cruiser looped around the parking lot and pulled up near the entrance of the trail.

The minutes after fell in a succession of shuttered blinks. The uniformed Rye and Portsmouth police officers opened car doors, while detectives parked jaggedly, wheels crushing crab grass. An ambulance was wailing in the distance. When the officers came over Maya filled them in on the situation.

She told James to stay back, telling him to stay with Carmen. James didn't look as if he would listen, but Sam appeared, placing a hand on James's shoulder and reassuring him that he'd keep Maya safe. James backed away begrudgingly. The crowd was contained and questioned. With several officers in tow, they followed the frightened Henry Zimmerman, who grew more skittish the further into the trails they got. It felt peculiar: the knot of policemen speed-walking the ocean-side trails.

They passed several confused hikers and bikers, who were directed back up the trail from where the police had come. Henry was recounting to the officers how he had come upon the body. It took them ten minutes before Henry said, “We're close.”

An ocean breeze blew off the dirt and through the trail like a tunnel ahead of them. The distinct smell of rotten flesh was carried with it. Someone was running fast behind them. Tight faces turned to see the two EMTs appear. They were out of breath and their big medical bags were bouncing off their sides.

Maya exhaled deeply. They pushed farther up the trail, which had become much more dense and scrubby.

Henry's heels skidded to an abrupt halt and he back-pedaled several steps. “This is as far as I'm going. It's right around this bend.”

The trail ahead was covered by the boughs of the overhanging trees, which only permitted splinters of sunlight to be filtered through. The ground of the small gulley was damp and spongy. Roots stuck out of the trail where the wild flowers failed to grow. Even the weeds looked sullen and undersized.

Maya fell to the back of the pack where she failed to see over the higher heads of her fellow officers. She heard the first words being spoken as they got closer to the source of the heavy odor. Three voices in the front had come upon it.

“Oh, shit.”

“Jesus!”

“Fuck me.”

They spread out around the scene and Maya got her first clear view. The body of a man was laid out spread eagle across the path. It almost looked as if he had fallen out of the sky. His open throat was buzzing with greenhead flies that circled the corpse like miniature buzzards, then settled

among the splotches of dried blood along his shredded throat. The ground beneath his neck and head was stained dark with blood. His uniform was clearly that of a Fish and Game officer. His gold name tag read “Colonel Nicholas Bender” The police moved about the perimeter to make sure the scene was safe, and the EMTs, with their blue latex gloves, inspected the corpse. They radioed back to their dispatch.

Sam wiped his forehead and stepped carefully to Maya's side. All the other officers had gone sullen, falling into the autonomy of procedure and protocol.

“Today's your day off, right?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Maya said.

“Then what the hell you doing here? Get out of here. If we need you, we'll call you.”

“Are you sure? I mean—”

“You're getting married soon, you don't need to see this right now. Go on.”

“All right.”

“By the way, I RSVP-ed the wedding.”

Maya touched his arm affectionately and thanked him. She took one last look at the scene. The EMTs were looking for something in their medical kits, while some of the police had headed up the trail, yellow tape in their hands. Others were combing the scene, while an officer was busy talking over a radio attached to his lapel.

Maya left the scene and back-tracked the trail. So many questions. As she moved she was aware of her surroundings. Insects made chirps and fluttered their tiny bodies across the trail. Poison sumac trees hung above, their leaves like window blinds, and shiny red three-leafed poison ivy poked out of the ground underfoot, waiting for an opportunity to sweep some bare skin. Maya felt disturbed that she had no emotional connection to the murdered officer and she tried to shake the image of his blood-drained face out of her head.

As she hurried up the trail, she thought of James and the confused Carmen, who took pleasure in teasing him. “Mr. Morrow,” she said, mimicking her tone. It made her smile despite the mood. A concrete bunker to her right, thoroughly overgrown with plant life, opened up like a cave.

The ground in front of her glimmered for a moment. She bent down to pick up a black leather watch at the edge of the trail. It was a Minnie Mouse watch, with Minnie in a polka-dotted dress inside the face; her arms were the watch's hands. She vaguely remembered having owned the same kind of watch as a kid. A gift from her parents. Whatever happened to her watch? Her younger brother, Sidney, had been given a Mickey Mouse version, she seemed to recall. Sidney no doubt lost or got rid of the watch. How long had it been since she'd visited him in the Framingham Prison? Several weeks. Another two years, and he'd be out. She often wondered if he would go back to selling drugs when he got out. She liked to imagine that he wouldn't, but he'd disappointed her before.

The watch's red second hand was still. Some kid must have left it behind or thrown it away. She kept the watch and quickened her pace.

The next day's paper sitting on Maya's office desk had Colonel Bender's face on the front page. The picture showed him smiling underneath a light mustache and blushing red cheeks, yet the face she'd seen was bleached white and horror-stricken. She'd taken to wearing the Minnie Mouse watch, even though it didn't work. The watch fit snug when the metal latch slid through the farthest hole. Looking upon it dug up lonely memories of a loveable, yet naïve mother, and a distant father. She took the watch off and toyed with it in her hand. Maybe it just needed a new battery? Batteries she could handle. When she turned it over, she squinted her eyes to make out the two letters scrawled into the back metal plate. “M. C.”

Just then her desk phone lit up. After four long rings she lifted the phone off the cradle and

clutched the speaker to her ear. Melanie Flynn was the last voice she expected at the other end.

Chapter 20

Maya sat alone at the bar at BG's Boathouse. She half expected to look down at the empty stool beside her and see *The Runaway* from Norman Rockwell's painting.

The bartender came over, a woman Maya figured to be a few years older than herself, and spoke through a broken smile. "Sure you don't want a drink-drink?"

Maya's hand cut sideways through the air. "I'm sure, but I'll take another cranberry juice, please." Maya rubbed her belly. She could hardly imagine that in less than nine months she'd swell up and balloon about her middle.

"No problem, hon." The bartender slipped the drink on a coaster, latched her hands on her thin cheeks, and propped her elbows like tent poles on the bar top. "Never seen you in here before," she said, squeaking her voice.

"My first time."

"Makes sense," the bartender said as she looked about the place with a casual sweep of her eyes.

"Why does it make sense?"

"We get a rough crowd in here at night, hon. Fishermen, deck hands, those kind of guys. They're all fat, rough, and genuine dick-heads. Not many women—classy women—like you and me." The woman gave a heavy wink, her long lashes dusting the air.

"Actually, that's the type I've come to see, a lobsterman."

"Which one? I know 'em all," the woman's eyes zoomed in on Maya.

Maya hesitated. "Tucker Flynn."

“I know that one—too well—unfortunately,” the bartender said then rolled her eyes. “He owe you money or something? Tucker owes just about everybody money.”

“No, nothing like that. He's just a friend of my fiance'.”

“Oh, engaged.” She seemed mildly enthused. “Congratulations. Let's see the rock.” The bartender spread her own ring-less hands wide and leaned closer.

Maya offered the her own outstretched hand. The woman swooned and caressed the small sparkling diamond and said, “It's beautiful, hon.”

“Thank you. How about you?” Maya asked, surprised to find her voice shaky.

“Haven't found the right one yet. Two divorces and three kids later, still by myself. Thank the Lord for child support.”

Maya smiled on the outside and winced on the inside. She took another drink of her cranberry juice and surveyed the bar.

The bartender winked at her again and flicked the button on the little TV. Over her shoulder the woman said, “Your secret's safe with me.”

Maya cocked her head at the woman.

“The badge,” she said, pointing to the glimmer of exposed metal dangling underneath her sport coat.

Maya hastily tucked the badge underneath her blouse. She'd thought to leave her guns at home, but had forgotten to remove the badge.

The bartender laughed. “You're a local celebrity.” She motioned to the TV. “Caught you on the news. You really served justice to that drug dealer. Nice going, girl!”

“Thanks.” Maya took a sip of her drink. “You saw my fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, don't say that, hon. I'm sure you'll find a way to get back on TV. Plenty of bad guys out there.”

“Maybe you're right.” Maya found herself looking around the bar room. This bartender, although heavy on the chat, had an honest appeal about her.

“When's the wedding?” the bartender asked.

“Three days. It's going to be at Odiorne Point.”

“No shit! Pardon my French. Three days. That's practically tomorrow. Going to be beautiful, hon. I'm totally jealous.”

“Did you ever . . . get cold feet when you got married?” Maya asked.

“*I* didn't. *They* did. Men get like that. As if they're going to miss out on a world of pussy just waiting for them.”

They shared a laugh.

“James—my fiance—has had cold feet for years. I think he's gotten over it, though.”

“Oh, he loves you, hon. You're beautiful—and sexy. Any man would be lucky to be with you.”

Maya waved off her praise. “Tell me about Tucker. Seems like you know him well,” Maya said, now resting her cheeks on her hands.

“Tucker, Tucker, Tucker.” The bartender leaned against the metal counter behind her. “Well he's a stubborn ass. He means well, but so does everybody, you know?” She plucked a random glass from a tray and gave it the once over with a dish towel. “Tucker changed a lot when he settled down with Melanie and had their two boys. Well, one kid now, but that was a shame.” Her tone switched to solemn.

“Wait, I know Kevin. There was another son?”

“You never heard?”

“Heard what?”

She put the glass back and leaned close to Maya. “Tucker's first son, Jacob, fell overboard from Tucker's boat. I'll never forget that day. I happened to be staring out the back window over there. I

saw them walking out on the dock together. Jacob was a little younger than Kevin is now. It had started out as a really fine day, but the weather turned, and they had gone out past the Isles of Shoals to go fishing for the day.” She picked a hanging scotch whiskey glass, examined a black speck of grime, and scraped it off with her nubby nail. “Tucker and I have known each other since grade school. We dated off and on in high school, where he was a complete asshole to me. He thought more with this head than this head.” She motioned towards her crotch then her own head. “But that's besides the point. For as long as I have known him, Tucker has always had shit luck, that much I'll give him, but he never deserved what happened to him that day.”

She rehung the glass. “They were still out past the shoals when this insane storm blows through. I heard he had motor problems. All the while big waves—I'm talking big waves—are tossing his boat all over the place, but with no motor, it might as well be dead in the water. Tucker, being the stubborn guy he is, didn't call in for a tow. He's the type to keep banging and beating away at a motor as if they're locked in a bloody battle of wills.” She paused then began again. “Now from what I've gathered, Jacob wasn't a strong swimmer, so why he liked being out on the water? I haven't a clue. Probably just liked to be with his dad.”

Maya put a hand over her heart.

The bartender continued. “Tucker, knowing Jacob ain't a strong swimmer, at least had the sense to hand him a life vest. The paper said a big wave hit them and tipped the boat damn near over.” The bartender used her hands to mimic the motion of a tipping boat. “Jacob was flung overboard.”

Maya released a gasp.

“Jacob didn't have time to fasten his life vest; he sank like an anchor to the bottom.” She balled her hand like a rock and dragged it down below the counter.

“What did Tucker do?” Maya asked with a heavy lump in her throat.

“He jumped in after him, no life vest or nothing. The problem was that he was battling big

waves in a rolling sea.” She shook her head. “They never found Jacob's body.”

“That's awful,” was all Maya could say.

“It is. Tucker himself was nearly lost, but another boat came and the men pulled him out of the water, half mad and half drowned. They had to have three guys restrain him 'cause he was fighting them like a bear. They even went as far as knocking him out and tying him up, because he was trying to dive back into the water.”

Maya shook her head. “That's an incredible story. I feel awful for their family.”

“Me, too. Poor Jacob didn't deserve that.”

They were both quiet for a few moments examining their thoughts. The TV hummed; the Red Sox were in the second inning against the Orioles.

The bartender took a walk over to the window. “Looks like the guys are starting to come in now. I don't think I need to tell you that no one brings up *that* day around Tucker.”

“I would assume not.”

“Sorry to be such a downer, hon. What's your name again?”

“Maya, soon to be Maya Morrow.”

“I'm Ingrid.”

The door opened and the first man threw up three stubby fingers and shouted, “Hey, Ingey! Three pitchers of PBR. We're thirsty!”

Ingrid rolled her eyes at Maya and winked before she went about filling the first pitcher.

Maya glanced as several knots of men passed through her peripheral vision. Tucker was the last one to come in. His demeanor was solitary while the other men seemed to favor the company. Chairs scraped inconsiderately over wooden floors as the men took up their seats, several taking the time to eye Maya. She ignored their looks and fingers that wagged behind her. The fishermen didn't even try to whisper; she could hear all their assessments.

Tucker looked up and saw Maya and his eyes went wide with recognition. He stopped and seemed unsure as to whether he should stop or keep going to the table where the rest of the men were picking off seats. Maya turned on her bar stool and he was caught in her net.

“Hey, Maya, wow. Good to see you. You with James?”

“Not tonight. I was actually hoping to talk to you.” She spoke confidently.

Tucker looked back at the guys who were starting to take interest in them. “Not really the place, to ah, well What was it you wanted to talk about?” His voice was low, sliding underneath the music.

“Take a seat.” She patted the stool next to her.

“This isn't the best place to talk,” Tucker mumbled as he sat down and tried to get comfortable.

She matched his low voice saying, “It won't take long. The thing is, Tucker, I know you've gotten yourself mixed up in some illegal business.”

He looked at her blankly, then his eyes shifted. Before he could rebut her Maya continued. “I got a tip—from a *very* reliable source. I know your situation, Tucker. You're hurting. You turned to the quick money.”

Tucker crossed his arms over the edge of the bar top and said, “I don't know what you're . . .”

Maya leaned closer to him. Her eyes became slits, focusing on him as if he were under her microscope. “Tell you the truth, the only reason I came here is because of James. He sees something in you, and I don't want him to be disappointed. He's much more compassionate than I am. I suppose, that's why I love him.” She turned away and began touching the wetness of her glass. The ice inside shifted, then she said, “I'm offering you a way out here before I inform the cavalry and bring this whole trafficking operation down around you.”

Ingrid swooped past them with three pitchers of beer clutched in her sturdy arms. She threaded past the empty tables to get to the pile of men in the back.

Tucker sighed and shook his head. “I—” He stopped himself, winced, and made a small groan. His lips sealed and he narrowed the space between his eyebrows. “I ain't never been a good liar.” He scratched the back of his neck. “I'll talk. But not here, or even downtown at the police station.”

“It has to be tonight. I can't stall this. Things are going to happen quickly,” she said, whispering so Ingrid didn't overhear.

He rubbed his scruffy beard, rearranged his hat, and whispered, “Walmart. One hour. Meet me in the fishing section. I'll tell you everything I know.”

“Okay, I'll be there. Don't be late.” Maya stepped off the stool.

“I won't,” Tucker said, then slipped a soft sigh out his mouth.

“Hey, Tuck! Who's your lady friend?” The bulky fisherman clapped a bloated hand on Tucker's back and nearly knocked him off his stool.

“Eh-hey, Tom, this is my friend.” Tucker's body seemed to shrivel in the man's presence.

“Marissa.” Maya said, pulling the name out confidently.

“How you know Fucker—I mean—Tucker?” Tom asked. Tom smiled at his own joke and put his hands on his wide hips.

“He and I met at a Red Sox game last month. He and his wife and son sat right next to me and my boyfriend.”

“Sounds like it was a lot of fun,” Tom said, lacking the enthusiasm the words demanded.

“It was.” She turned away from the fat fisherman. “It was nice bumping into you, Tucker.”

“Sure you can't stay? Have a drink with us?” Tom asked, his tone was intentionally dull.

She turned back to him. She felt her hands slide up her hips. “I'm sure. I have to meet up with my boyfriend.”

“What a shame,” Tom said.

Maya left a five on the bar and patted Tucker on the shoulder as she left. She walked for the

door.

“Who'd they play?” Maya felt the fisherman's question hit her right between the shoulder blades.

She turned to face Tom, who was now leaning over the bar stool that Maya had just occupied.

“What was that?” she asked.

“The Red Sox, you said you guys went to a game last month. Who'd the Sox play?”

Tucker started to say something, but Tom turned on him and silenced him with a glare.

Maya searched her brain for a likely team. “The Yankees.”

“That's funny. They didn't play the Yankees last month.” Tom didn't take his eyes off Maya.

“The White Sox,” Tucker spit out. “Same colors, you know? Women always screw up the teams.” He laughed weakly.

Tom looked back at Tucker and then raised an eyebrow at Maya.

Maya shook her head and then pointed to her hair. “That's right. I knew it was a black and white uniform. My boyfriend's the real baseball fan,” she said then giggled as if she were a clumsy girl.

As she walked away Tom said, “Night, Alyssa.”

“Night.” She waved, then pushed through the screen door. As she closed the door behind her, she realized he'd called her Alyssa instead of Marissa. In her head she berated herself for the stupid mistakes.

She'd parked her unmarked police car in a boat yard two blocks up the road. She had to stop for a moment to rub her stomach. Had something stirred inside of her?

The moon was out, full and orange, like a celestial pumpkin. The dark leaves of the maples surrounding the boat yard gave her some refuge from the moon's glare. As she looked up at the row of large, white hulls, an animal burst through the undergrowth bounding away from her and scaring her to the point where she put her arm to her left hip, searching for the welcome weight of the gun that wasn't

there. “Stupid squirrel.”

The air around her became still and the dark shadows of the canopy seemed to sink when she heard a familiar voice slice through the silence.

“Maya.”

The voice slipped into her ears like a thief, echoing against her beating heart. She turned in time to register the face of the person who had spoken her name just as the dark object was brought crashing down on her head. There was no time to think or to feel the thunderous pain before her world became a shade of forever black.

Chapter 21

Where was she? James checked his watch again. Only five minutes had passed since he'd last acknowledged the time at 11:50PM. James had called Maya's phone seven times already. His calls had gone straight to voice mail each time. When he called the station they said she'd left at her usual time. When he'd gotten home from work he noticed the bathroom light was left on, the drier was spinning laundry, and Maya's guns were resting in the safe. He'd probably just missed her.

Lying awake in bed alone, he contemplated driving around to see if he could find her. But where would he look? No note, no call. Not like her at all. Three days before their wedding and he didn't know where his bride was. Drowsiness wrapped around his head like cushions and he eventually forfeited his worried thoughts to sleep.

Thump, thump, thump, thump. James's crusty eyes snapped open quickly, but his mind was slow. He looked out his window, the sun's light seared through the edges of the window's curtains. Who the hell would be knocking on his door this early? Had he locked it? He must have. It was probably Maya.

He found a loose pair of shorts to disguise his morning wood. “If it's Jehovah's Witnesses I'm gonna . . .”

Thump, thump, thump, thump! The knocking was louder than before.

“Give me a second. Jeez,” James muttered.

Wearing a dirty, white tee-shirt, he walked barefooted and spied through the eye hole. Two uniformed police officers appeared at the other end of the peep hole, not an uncommon sight at his door.

He made sure his retreating erection wasn't visible before he opened the door. Two detectives in Maya's unit. One was Sam. James couldn't recall the other guy's name. There was something in their similar puckered faces, something queer. “Looking for Maya?” he asked.

“What? No,” Sam said. “I mean, we, uh, know where she is.”

“Good. She didn't come home last night. I was starting to wonder.” James shaded his eyes from the sun.

“Um, James. I have some really bad news.” Sam's dark face shined like plastic. “I'm truly sorry to tell you this . . .” He paused, and his tongue passed over his bottom lip. “A fishing boat found a body in the water this morning.” Another pause. “The body they found, was Maya's. Maya's dead, James. I'm sorry.”

James frowned. “Little early for this kinda crap guys.”

They both stared back at James, stone-faced.

“Seriously guys, where is she?” James looked past them to see if she was hiding.

The other detective continued in the same tone: a sensitive, low humble speech. “It looks as if she was hit with a blunt object to the head. There wouldn't have been much pain.” He was a thick, barrel-chested guy. Was his name Charles? Charlie? Yes, they called him Charlie.

“Sam, Charlie, enough is enough. I really don't need this. Where is she? Did she put you up to

this?”

Sam put his hand on James's shoulder, he sniffed through big nostrils. His dark eyes were soggy, but he stared hard at James. Sam hid his lips and shook his head slowly. He kept his hand on James's shoulder, giving it a little squeeze. Charlie looked down at his shoes. Sam repeated himself. “Maya's dead, James.”

“Where is she?” James felt the words as they spring-boarded off his bottom lip. He became breathless. A peculiar thing. His temples beat the sides of his head, his ears rang, and his jaw grew tight. “Where . . . is she?”

Charlie turned away.

“Where is she?”

“Maya's dead, James. You have to understand. She's been killed.” Sam put his other hand on James's other shoulder as if he were trying to make his words physical.

“She's dead. Oh,” was all James said, before his legs turned into air and his body gave into gravity. When he woke a few moments later the two men were hauling him up by his arms and they dragged him to his couch.

“Is there anyone we can call? Anyone to come be with you?” Sam asked.

“Where? Where is she, Sam?” He asked the question, and thought about the answer. He threw up. Most of it was caught by his shirt, the rest splashed onto the couch.

“Oh, man,” Charlie said. He rushed away to the kitchen and came back holding two handfuls of paper towels. It felt odd to have these men in his apartment with their black polished shoes and their stiff collars.

James felt himself losing his grip, but then he regained control. “I can't believe what I'm hearing. It's just not right. You're telling me Maya is dead? Hit on the head and she . . . died?”

“Right now, we suspect foul play. That's what it looks like, but we're going to be devoting all

our time to finding out how this happened.”

“Maya is dead.” He felt the vomit rise up and he choked it down. The acid burned his throat. Charlie ripped two sheets of paper towels, which he handed to James. Charlie then began tentatively wiping the couch.

“Who can we call for you, James?” Sam asked.

James didn't respond.

Sam asked again. “Who can we call?”

Only one name came to mind.

Chapter 22

“Jesus, James. Jesus, I am so sorry man, Jesus,” Tucker said. “I don't even know what to say. What do you need, man?”

James hadn't moved from his sitting position on the couch. Sam had called Tucker's house. While the detectives waited they'd asked James questions. Where he was yesterday and last night? Who could confirm his whereabouts? The last time he saw Maya. Had they had any arguments recently? James responded to their questions hoarsely, the vomit had scorched his throat. The room smelled like his throw-up.

Tucker and Melanie had just sort of appeared in front of James's vision. Melanie busied herself with rags and sprays that she'd found in the kitchen and set about scrubbing the vomit out of the couch. With Tucker's help, they took off James's wet shirt. After another round of probing the officers turned to leave.

James snapped back at them. “I want to see her. I want to see Maya.”

Charlie seemed to hesitate then Sam broke in and said, “We'll be outside when you're ready.”

Tucker got him a new shirt. The living room took on a strong lemon scent. Melanie and Tucker waited and told James they would come along with him for support. James suddenly pitied them, but who else did he have?

James's body felt weighted down, as if by invisible stones. He sunk deep into the blue Buick's worn upholstery. They followed the unmarked squad car and James imagined he was following behind Maya. The image was unsettling and confusing.

Before Sam and Charlie let him enter the building they took the time to warn him, tried to prepare him for what he was going to see.

He was anything but prepared when the examiner in the lab coat unfolded the top part of the white sheet and revealed her corpse. James reeled away instantly: the sight of the gray blob in front of him was too much to bear. "Son of a bitch!" James said, covering his mouth with his hand.

"The water. It caused gasses to build up," the examiner said. He passed around a little plastic tube. Charlie rubbed some of the greasy gel under his nose and offered it to James. James shot the man a death glare.

"James, let's go," Melanie said putting a hand on his shoulder. "We can leave, right officers?"

Sam started to speak and James cut him off. "No! She was . . . going to be my wife. I need to see her."

He turned back slowly. The sheet respectfully covered her breasts. Her body was puffy. The fine angles that James had loved were now shapeless masses of flesh. Her neck bulged like a frog's. Her beautiful face. He'd spent many a night awake staring at all her lovely features, now ruined. As if an entire tree had landed on her head, then the damaged tissue had been reshaped by a night's soak. Her hair was a tangled mess that was still wet. The odor of death was powerful, mixed with an strong scent of seaweed and salt water.

James felt shame. The smell was too much for his twisting stomach. He ripped the smelling gel

from Charlie's hand and globbed two smudges under his nostrils. "I need a moment alone with her."

"Against protocol," Charlie sputtered out.

"I'm still running tests," the examiner said.

"I need a fucking minute with my fiance'e. I'm not asking!"

Sam was the one who spoke. "Clear out guys. I'll hang around the door, make sure nothing's tampered with."

They all shuffled out. The examiner flashed a look of irritation.

James stood over Maya. It didn't make sense. How could this have happened? She was alive and with him in their apartment the day before. Now she was dead: the life crushed out of her. Why her? Why him? The twisted clumps of hair were pushed back. The skin from her scalp all the way down to her nose had collapsed and sunken inwards. A long crack, splitting into her skull. Her face was a mottled mix of red, purple, gray, and black. Dried blood clung to her teeth and mouth.

James knew this would be the last time he would see her. He clenched his jaw, bent down, and kissed her lips. Cold, motionless, dead lips; the same as little Derek Fanning's.

Chapter 23

The lemon smell still remained and James's couch was as clean as it would ever get.

"I've got to go, doing a fishing charter today," Tucker mumbled.

"I can stick around, James, until Kevin gets dropped off from school," Melanie offered.

"It's not necessary. I'm okay. I'm fine. You've both already been so kind." James waved them away.

"Really, it's no trouble, James," Melanie said, for a moment reminding him of Maya.

James hugged himself and sighed. "I need to grieve alone."

Melanie hesitated then said, “I’ll call you later—to check in. You’ve got food in the fridge.”

“Thank you. Thank you,” James said. “Goodbye.” They scuttled off his front steps then drove away.

He sat alone, on the couch, staring at the wall. Time and place were no longer significant.

The phone rang. He blinked. The sound shook him out of the trance. James slowly picked the phone up and listened to the voice on the other end. “James, it’s me Melanie,” her voice was hushed and her words quick. “I couldn’t say anything with the police and Tucker there, but I think I might know something about Maya’s murder. Are you there?”

“I’ve got it. I promise,” James said. “Yes—I’ll do what I can. I’m sorry, too.” James hung up the phone. Melanie’s information split his head in half. Impulse guided his body. Maya’s locked case. The digital code. Her birthday. He typed in the numbers and the lock released. Two guns rested on the gray felt. Several magazines filled with ammo were stacked neatly while a box of bronze mushroom top bullets peeked above their cardboard case.

He grabbed the black Sig .38 first, and shoved in a magazine with the palm of his hand. The gun’s action snapped back with the smoothness of a snake bite. He placed the .38 on the bureau then eyed the second gun, a small Beretta .22 strapped into its leather ankle holster: her back-up weapon. Heavy with ammunition, he closed the door and left his home.

Chapter 24

“A fifth of Jameson, will that be all?”

“That's all.”

“It's on sale.”

“Keep the change. I won't be needing it.”

Chapter 25

Nothing's changed here, James thought. He licked his wet lips. The bottle of Jameson dangled in his right hand. The “special” sticker was still pasted to the side of the green glass. He took a pull off the bottle and let the whiskey swish around his mouth. Was this how his father felt when he drank? What was in the alcohol that made him so vicious? James had always imagined drinking his father's drink would transform him somehow. So far, all he felt was heat in his rubbery cheeks.

He'd walked into a living memory—a photograph. Although the abandoned sand and gravel pit was probably as alive as the heart of death valley. The hills of sand and gravel were piled into pyramids that sparkled with fragments of mica. At the edges of the pit the silent trunks of conifers watched, termite infested bark, half hidden by coats of needles; wardens of the wasteland, being eaten from the inside.

James's loose sensations were interrupted by the pinching skin at his back where he'd stuffed the .38 behind his belt. He took the gun out and cradled it in his two hands. Even though the gun was sleeping now, he could sense the power. All he needed to do was pull the trigger to wake it up.

“The only good part of me is dead.” He looked at the dunes surrounding him. “What's left?”

Tears hit the sand at his feet and were turned to dust. “I've got nothing. I'm lost without her,” he argued through his teeth.

The alcohol moved through him, quickening its pace in an effort to comfort. When he looked down at the gun in his hands he saw the dark circle staring back at him. Is Maya in there? Waiting for

me to come.

His lips quivered, suddenly an eight-year-old coward once again. His father was winding up to plant a knuckle kiss on his cheek.

He turned the gun away from his face and panted. How long had he been holding his breath? The sleeve of his black tee-shirt wiped his wet forehead. Another pull of whiskey.

The targets he'd set up, an aluminum army of discarded beer cans, stood at attention. They were a motley group of shredded cylinders sitting on two long, heavily pock-marked beams that somebody had lugged out here.

He hadn't changed either—the same frightened boy that had stood here decades ago. At twenty yards away he squared his shoulders, bent his elbows, and held the gun firmly. Taking his time he began slowly squeezing his finger on the slim metal trigger. The bullet exploded from the chamber and flew through the open air until it stabbed through the target like it was paper. The can flew off its perch and skittered away. Another pull of whiskey. What would his father say?

“Nice shot, retard.”

“Thanks, pop.”

“Clean that fucking wax out of your ears, moron.”

“Sorry, pop.”

“She's dead. Dead because of you, retard.”

Another pull of whiskey. James focused on the next target. It spun away with a brand new hole through its center. A smile smeared across his face. It was as if his dad was right there, somewhere past the thin curls of gun-smoke. James knocked down the other four in quick succession. Another pull of whiskey.

He refilled the magazine and dropped down to a knee to lift up his jeans at the leg. The Beretta strapped above his ankle didn't have the weight and feel of the .38, but it was meant to be concealable

and for close fire. He moved up to ten yards and took aim. He cleared the row and was left with one bullet to spare. When he looked down at one ripped can, the aluminum was torn open and bent like a smile. The last bullet struck the can and the smile spun around turning into a sad face. Another pull of whiskey.

The moped's front wheel weaved back and forth between the road lines. The way he felt, it was as if someone else were driving Sally Jay. The roads were dark where they weren't watched over by street lights. The spear of his single headlight slashed back and forth through the darkness. At a stop sign he waited for the road to clear.

The phone call with Melanie had given James something to focus on. She'd said that Maya had met with Tucker last night. That Tucker had taken up with drug traffickers to cover expenses. Melanie had reached out to Maya for help. Tucker would have been one of the last people to see Maya alive. He could easily be her killer. James shuddered. He put his hand to his back, the .38 was still there. Melanie had made him promise to try to help Tucker. We'll see about that, he thought.

Two angry horn blasts came from the set of headlights behind him. "Hey! Shit for brains. Hurry it up already!" The man stuck his head out the window and used his hand to make a rolling motion.

James shook his head and realized he hadn't bothered to wear his half helmet. He accelerated and fishtailed in a patch of sand. The moped caught enough of the road to stay upright, but just barely. Almost there, he thought. He crossed a grated bridge stretching over a section of Sagamore Creek. The grating made his small tires pitch left and right, creating a dull moan to fill the otherwise quiet night.

He took the next left and noticed his arms felt incredibly loose as if they'd given up working. He could barely feel his own grip. In a panic he blew past BG's parking lot. He tried to correct himself, jettisoning headlong into the gangly trees and thick brush. His arms and legs tangled in front

of him as he flew beyond his moped completely, ricocheting off the wrist-thick tree trunks, scratched by every branch on the way down.

Eyes opened slowly. Afraid to see if he was still alive or not. His face was lying in a pile of rotting, wet leaves. He spit out dirt that was sticking to his gums. A copper taste of blood was in his mouth; he licked the chunk of his cheek that he'd bitten into. His heart was beating in his head; warm blood trickled into his eye. He'd vaguely remembered a knocking his head especially hard off a branch. He stood up, dazed but still functioning. The moped was lying on its side. The engine was off, flooded no doubt, but the headlight was still on when James picked the moped up, pain stabbed his left shoulder. He propped the thrashed vehicle against a bush and turned off the headlight. Thankfully the bottle of Jameson stashed under the seat was still intact. He padded the wound on his head; it was tender. He pulled his shirt off and wrapped it like a headband around his forehead.

Despite his crash into the brush, this was where he wanted to be. He stumbled to the edge of the trees and crested a bluff overlooking the creek and the backside of BG's. Squinting hard, he could see that *The Periwinkle* wasn't docked.

James slumped down in the damp earth. A wave of fatigue threatened to overtake him. He fought against sleep. The black flies and mosquitoes helped. They were biting and landing on his face, trying to crawl under his eyelids and into his ears. He swatted and killed them at first. Then he let them feast, what did he care? He gulped long on the bottle and stared through the overhanging trees and half-open eyes at the starlit creek.

The sound of motors and echoing voices woke him up. James watched the cluster of boats make their way over the long strip of water. He listened and watched as they drew closer to the docks. Voices skipped over the water, but the night sounds and the boat motors drowned out their words.

The men docked and started carrying supplies and white buckets up to some waiting trucks. James watched as the a cop car's tires crunched gravel. Two policemen got out and approached the

men. James recognized one as Detective Wade Copley. James had filed several complaints on him in the past. A foreign-looking man took a white sealed bucket around the back and put it into the police car's open trunk. James watched as Wade went back to check the trunk. When he came back around, Wade grabbed the foreign man by the collar. "The fuck is this?"

"The stuff," the man said to Wade.

"Yeah, I know, moron. We don't want the drugs, we want the cash. 'Mon-ey.' Learn fucking English." Wade released the man who ran to exchange the bucket for a different one. Wade checked this time before it was loaded.

Tucker came into view, white buckets in each hand. James began to realize that there was a bigger picture here and Tucker was the key to it. "He knows, yeah, he knows everything. He'll be my answer man. Mr. Answers."

Chapter 26

The next morning, after a nightmarish sleep spent in the woods, James strode down the docks in a pair of dirt-stained blue jeans and a blood-stained black tee-shirt. Bug bites littered his face and torso. Since he didn't have enough arms to deal with the itching, he'd swallowed more whiskey instead, the shadow of the liquid inside settled just below the bottom third of the bottle. The humid air stuck to his skin, making the creases of his body run slick with sweat.

James nodded at a man in his boat bent over a skill saw. The man finished the cut and set the machine down to pad his dripping face with a red handkerchief. He brushed a glistening hand over gray work pants, raking sawdust off himself. The man made no effort to nod back.

The Periwinkle sat quietly towards the end of the dock. The floating dock squeaked at his approach. On the other side of Tucker's boat, sat two sea gulls atop the twin posts like sentries. They

preened their feathers and seemed annoyed. As James walked closer they gave him half their attention. A few steps more and they were shaking their wings out, preparing to flee. James felt like rushing the birds as a kid would have. Instead he stepped aboard *The Periwinkle* as if he belonged there, headed into the wheelhouse, and opened the rectangular plywood door to the hold. The inside was essentially a small cave, stuffed with piles of gear and leftover bait. He inhaled deep, crouched low, and crawled inside head first.

The darkness was powerful and he was met by an overwhelming odor of festering fish and blood. He closed the door and felt his way around to get to the back. James crawled over half-empty greased buckets, buoys, shifty life vests, and large coils of rope. His hand fell into one of the buckets and he felt his arm slide into a pile of warm, scaly fish. When he pulled his hand out it was spackled with fish guts and smelled foul. At the back corner he slid his back against the wall. The gun scraped the whole way down with him. He immediately lifted himself up once he felt the pool of filthy water seep into his jeans. James swore and bumped his head off the low ceiling. His hand groped until he found a bucket to sit on. He turned it over, and as he did something inside fell out and splashed. Bent over double wasn't comfortable either so he built a nest out of coiled rope and buoys. The smell only seemed to get worse.

James sweated as if he were in a sauna; there was no light or fresh air, save for a pinprick in the ceiling that revealed a solitary ray of sun. He choked on the rotting fish smell, and could feel it seeping into his own skin. He endured this belly of a whale, the hot stink, the dripping bloody water, and the darkness.

How he'd come to this? In the gloom it took him a considerable effort to remember. Maya's death was like a fresh wound. He grieved for his dead bride, stolen from him, and the baby. The grief, so overwhelming, he'd sought nothing else but to end it.

Then there was the call. Melanie's suspicions had resurrected some body of anger. Could he kill

a friend? Was Tucker even his friend?

“What the fuck's the matter with you, James?” His father's words in his own mouth. James punched his cheek. He'd have to temper his body, become hard. Hard enough to kill. James banged his head off the fiberglass siding. Then he swung his fist like a club into his stomach. Then his chest. Slapped his face. Pulled his hair. “You can't hurt me.” James slapped his head. “No one can hurt me.”

James kept on till he could hardly feel the blows, until he was ready. Then he resumed his waiting. No part of his skin was dry: it was as if he'd bathed in wet compost. The itching flared up again. His fingers scratched his scalp, between his shoulder blades, then his calves. When one scratch was relieved, another itch would sprout. It was as if his body was bullying him. Hastily he unscrewed the cap off the Jameson and took two long pulls in rapid succession and clutched the bottle to his chest. Within moments he could feel it fall into his stomach, where it began a festering of its own. The tiny pinprick of light above him—such small hope for a man trapped in hell.

Chapter 27

Tucker rummaged through his garage and found the socket wrench buried under a pile of screw drivers. The heat off the engine was still warm as he leaned over and shoved his arm into the crack, his fingers picking up grease and coal black dirt scraping under his nails. The sun was relentless, but not nearly as oppressive as the humidity. One of those days when he felt he was living in a rainforest. He flicked the timing belt, then rubbed it, feeling for cracks. After filling up all the fluids he patted the engine and let the hood fall like a deadfall trap.

He cleared the bench, swept the floor, returned his tools, and took a moment to admire his work. The hanging hammers and pipe wrenches gleamed in the half light. The rusty handsaws and sharper tools hung on nails just above.

Tucker wiped the sweat tumbling down his sideburns thinking how another hour in this hot box and he was liable to go crazy. He left the garage and headed inside to wash up and enjoy the comfort of the new air conditioner. Kevin was relaxing on the couch, his windswept surfer hair shaking under the blowing power of the a/c unit. Kevin was currently fixated with the new Nintendo handheld Tucker had bought him, hooked on it like a drug. Tucker shook his head.

In the kitchen, Tucker found Melanie cleaning out the fridge. "Need some help, hon?" he asked the butt sticking out the fridge.

"I'm fine. This thing is filthy," Melanie said.

"It's not that dirty," Tucker mumbled.

"Dirty enough," Melanie said, pointedly.

Tucker shrugged and lathered up his hands with globs of soap. The dirt came off, but the grease had to be worked out. When he was done, his fingers still felt gummy.

Tucker was on his way to his bedroom, when Melanie called out from the fridge, "Are you going to do whatever it is you do for work today?"

"I am." He saw the bait and refused to bite.

"What time will you be back?"

"I'd say around eleven-thirty."

"Hmm . . . mhm," Melanie said, without even taking her head out of the fridge.

Tucker took the opportunity to go to the bedroom where he ducked into the closet and picked through folded beach towels and old VHS tapes till he got to the shoebox. He cracked the lid. "What the hell?" Staring at the hanging shirts he muttered, "Melanie."

In the kitchen, Melanie had momentarily separated herself from the fridge. She held Mayo in one hand and a jar of pickles in the other.

"We need to talk," Tucker said, his tone was heavy.

“Not now, can't you see I'm busy?”

“No, now!” His voice was growing louder, he could feel his neck hackles begin to rise.

“About what?”

“You know exactly what.”

“I don't have time for this,” Melanie said, putting the jars back into the fridge

“Where is it?”

“Where is what?” Melanie asked, then reached for the bottle of ketchup on the kitchen table.

Tucker stepped in her way. “Where is the money that was in the shoebox?”

“Oh? I thought that was mine. Seeing as I am the only person that makes legitimate money in this household.”

The *bitch*, he thought. Melanie's arm reached around Tucker and went for the tub of margarine instead. Tucker batted the yellow container off the table.

“Well that was smart,” Melanie said, sarcasm sticking like the yellow margarine on the floor.

“Melanie, I'm not playing with you. Where's the money?”

“You got a temper problem. I'm not about to take this kind of crap from you.”

She went to reach around Tucker again and he grabbed her wrist. He held it tight, unsure of what he was going to do, only that he needed to do it. Her face curdled with displeasure and he let her arm go.

“I think the heat's gone to your head,” she said, holding her wrist. “You're a lunatic!”

“Last time I'm going to ask. Where is it?”

Melanie walked around Tucker to her purse, opened it, and pulled out the hefty wad of hundreds. “I was going to put it in the bank so it could collect interest. Better than leaving it hidden in a shoebox.”

“It's mine.” He heard himself growl.

“What's yours is mine, Tuck. We promised to share everything when we got married, remember?”

“You have no right—”

“—I have every right, as long as you are hiding things from me, I can hide things from you.”

“You want to know what I do? Is that it? You really want to know what I do?” He felt his hands leave his sides and start to flail.

“I want you to be straight with me,” she said.

“Fine.” Tucker leaned into the living room. “Kevin, mom and I are going to make a trip to the store.”

“Yeah, fine, whatever,” Kevin yelled back.

They took Tucker's truck. When Tucker turned onto the main road Melanie turned to him and said, “I want you to tell me what's going on. Where is this money coming from and what are you doing?”

Tucker let the questions soak for a minute. He concentrated on driving and sighed. “You don't know what kind of pressure I'm under here.”

“I want to know.”

Tucker rubbed the back of his neck; it was reddish pink from the sun. “I'm helping transport some stuff.” He paused for three heart beats. “Drugs.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Melanie's frown sank deep.

Tucker stopped at the stop sign. “Listen. I'm only doing this for us. So we can eat, live, and save the god-damned house! You think I like doing this? Sneaking around at night with some fucking criminals, paying off crooked cops, and smuggling illegal shit. You think I like this?”

Melanie's look turned sympathetic. Tucker watched as she put her hand on his. It felt good to feel her touch again.

“Beep! Beep!”

“Fuck!” Tucker shouted. “I’m going, asshole!” Tucker threw the car the finger and headed right. He sighed and watched the road. “My nerves are completely shot”

“Then stop. You’ve got enough money to get us by. We can figure something else out. You can get another job, we’ll make it work.” Melanie’s voice became soft, with a subtle urgency.

Tucker shook his head. “It’s not that easy. The lobstermen that brought me in on this deal are tough S-O-Bs and they aren’t the sort to let me out whenever I damn well please. This smuggling shit has been happening right under the radar: there’s cops in on it, guys from the coast guard, Fish and Game, bunch of lobstermen, and these other guys—Brazilians. They’re here to make sure everything runs smooth-like.”

Melanie took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one up. The smoke was sucked through the crack in the window. “Tucker, I have to know the truth. Were you involved with what happened to Maya?”

He shook his head vehemently. “No. I swear it. She came to me. Came at the worst time. I was at the bar, with all the guys around. Somehow she found out I was part of this. Said she could get me out. I believed her. Told her to meet me in an hour. She never showed. Next thing I know she’s found dead up the creek.”

“Do you know who did it?”

“It could have been anyone. Anyone who didn’t like her snooping around the operation. It broke my heart to see James the way he is. With her gone, my chances of getting out are gone, too. I don’t know which cops are clean. This shit’s bigger than me.”

Melanie burned through the cigarette, flicked it out the window, and exchanged it for a fresh one. “I’m sorry, Tucker.”

“Sorry for what?” he asked.

“For everything. Life’s never been the same since we lost Jacob. I know you’ve had incredible

pressure on your shoulders. I'm so sorry.” Melanie rubbed his shoulder.

Tucker pulled over on the side of the road. He took Melanie in his arms. Their muffled sobs didn't escape the truck cab.

Chapter 28

When they came back to the house Tucker peeled Kevin off the couch and ushered him outside while balancing a basketball in his arm pit.

“I don't want to. It's too hot,” Kevin said once they were on the drive way, his hand shading his squinting eyes.

“Come on, play ball with your old man.” Tucker sent a quick bounce pass off the black tar. Kevin wasn't ready for it.

“What the hell?” Kevin said, shielding himself from the ball.

“Watch your mouth!”

“I want to go back inside,” Kevin said.

“Too bad, pick up the ball and try and drive on me.”

Kevin sulked over and picked up the ball that had rolled onto the grass. He held the ball and looked at Tucker who had gotten into an exaggerated defensive stance.

Kevin dribbled three times. Tucker reached in and swatted the ball away. “Got to play tighter than that.”

Kevin retrieved the ball again, dribbled twice, and stopped concentrating on the hoop. He licked his lips and threw the ball. It had almost no arc, descending like an air plane without landing gear. The orange ball hit the back of the rim and sprang away. Tucker rebounded and dribbled up to the key. Kevin slid into the defense role, his legs awkwardly straight, glued to the tar. Tucker eyed the

hoop, and in a burst of speed drove past Kevin, then went up and spun the ball with enough English to let it ride the backboard and slip through the hoop with a soft swish of the torn net.

Tucker looked back triumphantly and saw his son on the ground. Kevin was sitting down holding his left knee inspecting the fresh, red scrape. He winced as he brushed the dirt off. His bottom lip unfurled and his throat shaking. Kevin's brown eyes were balancing water weight.

Kevin got up and marched towards the front door, half dragging the scraped leg like a wounded soldier.

Tucker called out after him. "Where you going, Kev?"

Kevin mumbled something, his fists balled tight.

"Don't you walk away from me." Tucker could feel the heat gathering behind his ears. The screen door closed with a loud whack.

Tucker's legs leaped after him. Just as Kevin was about to sit back on the couch Tucker grabbed him by the shirt and started pulling him back toward the door.

Kevin began crying. "Dad, stop it."

"I'm going to show you that you don't disrespect your father. Or this house!" He dragged Kevin outside and held the screen door.

"Don't you ever slam the door." Tucker smacked the door once, twice, then a final time; each time cracking the flimsy wood against the frame.

"I didn't," Kevin screamed.

"See how you like it." He grabbed Kevin's wrist and held it against the frame. Then he brought the door crashing down like a guillotine. The wood smashed against his wrist and hand and Kevin's screams got louder.

"And don't you lie to me either," Tucker said and swung the door like a paddle, cracking it off Kevin's wriggling hand again.

Melanie rushed from inside and stepped in between the door and Kevin. Just in time to catch the door in her face. She brought Kevin to her chest and put her back to Tucker.

“Stay out of this,” Tucker said.

“No! Get out. Get out of here!” Melanie had tears of her own as she brought Kevin into the house.

How dare she. How dare she get in his way, he thought. He stepped halfway inside, looked at the door in his hands, then stepped back outside, the door retracting with a loud whack. The clouds above covered the burning sun; the shade offered a momentary respite. A whisper of a breeze licked the hot corners of his face. He gathered up the abandoned ball and threw a line drive at the backboard.

Across the street, his elderly neighbor Alphonso was standing on his stoop with his hands on hips. His face was full of condemnation.

“Mind you own business.” Tucker's glare sent the old man packing.

When Tucker got into his truck it didn't start. “Don't you try and stop me.”

He sprayed igniter fluid into the air intake, hopped back into the driver seat, punched the key into the ignition, pinched the key, and turned as if he was gripping skin. The spark caught and the engine roared. He tossed the spray can into the glove compartment. Tucker drove away from the house and headed for the harbor. Ungrateful, the both of them. Ungrateful. He checked the time on the dash, 6:15 PM.

At BG's he glanced through the window and was surprised to see Ingrid's face glaring back at him. Tucker waved half-halfheartedly. Ingrid crossed her arms across her meager chest. What's her problem? She'd at least listened to him. He only had to put the hand to her a couple of times when they'd been dating. Smartened her right up.

The restaurant was packed and the boaters chattered, reluctant to leave the water, content to just sit, drink, and swat at the first hail of mosquitoes. He stepped aboard *The Periwinkle*. She started up

strong for him. "That's a good girl." He untied the lines and led the boat out into the river. The sun was four fingers from touching the western horizon. The boats he passed, like him, had their dull lights glowing.

Tucker drove under the singing bridge. A car above him sped over the grate causing a humming sound. Tucker cleared the jetties. A few die hard fishermen clung to the sides of the channel, as if they were anemones casting their tendril lines, hoping to catch a passing fish. The light house to his far left flickered a beam over the foamy seas. He started to make wake and let *The Periwinkle* rise above the chop. As the boat hull rose up he heard some of the gear in the hold tumble around. He really ought to go through and clean it, he thought, picturing the mess within. At the two mile marker buoy he angled towards the Isles of Shoals. On flat seas he could usually make a short run of it, but choppy waters would make for rough slogging. Soon enough he was passing the small cluster of islands, some occupied, others more or less abandoned.

As he drove, he let the motor's sounds mix with the sound of the ocean spray. There were no other boats in sight. The sun at his back was an orange, its peels melting into the horizon. The sound of something being thrown around again in the hold drew his attention away from the wheel. He slowed the boat down and flipped the lever to neutral. Tucker bent down to open the hold door and he jumped back when something forced its way out.

Tucker stepped back and watched as James Morrow struggled to stand up.

"What the hell?" Tucker said. His phrasing reminded him of Kevin, so that's where the little shit learned to talk like that.

"Hell? Hell?" James was swaying and chuckling as he said the word over and over.

"Yes, hell. Like what the hell you think you're doing?"

James laughed back at him. An empty bottle of Jameson hanging from his limp hand.

Tucker looked for answers in James's face. His normally calm eyes squinted, they had a glaze

about them. He smelled like a bait bucket. He was wet and his clothes were filthy. There was a raw wound on his forehead. The front of his jeans were wet, he'd wet himself.

James crooked his pointer finger at Tucker. "You know. I know that you know."

"You're drunk and being stupid, James." Tucker took a step forward and James reached a hand behind his back and pulled out the large handgun.

"Whoa there. Whoa there. Why do you have that?" Tucker's tone was calming, behind a thin curtain of fear.

James's words stumbled out. "Just sit, I mean—stay there—I mean it. One more step and . . ."

Tucker stood still. He thought about bull rushing James and knocking him over the side. There was the fishing gaff. No chance, it was on James's side of the boat. Tucker saw the lever was still erect in neutral. He could dive and push it forward. The jolt might be enough to make James lose his balance. It was risky.

James must have caught the look. Tucker could only watch as James stared at the throttle for a long moment. Then, with the gun aimed at Tucker's chest, James snatched the boat key out of the ignition and clumsily pocketed it. The engine cut away and they were left with only the sounds of the elements and Tucker's pounding heart.

Tucker was barely aware that his arms were raised up showing James his open palms. "Hey, let's just talk this out, buddy. What is it that I know?"

"Pow!" The gun shot rang out. The barrel hung in the air where James had shot a round into the clouds. The dull echoes faded fast. "Everything . . . everything! You know it all, Tucker. I thought you were my friend. You killed Maya. You killed my Maya!" As James yelled, Tucker saw froth gather at the corner of his lips. His rabid eyes were now open wide; red marks lined the creases where his lids met.

Tucker lowered his voice and spoke slowly. "James. James, listen to me. I didn't kill Maya. I

swear on my family, James.” Tucker turned his head away, flinching as James leveled the barrel and shoved the gun closer to Tucker's face. “But I might know who did; I just, don't have the evidence.”

“Keep talking, you son of a bitch. You lie and you die.”

“I was desperate, man, they were going to take away my home, my father's house,” Tucker said. “I needed the money. I thought if I did it a couple of times I could cut my lines and move the family down South away from all this.”

“What are you moving that's worth so much?”

“Heroin.”

“For who?”

“These Brazilian guys. I'm on my way to meet them right now.”

James wiped the gun over his face as if it were a handkerchief.

Tucker took advantage of the pause. “James, you're emotions are out of whack and the liquor's screwed up your head.”

“Enough! Did you or did you not meet with Maya the night she was murdered?”

He felt himself begin to hesitate. “Y-Yes. Met her at BG's. She'd been tipped off about the drugs. Found out that we were bringing the drugs in by boat. She wanted to help me out of this mess. Said she was doing it for you. Cause I was your friend. She agreed to meet me later that night. I waited for hours, but she never showed.” The truth poured out of him. “I went home and woke up to a phone call from the police from your place. They wanted us to come over to help you out. That's the honest truth, man, every breath of it.”

“Melanie tipped them off,” James said dejectedly.

“That . . . makes sense.”

“If it wasn't you—and that's a big if—who did it?” James asked. “Who killed her?”

“I mean, there's several—”

“—Who did it Tucker?” James put the barrel right back in his face.

“James, please. Listen. I don't know who did it. Could be the lobstermen or the Brazilians. I mean it could be the fucking cops for all I know. This ain't clear cut. All I want to do is turn myself in.” He slipped the lie in. “Maya said she could help, but there's police involved. They get paid off by these Brazilians.”

James spit on the deck. “This whole thing smells of shit, Tucker. And the shit's all around you.”

“I just took the drugs and got them into the town. That's all I did, James, I swear.”

“That's all you did? That makes you innocent? I gave CPR to a kid who overdosed on the drugs you brought in. You've got a dead boy's blood on your hands. On top of that, you were the last person to see Maya alive. How's that for fucking innocent? 'All you did.' You make me sick.” James spat again, the phlegm hit the deck in front of Tucker's boots. They both looked at it, a wad of red mucous.

James's nose starting to spill a line of blood. James put his hand up to plug up the nostril. It didn't stop the flow. “Damn it! Grab me a rag or something,” James said as if the tension had dissolved momentarily.

Tucker moved slowly to the hold. He reached around until his hand touched what he was looking for. With all his speed he ripped the spare buoy out by the wooden stake and swung for the gun, trying to bat it away from James's hands.

“Pow!” The gun went off right next to his face. Tucker grabbed his ears. The sound was deafening, a painful ringing wracked his head. He could taste the gun powder in the air. His leg was burning. There was a patch of blood spreading from a bullet hole in his thigh.

He cried out in anguish, hit the deck, and rolled, clutching his leg. “You shot me. I can't believe you shot me!” Tucker said, looking up at James. Blood and bits of pulped flesh splattered on the deck.

James ripped a piece of his own shirt and used it to mop up his bloody nose. He held it and looked at down at Tucker. "That was your own fault. Were you trying to kill me too? I ought to finish you right here."

"Please." Tucker was weeping. He wrapped his hands around his leg to put pressure on it. Blood spilled past his fingers. He took off his own tee-shirt and wrapped it tight around the wound. Waves of nausea hit him as if he were sea sick for the first time in his life. "James, look at us. We're the good guys. The bad guys are out there killing and selling drugs. We're their fucking puppets, man. You're doing them a favor by shooting me. You want that, James? What would Maya think?"

James threw the bit of cloth away and swung the gun in front of Tucker's face, so close he could feel its heat. "You shut up. You shut up!"

Tucker couldn't shut up. "The Brazilians are a few more miles out. Just follow the GPS heading. You'll find them waiting, they're probably the ones responsible for Maya's death. Listen, the drugs are in the mackerel. They put the heroin in bags and shove as much as they can in the fish. I've got some in the hold."

"Give me their names."

"Of who? The Brazilians? The lobstermen? The police?"

"I want all their names."

The lobstermen he knew. He told James how they get together at the BG's Boathouse and sat in the back of the bar every week night. Any guy that's in that circle is involved. The only cop he knew by name was some guy named Wade. "Oh, and the Coast Guard officer, the one that ticketed us. He's in on it too. Same for the Fish and Game officer, the one that showed up dead. Must of crossed someone; they're ruthless."

James seemed to be thinking something over.

"Hey, I'm starting to get light-headed here, James. You want to bring me b-back now? I'm

going to need . . . to get to a hospital . . . s-soon.” His breathing was ragged.

“Sorry, Tucker, no can do.”

“Come on, James, I told you everything I know. J-Just let me go. You d-don't need me.” His body was frigid.

“You were involved, Tucker. Anyone involved with Maya's death is guilty.” James paused then said, “Jump overboard.”

“What are you crazy?” His mind scrambled for a way out: the right words to sooth James.

James's face was flat and lacked emotion. “Maybe I am. Jump overboard, or I'll shoot you right here. This time it won't be your leg.” James leveled the gun taking aim at Tucker's face and slid his finger onto the trigger.

Tucker grabbed hold of the rail and lifted himself with his good leg. “I don't deserve this.” He gazed at the swells below him. From here he could just make out the Isles of Shoals, a black smear against the rim of the ocean. Tucker turned his head back, and looked over his shoulder at James's glassy bloodshot eyes. “I'll never make it, James, think of my family . . . please.” His tone was somber, his words slow, and pleading.

“Shut up! One more word and I shoot, so help me.” The gun shook in James's hand and his jaw was clenched. “If you make it, consider yourself lucky. If you die, then it's your own damn fault.”

“I ain't never been lucky,” Tucker said, and he lifted his injured leg over the other side of the rail.

“Wait,” James said. “Those bruises on Kevin. Were they your doing?”

Tucker felt his stomach crush. “Yes.”

James shook his head. “You deserve this more than anyone.”

Tucker turned away from James, the shame now hurting more than the hole in his leg. He heaved himself over the edge of his own boat. No life preserver, weak from the loss of blood, he let the

cold water rise up and pass through his clothes and brush over his skin. Instead of feeling cleansed, he felt shock. He had to work through the pain of kicking off his heavy work boots as he was treading the choppy water. The pain in his leg began to throb numbly. He concentrated on breathing and keeping his head above the water.

Behind him, the familiar sound of the boat motor. Bobbing in the water, he turned and saw James at *The Periwinkle's* wheel, his back to Tucker. James didn't look back as he pushed down the lever and steered the boat away from Tucker, plowing to where the Brazilians would be waiting. Fear stole into Tucker's mind. He felt like a child, how Jacob must have felt in his last moments. Tucker paddled weakly with his arms and kicked with his good leg.

The sea lashed at his face and sought his mouth. It would be too easy to give in to the ocean's weight. It wanted him. Wanted to take him, as it took Jacob. Poor Jacob. Tucker fought the sea. He didn't want to die—leave his family all alone. If he could make it to the Isles of Shoals, he had a chance. He would be a good man, the best father, the best husband; he would never put a hand on Melanie or Kevin again. Make up for everything. Start a new life somewhere far away. Somewhere without oceans and drugs.

With each passing wave the stretch of islands became visible then was gone. It seemed an impossible distance. He took a breath, paddled with his arms, and kicked with his good leg. As long as he could see the islands ahead of him he would be all right: he could save himself. He began coaching himself. Trying to control the crippling fear. Don't give in. Come on now. Breathe! Stroke, kick, breathe, keep looking, it's right there, breathe, stroke, kick. Focus! Breathe then stroke. Then kick. Hardly even feel the pain in the leg now. Breathe, stroke, kick. Focus! Damn it. Focus now! Breathe then kick. -No! Stroke! Breathe. Focus! Come on focus! Focus! Breathe

Chapter 29

James's mind conjured up the image of Maya, her lifeless body spread out on the examiner's table. Tossed away like someone's trash. Barbs of hate again enveloped him. His skin contracted goose bumps. The small GPS in Tucker's wheelhouse indicated he was heading in the right direction. When he seemed to be getting closer to the coordinates, a white sport boat came into view. As he steered *The Periwinkle* in their direction, he slowed to see what the occupants looked like. There was a man at the back with a pair of binoculars fixed to his face. Then there was another who sat at the wheel. They both shared muddy complexions. The blast from an air horn welcomed James. James returned the greeting with a single blow of *The Periwinkle's* horn.

James felt his teeth grind. He pushed the lever down and aimed the bow dead center. No plan, no thought, he followed his single impulse. *The Periwinkle* rode high in the waves. Her prow angled out of the water like an axe head. The men were both waving at him. The man at the back, let his binoculars hang over his chest as he motioned for James to slow down. The wind and was so loud that James could hear nothing else. The drug boat's driver must have read James's intentions. He was trying to start his boat up. When he was a boat length away, James read a sudden mix of confusion and anger in his foe's eyes. James ducked his head and held on tight to the wheel. *The Periwinkle* broke through their side with a sickening crash and passed over the driver's soft body. The boat's momentum carried it across to the other side where it hit water, pitched, and miraculously righted itself.

The Periwinkle's fiber glass prow had been crunched and had folded inwards. The engine was silent. Behind him he witnessed the destruction. The driver was gone, his smashed body had sunk. The other man's head breached the surface. He was splashing and coughing up water. James tried the motor. It hesitated several times before it agreed to turn over. He steered the boat through the floating debris, stalking the survivor as he swam back to the sinking vessel. Sealed white buckets floated while others were open and spilling loads of mackerel into the water.

The man was calling out the name “Eduardo.” James put *The Periwinkle* in neutral and went to the side. The man tried to swim away from James. James's eyes searched and landed on the long gaff poll. He swung the shaft like a bat and the hook sank into the man's side, so deep he could hardly see it. This spawned a fit of screaming. James dragged the struggling swimmer as if he'd landed a tuna. The man shook, trying to get the hook off, this only promoted fresh screams and more harsh language. James spun the man around with the pole and brought him face to face.

His face was young, yet covered in wrinkles of pain and fear. James could feel the hook end wriggle underneath the man's skin—scraping across bone.

“Stop struggling! Stop struggling!” James yelled.

The man refused to listen.

James pulled out the gun and took aim. “Calm down or I will shoot you.” The man either understood or the gun in his face was enough to make him stop. “Speak English?”

The man grabbed the side of *The Periwinkle*. He nodded his head, wincing in pain. “Yes.”

“Good.” James regarded the trickling line of blood leaking out of the man's side and into the water. “A woman was killed, Maya Cooper. A police detective. She was black. Who killed her?”

The man's face was riddled with confusion and pain. “Don't know.”

James twisted the gaff, the hook grated against the man's ribs, which caused his eyes and mouth to simultaneously open wide. He wailed and amid a flurry of splashing tried to grab the shaft of the gaff to try to stop the twisting.

“What's your name?” James asked, yelling above the man's cries.

The hooked man grabbed hold of *The Periwinkle's* railing. “Marco.”

“Okay, Marco, every time you lie to me. I am going to twist. So tell me everything you know about the black woman that was killed.”

“I hear about her in the news.” Marco was breathing hard.

James made as if to wriggle it again.

“No. No. The lobstermen talk about her. They happy she dead.”

James turned the pole again twisting it from side to side.

Marco was screaming to make it stop. He yelled the rest of the information. “Eduardo say the police and the fishermen worry about her. Then she died. They happy. That's it. All I know. Get this out of me!”

A splash came from behind the boat. James looked over and saw several sleek bodies cruising between the floating buckets, snatching mackerel and eating them whole. Dogfish. Several of the small sharks had appeared. They brushed past Marco, curious as to the source of fresh blood. Marco yelped and began twisting. James struggled to hold the gaff. One of the small sharks had bitten into him. There were now dozens gathered.

“It's all that mackerel, all that drug-filled mackerel,” James said. “Going to work them into a frenzy, Marco.”

“Please, let me up!”

“Where are you from, Marco?”

“Rio de Janeiro.”

“Is that where the drugs are coming from?”

“Yes, yes! Please, please, I never hurt anybody. I have a wife and child. This is my job. Please.”

James chuckled dryly. “It's never anybody's fault. The woman who was killed was going to be *my wife*. Then because of your drugs she got killed. You hurt someone all right. Me. You hurt everyone that used your fucking drugs. Because of *you* my Maya is dead.”

Another shark bit into Marco, holding him for a second then let go when Marco fought back. More of his blood was in the water. The shark bodies were writhing all around him. The surface splashed with their tails and fins.

Marco was floundering now. Screaming and trying to fight the bodies off. Pleading with James to let him up. Some of the sharks were ramming their bodies into him, grabbing a hold of him and shaking their bodies. Alone they wouldn't be a threat, but in a frenzy with now scores of them gathered in the bloody mackerel water, they were in sensory overload.

Marco put both hands on the boat railing and tried to lift himself up out of the water. James kicked his face when it appeared over the rail and Marco fell backwards into the water, taking the gaff with him. He fell headlong into the sharks and they bit and thrashed. James pushed the boat into gear and drove away. Marco's bestial screams chased after him. When James had cleared the frenzy, he looked back to where Marco still splashed and tried to swim away. The sharks were eating him chunk by chunk.

James shook his head and turned the boat around, skimming past Marco, who was now surrounded by blood. He pulled out the .38 and when Marco's head bobbed up James shot him as if he were an aluminum can. The air caught a pink mist and Marco sunk. Within a moment he was gone, lost in an underworld of dark lithe bodies.

The Periwinkle's steering was off and the propeller didn't seem to give him as much power as it had before. There was a slow leak coming from somewhere in the hull. He avoided pushing the boat very hard.

James reasoned that if he had believed in God and the Devil, he was sure that what he had just done would be considered the worst sin. The damaged *Periwinkle* limped back towards the harbor. He licked his dry lips and tossed the empty bottle of Jameson overboard. Focus on one thing. Maya is dead. He pictured her generous lips, bowing in the middle to release a smile. Her eyes played above a scrunched up nose. She was so relaxed, so alive, in his head. He held the image and was horrified as

her eyes changed. To the dead fish eyes that he'd seen on the autopsy table. Maya is dead, it was the one thing he was sure of. She'll never be in my arms again. James felt as if a piece of his own flesh had fallen off. An arm, a leg, he felt violated, as if a thief had broken into his house and taken his passport, money, credit cards, and all the information that on paper made James real. The fact that he didn't know who killed her haunted him.

His pulse pounded. Was it Wade or had Tucker done it? He would never know. No! He had to know. That's why he was still here. Tucker wasn't the killer, but maybe Marco or the other other man. Both dead. The cop, Wade, he was still alive. How was he to find this man? What if Marco was lying to save his own skin? He was botching this up. What had he done? Two deaths on his hands. Two deaths as repayment for his one, Maya.

James was surprised to look up and see that the shore was so close. He searched out the dark harbor, and spotted the large white tent at Odiorne Point. They were set up for another wedding. The fact hit him like a metal pipe. His wedding had been tomorrow.

The sobs rose up and shook his body. It became harder to steer. James forced himself to wipe his stinging eyes and tightened his grip on the wheel.

When he got to the mouth of the channel he looped around the jetty and speared the boat onto the sandy beach at Odiorne Point. *The Periwinkle* slid several feet onto the shore and came to a rest. He stepped off the bow and sunk his sneakers in the damp sand. There was a single fisherman at the end of the jetty.

The fisherman turned away from his rod to give James a queer look. When James stopped to glare at him the fisherman spun his head back to face the fishing rod between his legs, probably deciding that the man beaching the smashed lobster boat was none of his concern.

James found the patch of sand where he thought he'd been when he committed to the wedding date. He sat down and tried to remember the way Maya's face moved. She had waited patiently for so

long. He'd been so stupid to make her wait. The silent doubt she must have felt, the strain and frustration he'd made her feel. Maybe he ought to end it here? She was too good a woman for him. He lay on his back, the still damp sand soaking through his clothes. James looked up at the sky. Stars watched him. An idea shot down from the heavens and slapped his face, causing him to lift himself up from the sand.

He hopped over the rocks at the edge of the beach and found the trail. The paths were empty. Despite the darkness, he quickened his pace and almost pitched himself headfirst over several tree roots. The old concrete bunker lifted itself out of the shaggy woods. The sound of crickets rubbing their legs together madly encased James in a tunnel, as if they were playing their tiny fiddles against the devil himself. He rushed to escape their playing.

James slowed when he got closer to the bunker. The tiny hairs on his ears stood up. Something had its eye on him. He looked back down the trail that he had just walked. Was someone out here? He was about to brush off the paranoia when a stone dislodged itself and fell, clattering off the base of the bunker. On top of the bunker, he saw a man duck out of view.

“Hey!” James said. His frustration overpowered the traces of fear and he raced to catch the man. The moon poured off the water and hit the walls of the bunker turning them bone white—a giant skull. James continued calling after the man as he ran through the mouth of the bunker and on through the other side. He heard the man scrambling through the thick forested trees to his right. James glimpsed the shape moving fast through the woods, dark clothes flailed in a flurry, as he ran in and out of the cover of trees.

“Stop. Stop or I'll shoot.” He thought about drawing his gun for effect, maybe shooting a round off into the air. Maybe whizzing it over his head. At this range he could probably hit him if he wanted to. The idea was quickly swept out of his head. What was he becoming? To kill this man as if he was a hunter and the man a deer. This was a human being. Still, he chased, gradually losing ground as the

man was darting and scrambling around every clump of bush. The man he chased seemed to know the woods, leaping over small gulleys and running fluidly along the narrow game trails. James plowed through. He was struck by every scratching bush, tugged by every thorn, and had to scramble up every gully. The man was almost out of sight as James slowed. His lungs were overworked and cramps in his sides told him to quit.

The man, who was now far ahead, was out of sight. James could still hear him running, but after a few more moments even that faded. James rested his side against a tree as he caught his breath. The tangle of forest has gone quiet, except for the sound of his heavy breathing and the blood pounding across his temples. James backtracked and found the bunker again. He made his way back to the main trail, which ran along the ocean. It took him twenty minutes to get to the entrance. Why had he chased the man?

The moonlight led him back to the trailhead where the yellow police tape still lingered. James walked around the Science Center and slowed as he made his way toward the large white tent. He unzipped the plastic curtain and gasped as he saw the reception area. Though it was partially immersed in shadows, he could plainly see the tables that were circled by white, ornate chairs. White linen hung over the tables with bubbled lace about the ends. The centerpieces remained empty, each waiting for its single orchid. There was a wooden dance floor set up and a stand for the DJ. White Japanese hanging lamps suspended above as if falling snow.

James looked away, the sadness threatening to shrivel his heart completely. He stepped back out of the white tent, and away from the dream. He walked to where the chairs would be set up at the bluff over-looking the ocean. He looked out at the sea and then back down the length of lawn. He imagined Maya, dressed in her wedding gown, her beautiful eyes, a mix of determination and excitement. James imagined her stepping beside him and he watched her gaze into his eyes. It would never be.

“We've been looking for you.”

James's breath caught in his throat. His eyes connected to the man who was standing not a dozen feet away. “Wade?”

“You got it.” Wade appeared satisfied with himself.

James looked past him, seeing the single squad car in the Science Center's parking lot. Wade seemed calm, not coming closer and not scrambling for backup. Instead, he seemed contemplative, as if he were trying to figure out what to do with James.

“What do you want?” James asked.

“You. Isn't it obvious?” Wade said.

“What for?”

“You've been making a God-awful mess for me and the boys. Can't say it's all your fault. Maya getting killed and all. I suppose we let you off the hook so you would off yourself. Guess we figured you wrong.” Wade looked at the tent then said, “This was where you guys were going to get married, right?”

James said nothing.

“Yeah, I didn't get the invite. Maya and I never seemed to get along. So I asked myself, 'Wade,' I says, 'where would you go if you had just lost your wife,' excuse me, *fiance'e*. Being the day before your wedding, I figured the wedding spot would be worth a shot.”

“I know all about your part in the heroin trafficking. Tucker said you're the one who killed Maya.” James focused on Wade's face, there was no visible change, and he gave no reply. James pressed him harder. “What was it like killing a fellow cop?”

“I didn't kill Maya,” Wade said, flatly.

Wade hadn't denied the drug connection. James could feel the frustration massing. It tickled his fingers. He shifted his waist to feel the gun as it rubbed against his belt, still nestled in his lower back.

“Liar. Tell me. What was it like? How'd it make you feel? Killing a woman.”

“Couldn't tell you, haven't killed any women before,” Wade said, then quickly pulled a weapon and fired before James could pull his own gun. Tiny, shocking barbs imbedded into James's chest, electricity rippled through him, sending him straight to the ground flopping.

When it stopped and James's pupils rolled back down, he looked up to see Wade standing over him. His face was calm. James felt as insignificant as an insect as the black shoe was lifted high and then came down, shutting his eyes and mind to the world.

Chapter 30

James came to as his face was bouncing off the thin scratchy rug of what must have been a car trunk. His wrists were cuffed behind him and his ankles were taped together with duct tape. There was more tape over his mouth. His head pounded, as if he had sprung a hill on his scalp. He was alive. A truly remarkable development. Why had Wade decided to let him live? What further use could he be?

The car slowed and then stopped. The driver, that he assumed was Wade, got out of the car. He didn't come back to open the trunk, but instead seemed to go somewhere else. James wriggled his backside. There was no longer the weight of Maya's .38 there. James rubbed his calves together. He was surprised to feel the weight of the small .22 still there, strapped just above his ankle. Wade had missed it. The problem was that the duct tape around his ankles had been wound so tight that he couldn't get to the gun from his pant leg.

James knocked his head against metal, causing an explosion of pain as steely silverfish swam across his vision. He grunted. First he needed to get his hands in front of him. Rolling himself sideways into the fetal position he pulled his cuffed hands down as far as he could and tucked his legs as high as possible. It took time to awkwardly shimmy the cuffs past his shoes. Once he had his hands

in front of him, his fingers went to work on his belt, then the button, and the zipper of his pants. James pushed the jeans down as far as he could and sat half way up to get his hands down his leg. He was able to pull out the .22 and slipped the gun into his right jean pocket.

Wade's voice was outside the car accompanied by others. James hurried to pull his pants up and shook the car as he bounced to get them back up. He zipped up the fly, buttoned the button, and was working the belt when the trunk door opened up.

“Interrupting something?” Wade said, with a joyless grin on his face.

“Mmph.” The duct tape muffling his voice.

Wade ripped the tape off his mouth.

James narrowed his eyes and finished the belt. “I've got to piss.”

“Not in my trunk. Help me lift him, guys.” Wade put the tape back on James's mouth.

Two policemen were with Wade. Faces James had seen, but no one he knew. All three of them hoisted James out and walked him into the house. James's eyes searched his surroundings, trying to get a fix on his location. The car was at the end of a long freshly paved private driveway, which led to a small bridge. The driveway was lit by white lamp posts leading up to a cull de sac filled with several trucks and police cruisers. A long farmer's porch with twin rockers spread across the front of the mansion. Three stories high with a four car garage. The house's property was set against a thick wood of conifers and there were no other houses in shouting distance.

The men carried James through the garage. “Wish I had *my* own island,” Wade said to the officer across him. They shuffled past a narrow corridor created by a Land Rover SUV. There were twin Harley Davidson motorcycles, jet skis, and a Porsche in the other bays. Everything was well-kept and tidy. The men moved around an oil stain on the concrete floor. It had been covered up with a layer of kitty litter. James thought about struggling, but didn't see the point. His best chance would be the .22 in his right pocket. These men, being law enforcement, would probably be heavily armed. He

would need to surprise them.

Wade looked at one of the men. “He tried pulling a gun on me. Must be Maya's service weapon.” Wade brandished the .38 to show the other guys. They gave him little response. James wondered how they felt about hauling bound man out of a trunk.

Once inside, they followed Wade and took James down a set of stairs to a basement. The basement was finished and the smell of cigar smoke became prevalent. A green rug covered the space and brown leather furniture was spread about the room. Pictures, small antique cars, and golfing memorabilia lined the walls. They dropped James on the carpet in the middle of the room. The three who had been holding him took seats at a poker table followed by hasty sips of their waiting beers. James looked at the men who in turn examined him.

They looked unsure of themselves. All except one man. The Chief of the Portsmouth Police, Gary McCourt. “Where'd you find him, Wade?”

“Odiorne Point.”

“No shit?” the chief said, shuffling a deck of cards.

“He was blubbering and talking to himself. Had her gun on him.”

“Good, this is good,” the chief said, cutting the deck in half.

“So what's the plan, chief?” Wade asked, leaning back in his chair.

“I'm working on it. Whatever we figure has to be done tonight. Any more time goes by and it starts to get too loose.”

“He's convinced that I killed Maya by the way,” Wade said then stared at James on the floor. “I sure as hell didn't like the broad, but I wouldn't have killed her.”

“Yeah, that is a mystery,” the chief said. “Eduardo had no clue either.”

“Can we pin it on him?” Wade asked, his thumb indicating James.

“Maybe. What about Tucker?” the chief asked.

“That's what I been thinking,” Wade said.

“Tucker didn't show tonight at the docks,” one of the other officers said. “He's MIA,”

They were all looking at James who turned away from their stares.

The upstairs door opened and boots started down the wooden steps. The man who came down the steps had a shirt that said United States Coast Guard. It was the same man who had given him a ticket weeks ago for driving Tucker's boat without a license. “I got news. Who's this?”

The men gathered around the poker table turned their attention to the newcomer.

The chief spoke up. “James Morrow. Maya Cooper's fiance'—pay him no mind—he's in time-out.”

“Okay,” he said skeptically stepping around James. “Lost radio contact with Eduardo's boat. I don't know where the hell he is or what happened. But, we did find Tucker's boat. The hull was crunched in, and it was run aground at Odiorne Point. I looked around, but no sign of him, plus it's wicked dark and I didn't want to go into the freaking puckerbrush looking for Tucker's stupid ass.”

“Where's the boat now,” the chief asked.

“We hauled it back to its mooring. It's still floating, just barely though.”

“Anyone see you?” the chief asked.

“I saw no one.”

“You positive?” the chief pressed.

“Positive. There were no other boats on the water between the little beach there and BG's. Dark as all hell out there tonight.”

“Good. Take a seat, Wade has something to tell you,” the chief said, as he sucked at his short cigar.

“Mr. Morrow here was at Odiorne Point. There were no cars or bikes in the parking lot. I hit him with the stun gun. Shocked him real good, didn't I, James?”

James didn't give him the satisfaction.

The chief broke in. "I think I'm getting a handle on this. Correct me if I'm wrong, Mr. Morrow. We know that Maya was at BG's from our lobstermen pals the night of her murder. She talked to Tucker then left. Her body showed up further down the creek." The chief paused to think then began again. "So James here wants to find out who killed his woman. Let's say he figures out she went to meet with Tucker the night she was murdered. Reasonably, he wants to go have a stern talk to him. Am I right, boy scout?"

James looked at the man and tried to burn him with his eyes. He thought about shooting him right there. He needed to hear this, needed to know who was responsible, then he'd get them. James would need some sort of distraction. But what?

"So James goes and meets Tucker or somehow goes out with him on the boat, haven't quite figured that part out. Maybe he had Tucker at gun point. How many bullets were discharged out of her gun?"

Wade released the magazine and examined it closely. "There's three bullets missing, chief."

The chief looked up to the ceiling. "Okay, so he shoots and kills Tucker, and tosses him overboard. Three shots seems a bit excessive, but he's no marksmen, probably made a sloppy mess of it." The chief rubbed his cigar out in an ashtray. "This takes care of Tucker. You said it was dark out there, so James probably smashed the boat off some rocks, then parked it on the beach by Odiorne. He ditched the boat and got all sentimental at the wedding site. Am I right or am I right, James?"

"Mmph."

The chief tossed his hand up. "Wade, take the duct tape off his mouth, wife's away, no one will hear him if he yells."

Wade ripped the duct tape off violently. James puckered his lips against the pain.

"Well am I right, James?" the chief asked.

“No, you're wrong,” James said.

The chief rubbed his mustache and regarded James through slitted eyes. “I think I pretty much have it. You're just being brave, which is really stupid, because as far as I see it, you're going to be painted as the villain when this is all over.”

James watched as they sat down and created the whole conspiracy with pen and paper. They pinned Maya's murder on Tucker and Tucker's murder on James. Then they discussed and configured a time line and gave actual times. Wade would be the hero. They would take James back to Odiorne and replay a scene where he fires a gun at Wade and Wade stuns him with a department issued stun gun, making sure to place the barbs in the same holes as the first. Then James would manage to lift his gun where Wade would then finish the job.

They planned out who would arrive on scene and what each of their roles would be. They replayed it over several times. They figured in all the factors.

The chief stood up. “All right, let's all help Wade get Mr. Morrow outside. I'll get the doors.”

All four men picked James up as if they were his pall-bearers in a funeral procession. The men took him back up the stairs and they headed out the door that led to the garage. The sound of the garage door opening made James realize he didn't have much time. He needed to get out of their hands. He suddenly thought of Derek Fanning, when James has tried to get the boys to open the stall door the red-haired Hanson boy had claimed he was shitting.

He forced himself to do it. The smell was almost immediate. But for good measure he let them know. “Oh, God, I'm shitting myself. I'm shitting!”

The men groaned in disgust and dropped him to the concrete. James hit the ground with a thump and began crawling away on his hands and knees.

The chief came up to them. “What the hell is going on? Why'd you drop him?”

“He's shitting his pants. I'm not holding the nasty fucker while he's shitting,” Wade said, his

face filled with revulsion.

“Well don't let him get away,” the chief said.

“Where's he going to go? Won't get far crawling on his belly like a fucking worm,” Wade said in a sneer.

James made it to the edge of the garage, pushed himself up to his knees, fished for his gun in his pocket, and faced the men with gun drawn. The moment would always stay with him. Their faces were stenciled into his memory. Where did the gun come from? Was probably the first thought that ran through each of their minds.

“You stupid shit, Wade, you left a gun on him!” the chief blurted out.

James had noticed coming in how the big SUV had created narrow corridor. Leaving no place to hide, no time to run. There was only a moment. Five cans were in front of him. He made his shots count. The first two faces were still stupefied as to what was happening as the holes sprouted between their eyes. The third, the marine patrol officer turned to run to find the SUV blocking his way. James hit the back of his head. The fourth was Wade, who was quick enough to duck. He'd managed to pull his gun out, but not before he took two bullets through the chest. The chief being at the back of the pack made it back to the door before James zipped the final round through his neck, producing a small geyser of blood that sprayed sideways. He fell; his body tumbling awkwardly down the wooden steps.

James sat and waited for a few moments. It was over. The small moan from one of the men brought him back to the ready. On the ground, Wade shifted his shoulders, but didn't attempt to do any more than that. James began to crawl his way over to the first dead cop. He unclipped the dead man's pistol and held it in front of him. James pushed off the ground with his hands and managed to stand up, using the wall to steady himself. Shit running down his legs.

“Help me,” Wade said, choking on foaming blood, the two bloody holes in his chest oozing blood with each breath.

“No problem.” James pulled the trigger. The bullet made an awful mess.

James used a saw blade from the tool rack to cut the duct tape that bound his feet. He found the handcuff keys in Wade's left pocket. The cuffs clattered off the concrete floor and settled in a pool of Wade's dark blood. James closed the garage door, sealing him in with the dead. The smell coming from his pants was still strong. Instinct told him to run away from this place, yet an odd comfort had settled over him, and he smothered the side of him that proposed doubt.

In the bathroom he hesitated only a moment before stripping and brushing aside the curtain to take a hot shower. It was very odd moving about the home, as if he was an invited guest, waiting for the chief and his wife to come home.

He didn't want to, but merely out of necessity, he climbed the stairs to find the chief's room. He needed clean clothes. James fumbled through the dead man's drawers. He settled on khaki pants that were too wide at the waist which he got to stay up by snaking a belt through its loops. A white tee shirt, with the chief's smell on it, was taken from one of the top drawers. A navy blue Hawaiian shirt, with light blue palm trees, because why the hell not? He found a tan woven hat with a black band about it. It fit his head well enough. New socks slipped into his own sneakers.

When he got back to the garage he was almost surprised to see the five dead men. Blood smeared the concrete. Their bodies were twisted and lay in awkward poses, some on top of each other where they had fallen.

James relieved Wade's corpse of Maya's gun. He stepped over the rest of the bodies being careful to step around the blood. As he left the garage, he wondered who would be the first person to come upon the dead men. It would probably be the chief's wife, maybe a day or two later. It would probably smell awful, probably destroy her. Maybe that's why he didn't feel anything, didn't feel sorry for what he'd done, because he was already ruined.

James put his soiled clothes in the trunk of Wade's car and drove the unmarked car down the

long drive way, crossed the island's bridge, and when he got to a road, turned left. He wasn't sure where he was going yet, but just simply driving the empty roads made his body relax slightly. James couldn't help feeling a sense of irony that he was now freely driving Wade's black unmarked police car, a car where he'd previously been captive. James loosened his grip and drove at a leisurely pace. This allowed him to think. Should he try to cover his tracks? Add a layer to the confusion? Maybe he should burn the house down? Yes, he would. He turned the car around spraying loose gravel as the right side tires bent past the pavement.

“Burn it, the bodies, the house, the lies.” His thoughts became words, but he'd hardly noticed.

He found his way back to the house, parked the car at a safe distance, and opened the door to the garage. The men inside were still dead. He counted all five to make sure. Something was odd though, had someone moved them? Had they moved themselves? Were they still alive? James looked at the bodies, they appeared to be in a different layout. Was it the angle he was looking at them? Was someone here? I'm just being paranoid. No one is here. Keep it together. Burn it all, that's the best bet here. How does someone go about burning down a house? James stopped. The silence of the mausoleum was powerful. He tapped his foot to fill the air with sound. Then he saw the propane tank. He looked at Maya's gun. Yes, this can work. The other thing that he needed was open flame. Open flame with a bullet and a propane tank. Needs to be a big bullet. The police cars had shotguns. He used the keys off one of the dead officers and retrieved a shotgun from a squad car. There were slugs already loaded. Perfect.

He found a lighter among the tools. Once he had gathered the lighter, propane tank, and shotgun all together he started doubting himself. Was this the right idea? The fire would bring police down on his head. Then again, tomorrow people would start to wonder where five of the town's uniforms were. What to do next? James looked down at supplies in his hands. A homemade bomb, really. That was when he saw his next move.

Chapter 31

James kept a low profile the whole next day. He'd chosen not to burn the house. He did, however, take his homemade bomb and drive it to BG's Boathouse. James parked Wade's unmarked police car at the back of the vacant land across the street from the restaurant. He tried to sleep, but his mind wouldn't let him. In the side mirror he stared into his reflection. A tired, hollow-looking scarecrow man stared back at him, almost begging him to set him free of the glass prison.

The police scanner crackled and he heard nothing of importance. The bodies hadn't been discovered at the chief's house. He wasn't naive enough to think that this would last long. His stomach growled at him, demanding his attention. James couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. BG's was open. What was stopping him from going to grab a bite to eat?

James ate outside on the deck. The day was turning out to be a beauty. The humid spell had broken and the light breeze tossed the smells of the creek past his nostrils. He sniffed them freely and even let himself get comfortable.

When the food came, he ate heartily and sipped coffee. He enjoyed working through the piles of fried scallops, shrimp, clams, and haddock.

The waitress was bold enough to remark how she thought the coffee did him wonders.

James laughed and he couldn't help thinking how it felt incredibly odd to laugh. The food in his stomach suddenly felt sour. *The Periwinkle* was docked at her usual spot as if it had only been a nightmare. The damage to her hull reminded him it wasn't.

The chief had said, "You'll be the one painted as the villain." Maybe James was the villain. Did murderers sit and enjoy coffee and seafood on sunny days? He left his table and entered the bar. It was empty, being noon time, but James spied the bartender sitting alone in a vacant booth; a sharp frown cut

his young face as he was bent over a book, his sandy blond hair hanging down to his eyes. The kid finished the line he was reading, dog-eared the page, then closed the book and took his post at the bar.

James raised his hand as if casting a spell. “A drink, the hard stuff, I don't care what it is as long as it'll get me good and drunk.”

“Tough day?”

“Tough life.”

“It can't be all that bad?”

James laughed again. It was amazing how funny BG's staff were. “It's not good.”

There was a silence while the bartender made him a drink.

James spoke candidly. “Today's my wedding day.”

“Congratulations?” The boy was justifiably confused.

“Not necessary. She's left me.”

The bartender was about to hand him the drink, then he took it back and poured more vodka in the glass. James felt himself smile.

“One extra strong white Russian for the bachelor.” The bartender slid the drink into James's hands.

“Thanks.” James caught the bartender's name tag. “—Edmond. You know I didn't start drinking till this summer?”

“How come?”

“My father—he had a problem.” James drank a few gulps.

“I read somewhere that we're destined to become our fathers whether we like it or not.”

“What if we become worse than our fathers?” James asked.

Edmond looked up to the glasses hanging above him. “I don't know. Seek therapy, I suppose?”

“Tried that,” James spoke into his drink. “Didn't work.”

The bartender shrugged.

“Where's the usual bartender. A girl, with uh.” James motioned to his teeth.

Edmond's eyes flickered with understanding. “Ingrid doesn't come in till dinner time.”

“I see.” James was compelled to ask the guy something. “Have you always wanted to be a bartender?”

“No, sir. I'm only working this gig for two reasons. One, to save up money for a lobster boat, and two, to get to know the other lobstermen.”

“You want to be a lobsterman?” James was astonished.

“I do.” He spoke with a decisiveness that James wished wasn't there.

“You know they don't make a lot of money, right?”

“The ones that come in here do pretty well. Besides, it's not about the money for me. I love the sea.”

“Well . . . give it a shot. Do what makes you happy.” James couldn't believe what he was saying.

“I will. Want another one of those?” Edmond pulled the empty glass away.

“Yes, good and strong, please.”

James and Edmond discussed the life of a lobsterman. The rules and regulations. The draw and the allure. James drank and listened to Edmond's ideas and plans. The day passed by in a pleasant manner, James drank, Edmond talked, and steadily James became numb, a place where he couldn't feel the hurt, a safe place, where he could tell his memories to “fuck off.”

When dinner time approached Ingrid came in and replaced Edmond. “Ingrid, I want you to treat my friend here well,” Edmond said. “That's right, I never got your name?”

“It's James.” James didn't fail to notice Ingrid's sharp turn of the head at his name.

Edmond wished him all the best and left.

Ingrid's eyes became slits as she examined James. She told him that he looked familiar and asked if he'd been here before. He told her that he was new to town, a mechanical engineer recently hired at the Naval Shipyard. She shook her head, as if she'd proven herself an idiot and bought the lie.

James was not deterred by the woman, he continued to drink, tilting his borrowed hat down a few degrees south. Another hour passed, and the lobstermen and fishermen started to show up just as Tucker had said they would. They formed a tight cluster around back table and spoke in hushed tones. James strained to hear what they were saying.

“They weren't there. I waited, circled around a bit, but they never showed.”

“Something's not right if you ask me.”

Then a newcomer came in. The men gathered around him. This man spoke in an urgent whisper. The men leaned in to hear what he had to say. James could only make out a scattering of words.

“Murdered . . . chief's house . . . all of 'em . . . I don't know who.”

James waited some time. The men spoke in hushed voices. James ordered a double shot of Jameson, threw it down his throat, and paid his bill in cash. He walked out the front of BG's and took his time crossing the street. He felt very loose. His legs were light and his face felt as if it must be smiling.

Inside the car, he saw the shotgun, lighter, and propane tank sitting quietly in the passenger seat. His pulse became rapid, he closed his eyes, and embraced the adrenaline. He put the shotgun under his right elbow, stuck the lighter in his right pocket, and held the propane tank in his left hand. James casually closed the door and started walking away from the car. At the edge of the road, he waited for the traffic to clear. Cars drove past him completely unaware of the man with the makings of a bomb on his person. BG's was on a bend, a dead spot. The fast moving cars coming down the road appeared before you could see them coming and were gone in an instant.

Which is why James was so caught off guard when a police car appeared driving at a solid clip around the bend. James froze as he looked right into the cop's eyes. The cop looked back at him, his eyes popped wide with recognition. It was Sam. Sam slammed on the breaks and threw on the lights. He was out of the car in a what seemed a microsecond, stepping out with gun drawn. “James, put the gun down!”

James could hardly believe the speed in which his plans had changed. “They're in there, listen, Sam, I need to finish this. For Maya.”

“Think about what you're doing here, James. I miss her too, man, but you can't bring Maya back.”

“If I go in there I can get all of them. They deserve it.” James took a step across the road.

“Stop! Don't. I *will* shoot you.”

“No, you won't. You want to see these scum bags pay just as much as I do. One of the guys in there killed Maya.” James took another couple steps.

“You don't know that.” Beads of sweat appeared on Sam's forehead.

“They're the drugs traffickers. They're guilty, Sam.”

“James, don't make me do this.”

“I'm going to go in there, Sam. I'm sorry.” James started running across the street. He was confident that Sam would make the right—pain. So much pain. The sound of the second gun shot let him know that the first bullet had company. James stumbled face first and rolled over himself. The first one had been through his side. The second through his back. The propane tank rolled away from him and his arms went slack. James lay down with his face on the gravel. He struggled to crane his head up. The entrance to BG's lay fifteen yards before him. The people inside were pouring out. Lobstermen, dinner guests, and the restaurant staff. James felt their confusion. He'd been so close. Now the pain radiating from his back and his side were taking away his life.

Sam's voice drained away in the background. "Ambulance . . . BG's Boathouse."

His final thought, before he closed his eyes and waited for death to take him away, was that he'd failed her.

Chapter 32

James saw Maya. She was alive and in front of him. She grabbed him and kissed him. James's tears flowed and he kissed her back. His lungs felt as light as balloons. Together again. He looked at her and watched her move. She turned away from him. He was suddenly looking at her through bars. The bars of a lobster trap. He pleaded with her for help, but she kept walking away, deaf to his pleas. His arms and legs were caught and he struggled against his invisible bonds. The pain grew and he shrieked against the burning. "Come back to me!"

"Mr. Morrow. Calm down."

James looked up at the concerned face of the nurse and asked, "Am I . . . alive?"

"Yes, you're very much alive. But you're a bit feverish. The woman took a thermometer and placed it in James's ear. She pulled it out and read the reading. "One hundred and one. It's improving."

"Where am I?" James asked.

"Portsmouth Hospital."

James tried to lift up his arms, but found resistance. "Why am I restrained?"

"Why don't you lie back down, Mr. Morrow?" the nurse said then left the room.

James looked down at the bandages where the bullets had passed through. He was hooked up to multiple fluid bags and an EKG was beeping beside his bed. There was a pulse ox on his finger. He felt incredibly weak. The soft restraints reminded him of Wade's hand cuffs. They'd even restrained his

legs too. Did they think he was going to get up and run away? Or maybe they thought he'd try to kill himself?

The nurse opened the door and James saw a beady-eyed doctor walk in. James saw a quick flash of a police officer seated outside the door. Sam.

The door closed behind the doctor and they moved as one to James's bed side. The nurse handed the doctor the charts.

"How do I look, Doc?" James asked.

The doctor gave him a scrutinizing stare and said nothing. He seemed annoyed at having to be in the room. "Blood pressure is still low. Fever has gone down, and the other vitals have stabilized."

The man took out a pen light and flashed it in one of James's eyes. He then moved the annoying light to the other eye. He wordlessly examined the dressings. Then told the nurse to change the dressings, handed her the clipboard, and started out of the room.

James gave him a queer look. "So, I'll be okay then?"

The man stopped halfway to the door. He didn't turn around to look at James. "You'll live." With that he continued out the door and passed into the hall. The nurse remained.

"What's his problem?" James asked the nurse.

The nurse chewed her lip as she began changing his dressings. "I don't know that it's my place to say, but you should probably know. One of the men you shot, the chief of police, was a close friend of the doctor."

James didn't say anything after that and the nurse offered up no more conversation.

Lunch came. A different nurse had to spoon feed him as they wouldn't take off the restraints. He ate ravenously.

Once he was done, the nurse left and Sam slid through the door before it closed. "I've been thinking of what to say to you," he said.

“And?”

“I still got nothing.” Sam tossed his hands up and let them fall to his knees as he took a seat across from James's bed.

“You shot me.”

“I did.” Sam rubbed his knees as if they bothered him.

“When I could have gone in and taken out a pack of drug trafficking murders all at once.”

“You forget there were innocent people in there, too. I don't regret shooting you, James.”

“What do you want?” James asked.

“Things have happened. You have any idea on how long you've been out?”

“Couple days?” A blind guess.

“Couple weeks.”

“Wow.”

“The good news or the bad news?” Sam offered.

“Maya's still dead, right?”

“She is,” Sam said, bowing his head in respect.

“You find her killer?”

“Not yet, but we're investigating.” Sam seemed hopeful.

“Then it really doesn't matter.” James turned his head on the pillow, away from Sam.

“The good news is that you brought Internal Affairs and FBI into Portsmouth. They investigated the case and determined that the officers you killed, were all involved in the trafficking of heroin into New Hampshire. In fact, DEA got involved and exposed a drug network all along the Eastern coast. Drugs are coming in from Brazil. They're still putting the pieces together, but because of you, they're now investigating this.”

“What happened to the lobstermen?” James asked.

“There have been arrests. Everyone at the bar was taken in for questioning. Had you blown them up, like you intended, we wouldn't have been able to extract the information we did.”

“It would have been one hell of a show though.” James looked up at the ceiling and put on a fake smile.

“It would have been murder.” Sam's voice went cold.

“Aren't I already convicted of that?”

“From what the FBI has figured, it looks like there's a good shot at calling what you did at the chief's house self-defense.”

“Really?” James had a tough time believing that.

“Wade's car camera was aimed right into the garage. We saw the whole thing go down.”

“Wow.”

“Maya teach you to shoot like that?” Sam asked as he leaned his head back.

“My father.” There was a pause. James balanced the new information in his head. He'd said nothing about Marco. James would later learn that they never found the bodies or the boat that James had sunk. As if the whole thing had never really happened.

“Ready for the bad news?” Sam's tone grew more serious.

“No, but let's hear it anyways.”

“Tucker Flynn's body was found, washed up on the rocks of Smuttynose Island.”

James looked down at his fingers.

“He'd managed to crawl up into a cave where he died of exposure and blood loss. The local islanders freaked.” Sam stopped, apparently waiting for a reaction.

James stared at him rigidly.

Sam averted the stare and continued. “The gun shot to his leg was linked back to Maya's gun, which you had in your possession. They're going to try to charge you with the murder of Tucker Flynn

on top of intent to murder at BG's. Now, they don't know what happened out on the water, and neither do I. Your story will be the majority of the evidence. This is the part where I recommend you getting yourself a good lawyer.”

James sighed. He felt tired. “Was Maya taken care of, Sam?”

“She was given a full police funeral. With you missing and no close relatives around, they bent the rules and let the department take care of the arrangements. I volunteered for the task. She was buried in a nice plot under a maple tree.”

“I never expected to survive all this. Do you think she hates me, Sam? I've screwed so much up.”

“Hell, I don't know, what's the difference?” Sam said, he'd dropped the official attitude. He seemed tired too.

James tried to put his hands over his face, but the restraints prevented him.

Sam got up to leave. James choked out a “thank you.”

Sam half turned and said, “Maya was like a sister to me, James. I knew she would have wanted me to protect you. I had a clear shot. I could have killed you, but I didn't.”

The next day a different officer was on duty. The nurse came and went, as did his meals. Would they take him to prison once he was well enough to leave? No one told him, treating him as if he was a problem that no one wanted to deal with. Maybe they would give him the death penalty? Putting needles into his arm and killing him like a dog. They would never let him back into society again. They don't release mad dogs into the population. He looked at his restraints. His hands, his legs, no longer free. He'd lost Maya, he'd lost his freedom. His body, was the body of a murderer. James Morrow, who was that? The idealistic social worker? The kids at the rec center. How did they see him now? It seemed so distant, but their faces came to him. He'd betrayed them. James knew what it was like to be betrayed.

James had just finished his dinner when the officer on duty came in and told him he had visitors. Behind him, Melanie Flynn nudged her way into the room holding Kevin's wrapped hand. Kevin's eyes darted as if expecting something in the room to fall on him. The officer stayed in the room, sitting down in the chair by the door. Melanie approached James tentatively, her face was blanched white, as if she had no more blood left to spare. Frizzy unkempt hair stuck out every which way. James was overwhelmed at being so caught off guard.

They stood at the end of his bed and cast their tired eyes into his face. James felt trapped. He looked away from Kevin and up at Melanie. She'd aged ten years since he saw her last.

"I don't know why I came here," she started.

James nodded. He didn't even try to think of anything to say.

"They told us that you were charged with Tuck's murder." The words seemed to take the life out of her. "I want to know the truth."

"You deserve to know the truth." James glanced over at the police officer. "Can you give us a minute?"

The officer folded his arms. "Can't, I've got orders."

Melanie looked as if she would lose it. Instead, she moved beside James's bed side, eying the restraints and making sure to keep Kevin behind her.

Having her so close made James nervous.

"Whisper it to me," she said.

James told her the truth. A gift only he could give her. Telling her made it seem real, instead of an alcohol-induced dream. The hardest part was telling her how he'd forced Tucker at gun point to jump into the ocean. James wanted to apologize, but he didn't, it would be useless to her.

She backed away to the front of the bed and held on to Kevin again.

"You promised me you'd help him!" Melanie began to shake. She patted her frizzy hair with

her hands. She took a deep breath and blew out a shaky exhale.

Melanie moved to leave then hesitated. “Tucker wasn't the perfect husband. He wasn't the perfect father . . .” She seemed lost, pausing for almost a minute staring at her son.

Kevin looked up at his mother through pink puffy eyes then back at James.

“Tucker took out a large life insurance policy on himself. I think . . . I think he knew.” That was all she was able to say. She began to break down and hurried out of the room clutching Kevin. The officer opened the door for them and resumed his station outside the door.

Chapter 33

James was discharged from the hospital and then detained without bail until the trial. He spent his days in the cells of a penitentiary in Concord. They kept him separate from the rest of the prisoners due to his healing wounds and weakened condition. He hired a lawyer, whom he'd heard was good, and met with her regularly. She told him how the state was scrambling for evidence that James had murdered Tucker. They wanted him to serve time for the cops he'd killed, even though they were connected to the drug trafficking network and obviously corrupt.

She went on about how the case attracted a frenzy of media and had gained national attention. People had began calling him, “The Smuttynose Murderer Reborn.” Superstitious locals had said that the spirit of the dead murderer had come back and inhabited his body.

His lawyer told him not to speak to the media. He told his lawyer everything, every detail, and went on to tell her that he was planning on telling the truth to the court. What the state wanted to do with him after was what he deserved. His lawyer spoke in spurts and took pages of notes. She didn't seem afraid of him. It was actually the opposite. The woman intimidated James. She seemed too quick and smart, as if she were already a step ahead of him. James waited patiently until the trial

began. He kept to himself, mostly because there was no one to talk to besides his lawyer and prison guards.

The day of the trial the state prosecutor put Melanie on the stand. It felt strange to be back in his old clothes. His lawyer had gotten his suit from his apartment. James had shed the orange prison clothes for his work clothes. His white shirt smelled like the fabric softener he used to use. The clothes were his, but they felt as if they didn't fit him anymore.

Melanie still looked extremely fragile, but her hair was put together and her face had a little more color. She told the court about the phone call she had had with James and about the last time she saw Tucker alive. The prosecutor fleshed out the relationship that James and Tucker shared as friends. None of it was substantial. The major evidence was the match of the bullet wound in Tucker's leg and Maya's gun, which was last seen in James's possession. James was moved by Melanie. She kept herself together, even when his lawyer asked her about the large life insurance money that she'd been receiving for Tucker's death. James hadn't told his lawyer about this, but the woman had somehow dug the information up. Melanie looked at James, a face full of hurt. James gave her a look that he hoped said, "I didn't tell her." His lawyer wasn't able to link the money, but left room for doubt. Maybe Tucker had killed himself to absolve his family of debt? The whole thing made James feel sick. Melanie didn't utter a word about what James had told her in the hospital. This made him feel worse. The only salvation was that he would be able to take the stand and tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

When it was his turn to take the stand the prosecutor asked him some routine questions: his name, occupation, age, family history, the usual crap. Then his questions became more specific. He began needling out James's actions following Maya's death. Before the lawyer could ask him another question James stopped him and said, "How about I tell you the whole story, the whole truth, from beginning to end, and we go from there?"

The judge warned James not to speak out of turn.

The prosecutor must have seen something in James's expression, because he asked James to tell his story. He did stop him several times to clarify times, places, and small details. James's own lawyer was uncharacteristically quiet. James didn't tell the prosecutor about Marco. This felt wrong, but no one had yet asked him about the Brazilian boat, and James wasn't even sure if it had really happened. It wouldn't matter either way, because by the time he had finished talking he had already successfully convicted himself of causing the death of Tucker and attempting to kill the lobstermen at BG's.

The prosecutor looked pleased with himself, and even was allowed to show the police video of James killing the police officers. James's own lawyer was in a small rage over this, saying how he wasn't being charged with this incident and that it was already proven as self-defense. The prosecutor argued that it was merely a way to show James's character and his effectiveness with a weapon. The judge allowed it, but only played the video for the jury and the lawyers on each side back in their chambers. James watched the video footage in the chambers, feeling as if he were watching someone else. The shadowy shapes of his captors were alive again carrying him. They dropped him and James was crawling towards the entrance of the garage. He watched himself get up to his knees and shoot the handgun. The muzzle flashes flared. The men were screaming and dying. When it was over, his lawyer looked at him for reaction, she herself showing none. James wondered what she thought of him.

His lawyer called Carol Wayneright, his former psychiatrist, to take the stand. James stared at his lawyer, she'd never mentioned anything about Carol in their conferences.

Confident and comfortable. Best two words to describe Carol's appearance. She dressed in a sharp business suit jacket over a coral pink blouse and a knee-high matching skirt. She wore just enough make-up to accent her features, not to try to cover up flaws. Carol gave her oath, and strutted across the court room floor as if she was the teacher and everyone in the courtroom were her students.

James felt at ease having her there, although he had no idea what she would say.

He looked on anxiously as the woman began to offer up testimony to James's lawyer. "You know now, Mrs. Wayneright, that since this is a legal matter, the court is now privy to the information that was passed between yourself and the defendant, James Morrow, correct?"

"This isn't my first time around the block, Missy," Carol said.

The court broke its hushed silence and nervous laughter rose up from the room. The prosecutor snickered a little louder than he should have.

"Don't you laugh at me, Phillip, I knew you when you were making doodies in diapers: before you got the fancy clothes and the state prosecutor label," Carol said, her tone spitfire.

The prosecutor smiled and put his hands up. The courtroom atmosphere loosened until the judge brought a stop to it, politely though.

Carol described her professional relationship with James and talked about their sessions. "James comes from a history of family abuse." She later talked about his relationship with Maya. "Maya, was a strong source of support for him." Carol delved deeper. "James is a victim of severe child abuse and this has had lasting effects on his mental status. James suffers from deep depression, from what I believe is a result of childhood trauma. He also may suffer from hallucinations and symptoms related to paranoid schizophrenia. This doesn't excuse his violent acts as, every day, people with these disorders live normal, healthy lives. I believe over the years James had developed a sort of control over his psyche through his own mental strengths. I was working with him to justify his painful memories."

She went on to say, "The trauma of losing Maya—in my professional opinion—was the catalyst that bent his mind to give in to feelings of retribution." Carol shook her finger at the jury and said, "It can't be overlooked that in his family there is a history of alcohol abuse. From the case reports I've read, there was a significant presence of alcohol in James's system when he was shot and arrested at BG's. This would have caused his depression to worsen, potentially creating hallucinations, and a lack

of regard for his own life.”

When his lawyer asked about what should be done with James's disorders, Carol spoke without hesitation. “James Morrow is deeply disturbed and my professional recommendation is that he should be committed to an mental health facility for immediate psychiatric treatment.”

Carol answered all the prosecutor's questions and stepped down from the stand. James's lawyer leaned in and told James that she wasn't going to let him toss himself to the sharks that easily, adding that Carol was extremely popular among the public safety personnel. “A strong person to have on your side,” she had said.

When the day of the verdict arrived James found, that despite his utter lack of caring, he was still nervous. Television cameras and flashes assaulted him on his way into the courtroom. People yelled threats, while others cheered. He heard several people yell, “Smuttynose Murderer.” James's lawyer helped him put his suit coat over his head.

In the courtroom the jury looked faceless. A woman among them stood up and told the judge that the jury had found a verdict. The judge read the verdict and told the courtroom that James was found guilty by reason of insanity. No surprise there, James thought. The judge then told him that he was sentenced to undergo treatment at a psychiatric facility where he would be eligible for an assessment hearing every five years.

His lawyer shook his hand and told him, “It's a good deal.” That was the last time he ever saw her.

Chapter 34

Weeks progressed and summer leaked away as if water through cupped hands. After the trial

James had been transferred to Concord and admitted to the mental health center. Regular therapy helped him deal with the pain and guilt. The employees were pleasant, if a little distant. James wasn't foolish enough to think that they didn't know who he was, but once they got to know him, some took a fondness to him. At first, James had been creeped out by his fellow asylum inmates. He didn't want to call them crazy, so instead, he called them unfortunate. This way, he was in the same boat they were: the captain of the unfortunates.

Lately, the hallucinations had gotten bad. It was as if he was dreaming while fully awake. He'd be in his room alone. Then his locked door would open and his father would walk through. He'd yell at James as if he was a boy and threaten to beat him senseless. Another time, he was lying in bed and when he rolled over, Maya was there lying beside him. She seemed so real, even ran her hands through his hair. When he snapped out of it, it was just him running his own hands through his hair. Still, hallucinations aside, at least he felt like himself.

The medication seemed to suffocate and imprison him. Twice a day the staff gave him a cup full of multicolored pills. They drained away his energy and made him drowsy and fuzzy; he felt utterly useless. So he learned to hack the pills up.

James's therapist wanted him to concentrate on making new memories. Reading was his answer, offering an escape through the sterility of the institution's walls. He discussed his current reading with his therapist and began to think of his meetings as book club. She praised him often, but wasn't half as good as Carol had been.

At night, the nightmares would come: filled with death, sharks, the faces of Maya, Tucker, Melanie, Kevin, his father. He would wake up, often in a sweat, and walk about his private room to calm down, exercise, bide his time till the morning sun greeted him, and the staff unlocked his door. He had a small barred window facing East from which he watched the death of Summer and the coming of a new Fall. The outside grounds of the institution consisted of manicured lawns with a

scattering of maple trees that seemed to catch fire.

There were days where he carried his loneliness about him like a cape. On those days, he swallowed the medication they gave him. No one from the outside ever visited, although he wasn't sure who he actually expected to see. A distant relative or possibly a reporter eager at the chance to brag that they'd met the Smuttynose Murderer Reborn in the flesh. He'd been informed by the staff that he'd been let go from his job due to his sentence.

James grew to accept the routine, gave in to his setting and his condition. Then on what looked like a cold, wet autumn day, it happened. James was settled in a chair off to the side while his other unfortunates went about filling their free time their usual ways. He'd been reading a new book, *City of Glass*, by Paul Auster. James was halfway through and trying to make sense of the story. It had something to do with identity. The sounds of yelling tore him away from his book. Someone new was being admitted, a black man, who yelled as if he was on fire. He was haggard-looking and vaguely familiar. James saved his place and put the book down, watching as two large members of the staff, (former military) were trying to keep the man from hurting himself or them. The man was brought past the thick reinforced glass of what James nicknamed "the playroom." The screaming man caught James's stare. Those eyes. He knew them. The man seemed to recognize James, because he broke one of their holds and lunged, butting his head against the glass. He got his hands loose, scratched, and clawed trying to get to James as if he was an angry dog behind a car window. A shaving of his past life—Maya's father, Marcus Cooper.

The two staffers regained control and led him away. James went to the window and waited till one of the men, Brock Saunders, walked back. He flagged Brock down, and having already told James how "cool" he was, Brock spared him the time, slipping into the play room and taking James aside.

"I have some news for you Jamie-boy." Brock's voice was just above a whisper.

James didn't actually mind the nickname. "Brock, that man, what's his name?"

"I'm breaking regulations if I tell you, but screw it, you know who it is already, don't cha?"

Brock rubbed his palms together as if warming them.

"Marcus Cooper," James said.

"Got it." Brock was almost giddy with the information. "Police found him wandering around Odiorne Point talking to himself. They said he'd been living in the woods for a while. He's a suspect for two murders. That Fish and Game officer, I forget his name, and . . ." Brock's pause made James want to die. "His daughter, Maya Cooper."

The walls might as well have just fallen inwards. "Marcus Cooper." Then he realized Brock had said, "Odiorne Point." James's mind flashed to the night he'd beached *The Periwinkle*. This was the man he'd chased through the woods. James took a moment to put together a storyline in his head. He must have hunted Maya down and attacked her when she was leaving BG's boathouse the night she'd met Tucker. BG's was only a mile or two from Odiorne Point. He must have done it. Killed his own daughter. James had almost shot him dead there in the woods. He'd had the man in his sights.

"I see the wheels are turning in your head, Jamie-boy. What are you planning?"

"Nothing," James said, dismissing Brock's eagerness. "Just trying to come to grips with it all, you know?"

Brock left the playroom and the door locked behind him.

Chapter 35

He figured if someone was to call him by a name at this very moment that the only proper name would be James Morrow. On this night, James was himself, completely unhindered by the pills. James had discovered how to rig his door so it wouldn't lock fully a while back, yet there was almost no likelihood that he could escape the institution without help. He could, however wander the halls and pass

the other locked rooms. James intended to be quick; there were risks. He waited until he was sure the night shift had changed and then took off running.

As he sprinted down the hall, his bare feet made a wet sound each time they slapped against the cold floor. The hard part was getting access to Marcus Cooper's room. The employees of the institution used plastic key cards to lock away the unfortunates.

He'd tried to imitate these devices, testing bits of metal against the locks, which ended in a series of failures. He would need to steal one or get a staff person in on the plot willingly or, more likely, unwillingly. James tore down the hall praying that whoever was on duty wasn't watching him through the cameras.

James flattened himself against the wall to get a load of the situation around the corner. The night staffer was a thin man with a blonde mustache and a weak chin. The sound of his thumbs punching the plastic keys of his cell phone made a serious racket; but, then again, the only sounds competing were a steady rush of air from the ducts and James's muffled heart. He crept closer, staying low, his calves balling up in anticipation. The staffer leaned back in his chair and yawned. James sprang and grabbed a loose pen on the desk.

"Jesus!" was all the man was able to say.

James held the man to the chair, the menacing pen tip brushing his neck. "I need your key card."

"Take it!" The guy's arms reached for heaven. The card dangled from his belt by a clip.

James snapped the card off its leash and hesitated. He looked at his captive's name tag.

"Jerry, I need a favor from you."

"Anything, man, just don't hurt me."

"I could stick you right here, right now, but I like you, Jerry. I don't want to see you get hurt."

James cocked his head to the right, while his eye lids stretched wide; he should have been an actor. "I

need you to promise me you'll wait three minutes. Three minutes, you sit here, you don't move, don't call anyone . . . until I've done what I need to do."

"S-Sure, man. Three minutes. No problem."

"If you don't do that, I'll come back here. I assume you know who I am right?"

Jerry nodded vigorously. "The guy from the news . . . you killed those people . . . the Smuttynose Murderer Reborn."

"Bingo!" James said. "We got a deal?"

"D-Deal."

"How many minutes, Jerry?"

"Three minutes."

"Exactly." He took the pen away from Jerry's quivering throat and took off back the way he'd come. As he ran he took a quick glance back over his shoulder and saw Jerry sitting stiff in his chair, afraid to move, afraid to breath.

The dim light guided James past the face-sized black square windows. He stopped in front of room thirty-six and took a moment to catch his breath. It was dim inside, only the sliver of moon light broke the darkness within. His hands trembled as he put the card up to the door and heard the lock retract. The green light told him to go. He pulled the door open and moved inside, his eyes adjusting to the gloom. He saw—a vacant bed. Wait, where the hell is he? Shit. Had he been moved today? The room remained silent.

James slumped down on the on the bed, laid his head back, and dangled his legs over the side. It was over. His only shot at revenge. He'd been so close.

Something grabbed his leg. He was suddenly pulled down to the floor. Under the bed, why hadn't he checked under the bed? James scrambled to get away and Maya's father came out of the darkness and leaped on top of him. He began to swing his arms and buffet James with blows to the

face. James was shocked at the man's strength. James defended himself and fought back. He punched Maya's father in the crotch and when he fell over James jumped on top of him. The man locked his hands around James's throat, clenching like a vise.

James locked his own hands around his attacker's throat. They held each other, each trying to squeeze the life out of the others body. James felt light-headed, but pressed on through the moonlight that revealed two killers whose lives were held in each others hands. The struggled for breath, pockets of rage gurgling out their black mouths. James saw himself reflected in the others glassy pupils. He didn't recognize it as the James that he knew, it looked more like his own father looking back, smirking a whiskey smile, and as James squeezed harder and fought off his own approaching blackness, he could almost hear the face staring back at him speak the words, "When you've got the enemy in your sights, you only want one story, your story.

James eye's went wide, the hands on his throat were his own, the room: his room. He coughed and released his grip. What's going on?

The lock released and Brock rushed to his side. "Jamie-boy, it's okay, you're having an episode." Brock's hold was too strong to escape.

A nurse came in behind him and stuck a needle in his arm. "This will make the hallucinations go away." He fought them until his arms became jelly, and his body sunk to the floor.

When he woke he asked Brock, "Was Marcus Cooper ever here?"

Brock's eyes scoured the walls of James's empty room, then he whispered. "He was, Jamie-boy, but between you and me, the sorry bastard offed himself the day we admitted him."

From that day on, and till the end of his days, James swallowed his pills like a good boy.