

Chapter 1

Clayton and Thibault

Deputy Keith Clayton hadn't heard them approach, and up close, he didn't like the looks of them any more than he had the first time he'd seen them. The dog was part of it. He wasn't fond of German shepherds, and this one, though he was standing quietly, reminded him of Panther, the police dog that rode with Deputy Kenny Moore and was quick to bite suspects in the crotch at the slightest command. Most of the time he regarded Moore as an idiot, but he was still just about the closest thing to a friend that Clayton had in the department, and he had to admit that Moore had a way of telling those crotch-biting stories that made Clayton double over in laughter. And Moore would definitely have appreciated the little skinny-dipping party Clayton had just broken up, when he'd spied a couple of coeds sunning down by the creek in all their morning glory. He hadn't been there for more than a few minutes and had snapped only a couple of pictures on the digital camera when he saw a third girl pop up from behind a hydrangea bush. After quickly ditching the camera in the bushes behind him, he'd stepped out from behind the tree, and a moment later, he and the coed were face-to-face.

"Well, what have we got here?" he drawled, trying to put her on the defensive.

He hadn't liked the fact that he'd been caught, nor was he pleased with his insipid opening line. Usually he was smoother than that. A lot smoother. Thankfully, the girl was too embarrassed to notice much of anything, and she almost tripped while trying to back up. She stammered something like an answer as she tried to cover herself with her hands. It was like watching someone play a game of Twister by herself.

He made no effort to avert his gaze. Instead he smiled, pretending not to notice her body, as if he bumped into naked women in the woods all the time. He could already tell she knew nothing about the camera.

"Now calm down. What's going on?" he asked.

He knew full well what was going on. It happened a few times every summer, but especially in August: Coeds from Chapel Hill or NC State, heading to the beach for a long, last-chance weekend at Emerald Isle before the fall term began, often made a detour onto an old logging road that twisted and bumped for a mile or so into the national forest before reaching the point where Swan Creek made a sharp turn toward the South River. There was a rock-pebble beach there that had come to be known for nude sunbathing—how that happened, he had no idea—and Clayton often made it a point to swing by on the off chance he might get lucky. Two weeks ago, he'd seen six lovelies; today, however, there were three, and the two who'd been lying on their towels

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were already reaching for their shirts. Though one of them was a bit heavy, the other two—including the brunette standing in front of him—had the kind of figures that made frat boys go crazy. Deputies, too.

"We didn't know anyone was out here! We thought it would be okay!"

Her face held just enough innocence to make him think, Wouldn't Daddy be proud if he knew what his little girl was up to? It amused him to imagine what she might say to that, but since he was in uniform, he knew he had to say something official. Besides, he knew he was pressing his luck; if word got out that the sheriff's office was actually patrolling the area, there'd be no more coeds in the future, and that was something he didn't want to contemplate.

"Let's go talk to your friends."

He followed her back toward the beach, watching as she tried unsuccessfully to cover her backside, enjoying the little show. By the time they stepped from the trees into the clearing by the river, her friends had pulled on their shirts. The brunette jogged and jiggled toward the others and quickly reached for a towel, knocking over a couple of cans of beer in the process. Clayton motioned to a nearby tree.

"Didn't y'all see the sign?"

On cue, their eyes swung that way. People were sheep, waiting for the next order, he thought. The sign, small and partially hidden by the low-slung branches of an ancient live oak, had been posted by order of Judge Kendrick Clayton, who also happened to be his uncle. The idea for the signs had been Keith's; he knew that the public prohibition would only enhance the attraction of the place.

"We didn't see it!" the brunette cried, swiveling back to him. "We didn't know! We just heard about this place a couple of days ago!" She continued to protest while struggling with the towel; the others were too terrified to do much of anything except try to wiggle back into their bikini bottoms. "It's the first time we've ever been here!"

It came out like a whine, making her sound like a spoiled sorority sister. Which all of them probably were. They had that look.

"Did you know that public nudity is a misdemeanor in this county?"

He saw their young faces grow even more pale, knowing they were imagining this little transgression on their record. Fun to watch, but he reminded himself not to let it go too far.

"What's your name?"

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"Amy." The brunette swallowed. "Amy White."

"Where are you from?"

"Chapel Hill. But I'm from Charlotte originally."

"I see some alcohol there. Are y'all twenty-one?"

For the first time, the others answered as well. "Yes, sir."

"Okay, Amy. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to take you at your word that you didn't see the sign and that you're of legal age to drink, so I'm not going to make a big deal out of this. I'll pretend I wasn't even here. As long as you promise not to tell my boss that I let you three off the hook."

They weren't sure whether to believe him.

"Really?"

"Really," he said. "I was in college once, too." He hadn't been, but he knew it sounded good. "And you might want to put your clothes on. You never know—there might be people lurking around." He flashed a smile. "Make sure you clean up all the cans, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"I appreciate it." He turned to leave.

"That's it?"

Turning around, he flashed his smile again. "That's it. Y'all take care now."

Clayton pushed through the underbrush, ducking beneath the occasional branch on the way back to his cruiser, thinking he'd handled that well. Very well indeed. Amy had actually smiled at him, and as he'd turned away, he'd toyed with the idea of doubling back and asking her for her phone number. No, he decided, it was probably better to simply leave good enough alone. More than likely they'd go back and tell their friends that even though they'd been caught by the sheriff, nothing had happened to them. Word would get around that the deputies around here were cool. Still, as he wove through the woods, he hoped the pictures came out. They would make a nice addition to his little collection.

All in all, it had been an excellent day. He was about to go back for the camera when he heard whistling. He followed the sound toward the logging road and saw the stranger with a dog, walking slowly up the road, looking like some kind of hippie from the sixties.

The stranger wasn't with the girls. Clayton was sure of it. The guy was too old to be a college student, for one thing; he had to be late twenties, at least. His long hair reminded Clayton of a rat's nest, and on the stranger's back, Clayton could see the outlines of a sleeping bag poking out from beneath a backpack. This was no day-tripper on the way to the beach; this guy had the appearance of someone who'd been hiking, maybe even camping out. No telling how long he'd been here or what he'd seen.

Like Clayton taking pictures?

No way. It wasn't possible. He'd been hidden from the main road, the underbrush was thick, and he would have heard someone tramping through the woods. Right? Still, it was an odd place to be hiking. They were in the middle of nowhere out here, and the last thing he wanted was a bunch of hippie losers ruining this spot for the coeds.

By then, the stranger had passed him. He was nearly to the cruiser and heading toward the Jeep that the girls had driven. Clayton stepped onto the road and cleared his throat. The stranger and the dog turned at the sound.

From a distance, Clayton continued to evaluate them. The stranger seemed unfazed by Clayton's sudden appearance, as did the dog, and there was something in the stranger's gaze that unsettled him. Like he'd almost expected Clayton to show up. Same thing with the German shepherd. The dog's expression was aloof and wary at the same time—intelligent, almost—which was the same way Panther often appeared before Moore set him loose. His stomach did a quick flip-flop. He had to force himself not to cover his privates.

For a long minute, they continued to stare at each other. Clayton had learned a long time ago that his uniform intimidated most people. Everyone, even innocent people, got nervous around the law, and he figured this guy was no exception. It was one of the reasons he loved being a deputy.

"You got a leash for your dog?" he said, making it sound more like a command than a question.

"In my backpack."

Clayton could hear no accent at all. "Johnny Carson English," as his mother used to describe it. "Put it on."

"Don't worry. He won't move unless I tell him to."

"Put it on anyway."

The stranger lowered his backpack and fished around; Clayton craned his neck, hoping for a glimpse of anything that could be construed as drugs or weapons. A moment later,

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the leash was attached to the dog's collar and the stranger faced him with an expression that seemed to say, Now what?

"What are you doing out here?" Clayton asked.

"Hiking."

"That's quite a pack you've got for a hike."

The stranger said nothing.

"Or maybe you were sneaking around, trying to see the sights?"

"Is that what people do when they're here?"

Clayton didn't like his tone, or the implication. "I'd like to see some identification."

The stranger bent over his backpack again and fished out his passport. He held an open palm to the dog, making the dog stay, then took a step toward Clayton and handed it over.

"No driver's license?"

"I don't have one."

Clayton studied the name, his lips moving slightly. "Logan Thibault?"

The stranger nodded.

"Where you from?"

"Colorado."

"Long trip."

The stranger said nothing.

"You going anywhere in particular?"

"I'm on my way to Arden."

"What's in Arden?"

"I couldn't say. I haven't been there yet."

Clayton frowned at the answer. Too slick. Too . . . challenging? Too something. Whatever. All at once, he knew he didn't like this guy. "Wait here," he said. "You don't mind if I check this out, do you?"

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"Help yourself."

As Clayton headed back to the car, he glanced over his shoulder and saw Thibault reach into his backpack and pull out a small bowl before proceeding to empty a bottle of water into it. Like he didn't have a care in the world.

We'll find out, won't we? In the cruiser, Clayton radioed in the name and spelling before being interrupted by the dispatcher.

"It's Thibault, like T-bow, not Thigh-bolt. It's French."

"Why should I care how it's pronounced?"

"I was just saying—"

"Whatever, Marge. Just check it out, will you?"

"Does he look French?"

"How the hell would I know what a Frenchman looks like?"

"I'm just curious. Don't get so huffy about it. I'm a little busy here."

Yeah, real busy, Clayton thought. Eating doughnuts, most likely. Marge scarfed down at least a dozen Krispy Kremes a day. She must have weighed at least three hundred pounds.

Through the window, he could see the stranger squatting beside the dog and whispering to it as it lapped up the water. He shook his head. Talking to animals. Freak. Like the dog could understand anything other than the most basic of commands. His ex-wife used to do that, too. That woman treated dogs like people, which should have warned him to stay away from her in the first place.

"I can't find anything," he heard Marge say. She sounded like she was chewing something. "No outstanding warrants that I can see."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I do know how to do my job."

As though he'd been listening in on the conversation, the stranger retrieved the bowl and slipped it back into his backpack, then slung his backpack over his shoulder.

"Have there been any other unusual calls? People loitering around, things like that?"

"No. It's been quiet this morning. And where are you, by the way? Your dad's been trying to find you."

Clayton's dad was the county sheriff.

"Tell him I'll be back in a little while."

"He seems mad."

"Just tell him I've been on patrol, okay?"

So he'll know I've been working, he didn't bother to add.

"Will do."

That's better.

"I gotta go."

He put the radio handset back in place and sat without moving, feeling the slightest trace of disappointment. It would have been fun to see how the guy handled lockup, what with that girly hair and all. The Landry brothers would have had a field day with him. They were regulars in lockup on Saturday nights: drunk and disorderly, disturbing the peace, fighting, almost always with each other. Except when they were in lockup. Then they'd pick on someone else.

He fiddled with the handle of his car door. And what was his dad mad about this time? Dude got on his nerves. Do this. Do that. You serve those papers yet? Why are you late? Where've you been? Half the time he wanted to tell the old guy to mind his own damn business. Old guy still thought he ran things around here.

No matter. He supposed he'd find out sooner or later. Now it was time to get the hippie loser out of here, before the girls came out. Place was supposed to be private, right? Hippie freaks could ruin the place.

Clayton got out of the car, closing the door behind him. The dog cocked its head to the side as Clayton approached. He handed the passport back. "Sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Thibault." This time, he mangled the pronunciation on purpose. "Just doing my job. Unless, of course, you've got some drugs or guns in your pack."

"I don't."

"You care to let me see for myself?"

"Not really. Fourth Amendment and all."

"I see your sleeping bag there. You been camping?"

"I was in Burke County last night."

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Clayton studied the guy, thinking about the answer.

"There aren't any campgrounds around here."

The guy said nothing.

It was Clayton who looked away. "You might want to keep that dog on the leash."

"I didn't think there was a leash law in this county."

"There isn't. It's for your dog's safety. Lot of cars out by the main road."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Okay, then." Clayton turned away before pausing once more. "If you don't mind my asking, how long have you been out here?"

"I just walked up. Why?"

Something in the way he answered made Clayton wonder, and he hesitated before reminding himself again that there was no way the guy could know what he'd been up to. "No reason."

"Can I go?"

"Yeah. Okay."

Clayton watched the stranger and his dog start up the logging road before veering onto a small trail that led into the woods. Once he vanished, Clayton went back to his original vantage point to search for the camera. He poked his arm into the bushes, kicked at the pine straw, and retraced his steps a couple of times to make sure he was in the right place. Eventually, he dropped to his knees, panic beginning to settle in. The camera belonged to the sheriff's department. He'd only borrowed it for these special outings, and there'd be a lot of questions from his dad if it turned out to be lost. Worse, discovered with a card full of nudie pictures. His dad was a stickler for protocol and responsibility.

By then, a few minutes had passed. In the distance, he heard the throaty roar of an engine fire up. He assumed the coeds were leaving; only briefly did he consider what they might be thinking when they noticed his cruiser was still there. He had other issues on his mind.

The camera was gone.

Not lost. Gone. And the damn thing sure as hell didn't walk off on its own. No way the girls had found it, either. Which meant Thigh-bolt had been playing him all along. Thigh-

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bolt. Playing. Him. Unbelievable. He knew the guy had been acting too slick, too I Know What You Did Last Summer.

No way was he getting away with that. No grimy, hippie, dogtalking freak was ever going to show up Keith Clayton. Not in this life, anyway.

He pushed through branches heading back to the road, figuring he'd catch up to Logan Thigh-bolt and have a little look-see. And that was just for starters. More than that would follow; that much was certain. Guy plays him? That just wasn't done. Not in this town, anyway. He didn't give a damn about the dog, either. Dog gets upset? Bye, bye, doggie. Simple as that. German shepherds were weapons—there wasn't a court in the land where that wouldn't stand up.

First things first, though. Find Thibault. Get the camera. Then figure out the next step.

It was only then, while approaching his cruiser, that he realized both his rear tires were flat.

"What did you say your name was?"

Thibault leaned across the front seat of the Jeep a few minutes later, talking over the roar of the wind. "Logan Thibault." He thumbed over his shoulder. "And this is Zeus."

Zeus was in the back of the Jeep, tongue out, nose lifted to the wind as the Jeep sped toward the highway.

"Beautiful dog. I'm Amy. And this is Jennifer and Lori."

Thibault glanced over his shoulder. "Hi."

"Hey."

They seemed distracted. Not surprising, Thibault thought, considering what they'd been through. "I appreciate the ride."

"No big deal. And you said you're going to Hampton?"

"If it's not too far."

"It's right on the way."

After leaving the logging road and taking care of a couple of things, Thibault had edged back to the road just as the girls were pulling out. He'd held out his thumb, thankful that Zeus was with him, and they'd pulled over almost immediately.

Sometimes things work out just like they're supposed to.

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Though he pretended otherwise, he'd actually seen the three of them earlier that morning as they'd come in—he'd camped just over the ridge from the beach—but had given them the privacy they deserved as soon as they'd started to disrobe. To his mind, what they were doing fell into the "no harm, no foul" category; aside from him, they were completely alone out here, and he had no intention of hanging around to stare. Who cared if they took their clothes off or, for that matter, dressed up in chicken costumes? It wasn't any of his business, and he'd intended to keep it that way—until he saw the deputy driving up the road in a Hampton County Sheriff's Department car.

He got a good look at the deputy through the windshield, and there was something wrong about the guy's expression. Hard to say what it was, exactly, and he didn't pause to analyze it. He turned around, cutting through the forest, and arrived in time to see the deputy checking the disk in his camera before quietly shutting the door of his cruiser. He watched him slink off toward the ridge. Thibault knew full well that the deputy could have been working officially, but he looked the way Zeus did when he was waiting for a piece of beef jerky. A little too excited about the whole thing.

Thibault had Zeus stay where he was, kept enough distance so the deputy wouldn't hear him, and the rest of the plan had come together spontaneously after that. He knew that direct confrontation was out—the deputy would have claimed he was collecting evidence, and the strength of his word against a stranger's would have been unassailable. Anything physical was out of the question, mostly because it would have caused more problems than it was worth, though he would have loved to go toe-to-toe with the guy. Luckily—or unluckily, he supposed, depending on the perspective—the girl had appeared, the deputy had panicked, and Thibault had seen where the camera had landed. Once the deputy and the girl headed back toward her friends, Thibault retrieved the camera. He could have simply left at that point, but the guy needed to be taught a lesson. Not a big lesson, just a lesson that would keep the girls' honor intact, allow Thibault to be on his way, and ruin the deputy's day. Which was why he'd doubled back to flatten the deputy's tires.

"Oh, that reminds me," Thibault volunteered. "I found your camera in the woods."

"It's not mine. Lori or Jen—did either of you lose a camera?"

Both of them shook their heads.

"Keep it anyway," Thibault said, putting it on the seat, "and thanks for the ride. I've already got one."

"You sure? It's probably expensive."

"Positive."

"Thanks."

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Thibault noted the shadows playing on her features, thinking she was attractive in a big-city kind of way, with sharp features, olive skin, and brown eyes flecked with hazel. He could imagine staring at her for hours.

"Hey . . . you doing anything this weekend?" Amy asked. "We're all going out to the beach."

"I appreciate the offer, but I can't."

"I'll bet you're going to see your girlfriend, aren't you."

"What makes you say that?"

"You have that way about you."

He forced himself to turn away. "Something like that."

Chapter 2

Thibault

It was strange to think of the unexpected twists a man's life could take. Up until a year ago, Thibault would have jumped at the opportunity to spend the weekend with Amy and her friends. It was probably exactly what he needed, but when they dropped him off just outside the Hampton town limits with the August afternoon heat bearing down hard, he waved good-bye, feeling strangely relieved. Maintaining a facade of normalcy had been exhausting.

Since leaving Colorado five months earlier, he hadn't voluntarily spent more than a few hours with anyone, the lone exception being an elderly dairy farmer just south of Little Rock, who let him sleep in an unused upstairs bedroom after a dinner in which the farmer talked as little as he did. He appreciated the fact that the man didn't feel the need to press him about why he'd just appeared the way he had. No questions, no curiosity, no open-ended hints. Just a casual acceptance that Thibault didn't feel like talking. In gratitude, Thibault spent a couple of days helping to repair the roof of the barn before finally returning to the road, backpack loaded, with Zeus trailing behind him. With the exception of the ride from the girls, he'd walked the entire distance. After dropping the keys to his apartment at the manager's office in mid-March, he'd gone through eight pairs of shoes, pretty much survived on PowerBars and water during long, lonely stretches between towns, and once, in Tennessee, had eaten five tall stacks of pancakes after going nearly three days without food. Along with Zeus, he'd traveled through blizzards, hailstorms, rain, and heat so intense that it made the skin on his arms blister; he'd seen a tornado on the horizon near Tulsa, Oklahoma, and had nearly been struck by lightning twice. He'd taken numerous detours, trying to stay off the main roads, further lengthening the journey, sometimes on a whim. Usually, he walked until he was tired, and toward the end of the day, he'd start searching for a spot to camp, anywhere he thought he and Zeus wouldn't be disturbed. In the mornings, they hit the road before dawn so no one would be the wiser. To this point, no one had bothered them.

He figured he'd been averaging more than twenty miles a day, though he'd never kept specific track of either the time or the distance. That wasn't what the journey was about. He could imagine some people thinking that he was walking to outpace the memories of the world he'd left behind, which had a poetic ring to it; others might want to believe he was walking simply for the sake of the journey itself. But neither was true. He liked to

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walk and he had someplace to go. Simple as that. He liked going when he wanted, at the pace he wanted, to the place he wanted to be. After four years of following orders in the Marine Corps, the freedom of it appealed to him. His mother worried about him, but then that's what mothers did. Or his mother, anyway. He called every few days to let her know he was doing okay, and usually, after hanging up, he would think that he wasn't being fair to her. He'd already been gone for much of the past five years, and before each of his three tours in Iraq, he'd listened as she'd lectured into the phone, reminding him not to do anything stupid. He hadn't, but there had been more than a few close calls. Though he'd never told her about them, she read the papers. "And now this," his mother had lamented the night before he'd left. "This whole thing seems crazy to me."

Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't. He wasn't sure yet.

"What do you think, Zeus?"

The dog looked up at the sound of his name and padded to his side.

"Yeah, I know. You're hungry. What's new?"

Thibault paused in the parking lot of a run-down motel on the edge of town. He reached for the bowl and the last of the dog food. As Zeus began to eat, Thibault took in the view of the town.

Hampton wasn't the worst place he'd ever seen, not by a long shot, but it wasn't the best, either. The town was located on the banks of the South River, about thirty-five miles northwest of Wilmington and the coast, and at first glance, it seemed no different from the thousands of self-sufficient, blue-collar communities long on pride and history that dotted the South. There were a couple of traffic lights dangling on droopy wires that interrupted the traffic flow as it edged toward the bridge that spanned the river, and on either side of the main road were low-slung brick buildings, sandwiched together and stretching for half a mile, with business names stenciled on the front windows advertising places to eat and drink or purchase hardware.

A few old magnolias were scattered here and there and made the sidewalks swell beneath their bulging roots. In the distance, he saw an old-fashioned barber pole, along with the

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requisite older men sitting on the bench out in front of it. He smiled. It was quaint, like a fantasy of the 1950s.

On closer inspection, though, he sensed that first impressions were deceiving. Despite the waterfront location—or maybe because of it, he surmised—he noted the decay near the rooflines, in the crumbling bricks near the foundations, in the faded brackish stains a couple of feet higher than the foundations, which indicated serious flooding in the past. None of the shops were boarded up yet, but observing the dearth of cars parked in front of the businesses, he wondered how long they could hold out. Small-town commercial districts were going the way of the dinosaurs, and if this place was like most of the other towns he'd passed through, he figured there was probably another, newer area for businesses, one most likely anchored by a Wal-Mart or a Piggly Wiggly, that would spell the end for this part of town. Strange, though. Being here. He wasn't sure what he'd imagined Hampton to be, but it wasn't this.

No matter. As Zeus was finishing his food, he wondered how long it would take to find her. The woman in the photograph. The woman he'd come to meet. But he would find her. That much was certain.

He hoisted his backpack. "You ready?"

Zeus tilted his head.

"Let's get a room. I want to eat and shower. And you need a bath."

Thibault took a couple of steps before realizing Zeus hadn't moved. He glanced over his shoulder.

"Don't give me that look. You definitely need a bath.

You smell."

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Zeus still didn't move.

"Fine. Do what you want. I'm going."

He headed toward the manager's office to check in, knowing that Zeus would follow. In the end, Zeus always followed.

Until he'd found the photograph, Thibault's life had proceeded as he'd long intended. He'd always had a plan. He'd wanted to do well in school and had; he'd wanted to participate in a variety of sports and had grown up playing pretty much everything. He'd wanted to learn to play the piano and the violin, and he'd become proficient enough to write his own music. After college at the University of Colorado, he'd planned to join the Marine Corps, and the recruiter had been thrilled that he'd chosen to enlist instead of becoming an officer. Shocked, but thrilled. Most graduates had little desire to become a grunt, but that was exactly what he'd wanted. The bombing of the World Trade Center had little to do with his decision. Instead, joining the military seemed the natural thing to do, since his dad had served with the marines for twenty-five years. His dad had gone in as a private and finished as one of those grizzled, steel-jawed sergeants who intimidated pretty much everyone except his wife and the platoons he commanded. He treated those young men like his sons; his sole intent, he used to tell them, was to bring them back home to their mothers alive and well and all grown up. His dad must have attended more than fifty weddings over the years of guys he'd led who couldn't imagine getting married without having his blessing. Good marine, too. He'd picked up a Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts in Vietnam and over the years had served in Grenada, Panama, Bosnia, and the First Gulf War. His dad was a marine who didn't mind transfers, and

Thibault had spent the majority of his youth moving from place to place, living on bases around the world. In some ways, Okinawa seemed more like home than Colorado, and though his Japanese was a bit rusty, he figured a week spent in Tokyo would rekindle the fluency he'd once known. Like his dad, he figured he'd end up retiring from the corps, but unlike his dad, he intended to live long enough afterward to enjoy it.

His dad had died of a heart attack only two years after he'd slipped his dress blues onto the hanger for the last time, a massive infarction that came out of the blue. One minute

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he was shoveling snow from the driveway, and the next minute he was gone. That was thirteen years ago. Thibault had been fifteen years old at the time.

That day and the funeral that followed were the most vivid memories of his life prior to joining the marines. Being raised as a military brat has a way of making things blur together, simply because of how often you have to move. Friends come and go, clothing is packed and unpacked, households are continually purged of unnecessary items, and as a result, not much sticks. It's hard at times, but it makes a kid strong in ways that most people can't understand. Teaches them that even though people are left behind, new ones will inevitably take their place; that every place has something good—and bad—to offer. It makes a kid grow up fast.

Even his college years were hazy, but that chapter of his life had its own routines. Studying during the week, enjoying the weekends, cramming for finals, crappy dorm food, and two girlfriends, one of whom lasted a little more than a year. Everyone who ever went to college had the same stories to tell, few of which had lasting impact. In the end, only his education remained. In truth, he felt like his life hadn't really started until he'd arrived on Parris Island for basic training. As soon as he'd hopped off the bus, the drill sergeant started shouting in his ear. There's nothing like a drill sergeant to make a person believe that nothing in his life had really mattered to that point. You were theirs now, and that was that. Good at sports? *Give me fifty push-ups, Mr. Point Guard.* College educated? *Assemble this rifle, Einstein.* Father was in the marines? *Clean the crapper like your old man once did.* Same old clichés. Run, march, stand at attention, crawl through the mud, scale that wall: There was nothing in basic training he hadn't expected. He had to admit that the drill mostly worked. It broke people down, beat them down even further, and eventually molded them into marines. Or that's what they said, anyway. He didn't break down. He went through the motions, kept his head low, did as he was ordered, and remained the same man he'd been before. He became a marine anyway.

He ended up with the First Battalion, Fifth Marines, based out of Camp Pendleton. San Diego was his kind of town, with great weather, gorgeous beaches, and even more beautiful women. But it was not to last. In January 2003, right after he turned twenty-three, he deployed to Kuwait as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Camp Doha, in an industrial part of Kuwait City, had been in use since the First Gulf War and was pretty much a town unto itself. There was a gym and a computer center, a PX, places to eat, and tents spread as far as the horizon. Busy place made much busier by the impending

invasion, and things were chaotic from the start. His days were an unbroken sequence of hours-long meetings, backbreaking drills, and rehearsals of ever changing attack plans. He must have practiced donning his chemical war protection suit a hundred times. There were endless rumors, too. The worst part was trying to figure out which one might be true. Everyone knew of someone who knew someone who'd heard the *real story*. One day they were going in imminently; next day they'd hear that they were holding off.

First, they were coming in from the north and south; then just from the south, and maybe not even that. They heard the enemy had chemical weapons and intended to use them; next day they heard they wouldn't use them because they believed that the United States would respond with nukes. There were whispers that the Iraqi Republican Guard intended to make a suicide stand just over the border; others swore they intended to make the stand near Baghdad. Still others said the suicide stand would happen near the oil fields. In short, no one knew anything, which only fueled the imaginations of the 150,000 troops who'd assembled in Kuwait.

For the most part, soldiers are kids. People forget that sometimes. Eighteen, nineteen, twenty—half of the servicemen weren't old enough even to buy a beer. They were confident and well trained and excited to go, but it was impossible to ignore the reality of what was coming. Some of them were going to die. Some talked openly about it, others wrote letters to their families and handed them to the chaplain. Tempers were short. Some had trouble sleeping; others slept almost all the time. Thibault observed it all with a strange sense of detachment. *Welcome to war*, he could hear his father saying. *It's always a SNAFU: situation normal, all f—ed up.*

Thibault wasn't completely immune to the escalating tension, and like everyone else, he'd needed an outlet. It was impossible not to have one. He started playing poker. His dad had taught him to play, and he knew the game . . . or thought he knew. He quickly found out that others knew more. In the first three weeks, he proceeded to lose pretty much every dime he'd saved since joining up, bluffing when he should have folded, folding when he should have stayed in the game. It wasn't much money to begin with, and it wasn't as if he had many places to spend it even if he'd kept it, but it put him in a foul mood for days. He hated to lose.

The only antidote was to go for long runs first thing in the morning, before the sun came up. It was usually frigid; though he'd been in the Middle East for a month, it continually amazed him how cold the desert could be. He ran hard beneath a sky crowded with stars, his breaths coming out in little puffs.

Toward the end of one of his runs, when he could see his tent in the distance, he began to slow. By then, the sun had begun to crest the horizon, spreading gold across the arid

landscape. With his hands on his hips, he continued to catch his breath, and it was then, from the corner of his eye, that he spotted the dull gleam of a photograph, halfburied in the dirt. He stopped to pick it up and noticed that it had been cheaply but neatly laminated, probably to protect it from the elements. He brushed off the dust, clearing the image, and that was the first time he saw her.

The blonde with the smile and the jade-colored mischievous eyes, wearing jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with the words *LUCKY LADY* across the front. Behind her was a banner showing the words *HAMPTON FAIRGROUNDS*. A German shepherd, gray in the muzzle, stood by her side. In the crowd behind her were two young men, clustered near the ticket stand and a bit out of focus, wearing T-shirts with logos. Three evergreen trees rose in the distance, pointy ones that could grow almost anywhere. On the back of the photo were the handwritten words, "*Keep Safe! E.*"

Not that he'd noticed any of those things right away. His first instinct, in fact, had been to toss the picture aside. He almost had, but just as he was about to do so, it occurred to him that whoever had lost it might want it back. It obviously meant something to someone.

When he returned to camp, he tacked the photo to a message board near the entrance to the computer center, figuring that pretty much every inhabitant of the camp made his way there at one point or another. No doubt someone would claim it.

A week went by, then ten days. The photo was never retrieved. By that point, his platoon was drilling for hours every day, and the poker games had become serious. Some men had lost thousands of dollars; one lance corporal was said to have lost close to ten thousand. Thibault, who hadn't played since his initial humiliating attempt, preferred to spend his free time brooding on the upcoming invasion and wondering how he'd react to being fired upon. When he wandered over to the computer center three days before the invasion, he saw the photo still tacked to the message board, and for a reason he still didn't quite understand, he took down the photo and put it in his pocket.

Victor, his best friend in the squad—they'd been together since basic training—talked him into joining the poker game that night, despite Thibault's reservations. Still low on funds, Thibault started conservatively and didn't think he'd be in the game for more than half an hour. He folded in the first three games, then drew a straight in the fourth game and a full house in the sixth. The cards kept falling his way—flushes, straights, full houses—and by the halfway point in the evening, he'd recouped his earlier losses. The original players had left by then, replaced by others. Thibault stayed. In turn, they were replaced. Thibault stayed. His winning streak persisted, and by dawn, he'd won more than he'd earned in his first six months in the marines.

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It was only when he was leaving the game with Victor that he realized he'd had the photograph in his pocket the entire time. When they were back at their tent, he showed the photo to Victor and pointed out the words on the woman's shirt. Victor, whose parents were illegal immigrants living near Bakersfield, California, was not only religious, but believed in portents of all kinds.

Lightning storms, forked roads, and black cats were favorites, and before they'd shipped out, he'd told Thibault about an uncle who supposedly possessed the evil eye: "When he looks at you a certain way, it's only a matter of time before you die." Victor's conviction made Thibault feel like he was ten years old again, listening raptly as Victor told the story with a flashlight propped beneath his chin. He said nothing at the time. Everyone had their quirks. Guy wanted to believe in omens? Fine with him. More important was the fact that Victor was a good enough shot to have been recruited as a sniper and that Thibault trusted him with his life.

Victor stared at the picture before handing it back.

"You said you found this at dawn?"

"Yeah."

"Dawn is a powerful time of the day."

"So you've told me."

"It's a sign," he said. "She's your good-luck charm. See the shirt she is wearing?"

"She was tonight."

"Not just tonight. You found that picture for a reason. No one claimed it for a reason. You took it today for a reason. Only you were meant to have it."

Thibault wanted to say something about the guy who'd lost it and how he'd feel about that, but he kept quiet. Instead, he lay back on the cot and clasped his hands behind his head.

Victor mirrored the movement. "I'm happy for you.

Luck will be on your side from now on," he added.

"I hope so."

"But you can't ever lose the picture."

"No?"

“If you do, then the charm works in reverse.”

“Which means what?”

“It means you’ll be unlucky. And in war, unlucky is the last thing you want to be.”

The motel room was as ugly on the inside as it had been from the outside: wood paneling, light fixtures attached to the ceiling with chains, shag carpet, television bolted to the stand. It seemed to have been decorated around 1975 and never updated, and it reminded Thibault of the places his dad had made them stay in when they took their family vacations through the Southwest, when Thibault was a kid. They’d stayed overnight in places just off the highway, and as long as they were relatively clean, his dad had deemed them fine. His mom less so, but what could she do? It wasn’t as if there had been a Four Seasons across the street, and even if there had been, there was no way they could ever have afforded it.

Thibault went through the same routine his dad had when entering a motel room: He pulled back the comforter to make sure the sheets were fresh, he checked the shower curtain for mold, he looked for hairs in the sink. Despite the expected rust stains, a leaky faucet, and cigarette burns, the place was cleaner than he’d imagined it might be. Inexpensive, too. Thibault had paid cash for a week in advance, no questions asked, no extra charge for the dog. All in all, a bargain. Good thing. Thibault had no credit cards, no debit cards, no ATM cards, no official mailing address, no cell phone. He carried pretty much everything he owned. He did have a bank account, one that would wire him money as needed. It was registered under a corporate name, not his own. He wasn’t rich. He wasn’t even middle-class. The corporation did no business. He just liked his privacy.

He led Zeus to the tub and washed him, using the shampoo in his backpack. Afterward, he showered and dressed in the last of his clean clothes. Sitting on the bed, he thumbed through the phone book, searching for something in particular, without luck. He made a note to do laundry when he had time, then decided to get a bite to eat at the small restaurant he’d seen just down the street. When he got there, they wouldn’t let Zeus inside, which wasn’t surprising. Zeus lay down outside the front door and went to sleep. Thibault had a cheeseburger and fries, washed it down with a chocolate milk shake, then ordered a cheeseburger to go for Zeus. Back outside, he watched as Zeus gobbled it down in less than twenty seconds and then looked up at Thibault again. “Glad you really savored that. Come on.”

Thibault bought a map of the town at a convenience store and sat on a bench near the town square—one of those old-fashioned parks bordered on all four sides by business-lined streets. Featuring large shady trees, a play area for the kids, and lots of flowers, it didn’t seem crowded: A few mothers were clustered together, while children zipped

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down the slide or glided back and forth on the swings. He examined the faces of the women, making sure she wasn't among them, then turned away and opened the map before they grew nervous at his presence. Mothers with young kids always got nervous when they saw single men lingering in the area, doing nothing purposeful. He didn't blame them. Too many perverts out there. Studying the map, he oriented himself and tried to figure out his next move. He had no illusions that it was going to be easy. He didn't know much, after all. All he had was a photograph—no name or address. No employment history. No phone number. No date. Nothing but a face in the crowd.

But there were some clues. He'd studied the details of the photo, as he had so many times before, and started with what he *knew*. The photograph had been taken in Hampton. The woman appeared to be in her early twenties when the photo was taken. She was attractive. She either

owned a German shepherd or knew someone who did. Her first name started with the letter *E*. Emma, Elaine, Elise, Eileen, Ellen, Emily, Erin, Erica . . . they seemed the most

likely, though in the South, he supposed there could be names like Erdine or Elspeth, too. She went to the fair with someone who was later posted to Iraq. She had given this person the photograph, and Thibault had found the photograph in February 2003, which meant it had to have been taken before then. The woman, then, was most likely now in her late twenties. There was a series of three evergreen trees in the distance. These things he knew. *Facts*. Then, there were assumptions, beginning with Hampton. Hampton was a relatively common name. A quick

Internet search turned up a lot of them. Counties and towns: South Carolina, Virginia, New Hampshire, Iowa, Nebraska. Georgia. Others, too. Lots of others. And, of course, a Hampton in Hampton County, North Carolina. Though there'd been no obvious landmarks in the background—no picture of Monticello indicating Virginia, for instance, no welcome to iowa! sign in the distance—there had been information. Not about the woman, but gleaned from the young men in the background, standing in line for tickets. Two of them had been wearing shirts with logos. One—an image of Homer Simpson—didn't help. The other, with the word *DAVIDSON* written across the front, meant nothing at first, even when Thibault thought about it. He'd originally assumed the shirt was an abbreviated reference to Harley-Davidson, the

motorcycle. Another Google search cleared that up. Davidson, he'd learned, was also the name of a reputable college located near Charlotte, North Carolina. Selective, challenging, with an emphasis on liberal arts. A review of their bookstore catalog showed a sample of the same

shirt.

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The shirt, he realized, was no guarantee that the photo had been taken in North Carolina. Maybe someone who'd gone to the college gave the guy the shirt; maybe he was an out-of-state student, maybe he just liked the colors, maybe he was an alum and had moved someplace new.

But with nothing else to go on, Thibault had made a quick phone call to the Hampton Chamber of Commerce before he'd left Colorado and verified that they had a county fair every summer. Another good sign. He had a destination, but it wasn't yet a fact. He just *assumed* this was the right place. Still, for a reason he couldn't explain, this place felt right.

There were other assumptions, too, but he'd get to those later. The first thing he had to do was find the fairgrounds. Hopefully, the county fair had been held in the same location for years; he hoped the person who could point him in the right direction could answer that question as well. Best place to find someone like that was at one of the businesses around here. Not a souvenir or

antiques shop—those were often owned by newcomers to town, people escaping from the North in search of a quieter life in warmer weather. Instead, he thought his best bet would be someplace like a local hardware store. Or a bar. Or a real estate office. He figured he'd know the place when he saw it. He wanted to see the exact place the photograph had been taken. Not to get a better feel for who the woman was. The fairgrounds wouldn't help with that at all. He wanted to know if there were three tall evergreen trees clustered together, pointy ones that could grow almost anywhere.

Chapter 3

Beth

Beth set aside her can of Diet Coke, glad that Ben was having a good time at his friend Zach's birthday party. She was just wishing that he didn't have to go to his father's when Melody came by and sat in the chair beside her. "Good idea, huh? The water guns are a big hit." Melody smiled, her bleached teeth a bit too white, her skin a shade too dark, as though she'd just come back from a trip to the tanning salon. Which she probably had. Melody had been vain about her appearance since high school, and lately it seemed to have become even more of an obsession.

"Let's just hope they don't turn those Super Soakers on us."

"They better not." Melody frowned.

"I told Zach that if he did, I'd send everyone home." She leaned back, making herself more comfortable.

"What have you been doing with yourself this summer? I haven't seen you around, and you haven't returned my calls."

"I know. I'm sorry about that. I've been a hermit this summer. It's just been hard trying to keep up with Nana and the kennel and all the training. I have no idea how Nana kept it up for so long."

"Nana's doing okay these days?"

Nana was Beth's grandmother. She'd raised Beth since the age of three, after Beth's parents died in a car accident. She nodded. "She's getting better, but the stroke took a lot out of her. Her left side is still really weak. She can manage some of the training, but

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running the kennel and training is beyond her. And you know how hard she pushes herself. I'm always worried she might be overdoing it."

"I noticed she was back in the choir this week."

Nana had been in the First Baptist Church choir for over thirty years, and Beth knew it was one of her passions. "Last week was her first week back, but I'm not sure how much singing she actually did. Afterward, she took a two hour nap."

Melody nodded. "What's going to happen when school starts up?"

"I don't know."

"You are going to teach, aren't you?"

"I hope so."

"You hope? Don't you have teacher meetings next week?"

Beth didn't want to think about it, let alone discuss it, but she knew Melody meant well. "Yeah, but that doesn't mean I'll be there. I know it would leave the school in a bind, but it's not as if I can leave Nana alone all day. Not yet, anyway. And who would help her run the kennel? There's no way she could train the dogs all day."

"Can't you hire someone?" Melody suggested.

"I've been trying. Did I tell you what happened earlier in the summer? I hired a guy who showed up twice, then quit as soon as the weekend rolled around. Same thing with

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the next guy I hired. After that, no one's even bothered to come by. The 'Help Wanted' sign has become a permanent fixture in the window."

"David's always complaining about the lack of good employees."

"Tell him to offer minimum wage. Then he'd really complain. Even high school kids don't want to clean the cages anymore. They say it's gross."

"It is gross."

Beth laughed. "Yeah, it is," she admitted. "But I'm out of time. I doubt if anything will change before next week, and if it doesn't, there are worse things. I do enjoy training the dogs. Half the time they're easier than students."

"Like mine?"

"Yours was easy. Trust me."

Melody motioned toward Ben. "He's grown since the last time I saw him."

"Almost an inch," she said, thinking it was nice of Melody to notice. Ben had always been small for his age, the kid always positioned on the left side, front row, of the class picture, half a head shorter than the child seated next to him. Zach, Melody's son, was just the opposite: righthand side, in the back, always the tallest in class.

"I heard a rumor that Ben isn't playing soccer this fall," Melody commented.

"He wants to try something different."

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“Like what?”

“He wants to learn to play the violin. He’s going to take lessons with Mrs. Hastings.”

“She’s still teaching? She must be at least ninety.”

“But she’s got patience to teach a beginner. Or at least that’s what she told me. And Ben likes her a lot. That’s the main thing.”

“Good for him,” Melody said. “I’ll bet he’ll be great at it. But Zach’s going to be bummed.”

“They wouldn’t be on the same team. Zach is going to play for the select team, right?”

“If he makes it.”

“He will.”

And he would. Zach was one of those naturally confident, competitive kids who matured early and ran rings around other, less talented players on the field. Like Ben.

Even now, running around the yard with his Super Soaker, Ben couldn’t keep up with him. Though good-hearted and sweet, Ben wasn’t much of an athlete, a fact that endlessly infuriated her ex-husband. Last year, her ex had stood on the sidelines of soccer games with a scowl on his face, which was another reason Ben didn’t want to play.

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“Is David going to help coach again?”

David was Melody’s husband and one of two pediatricians in town. “He hasn’t decided yet. Since Hoskins left, he’s been on call a lot more. He hates it, but what can he do? They’ve been trying to recruit another doctor, but it’s been hard. Not everyone wants to work in a small town, especially with the nearest hospital in Wilmington forty-five minutes away. Makes for much longer days. Half the time he doesn’t get home until almost eight. Sometimes it’s even later than that.”

Beth heard the worry in Melody’s voice, and she figured her friend was thinking about the affair David had confessed to last winter. Beth knew enough not to comment on it. She’d decided when she’d first heard the whispers that they would talk about it only if Melody wanted to. And if not? That was fine, too. It was none of her business.

“How about you, though? Have you been seeing anyone?”

Beth grimaced. “No. Not since Adam.”

“Whatever happened with that?”

“I have no idea.”

Melody shook her head. “I can’t say that I envy you. I never liked dating.”

“Yeah, but at least you were good at it. I’m terrible.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

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“I’m not. But it’s not that big of a deal. I’m not sure I even have the energy for it anymore. Wearing thongs, shaving my legs, flirting, pretending to get along with his friends. The whole thing seems like a lot of effort.” Melody wrinkled her nose.

“You don’t shave your legs?”

“Of course I shave my legs,” she said. Then, lowering her voice, “Most of the time, anyway.”

She sat up straighter.

“But you get the point. Dating is hard. Especially for someone my age.”

“Oh, please. You’re not even thirty, and you’re a knockout.”

Beth had heard that for as long as she could remember, and she wasn’t immune to the fact that men—even married men—often craned their necks when she walked past them. In her first three years teaching, she’d had only one parent-teacher conference with a father who came alone.

In every other instance, it was the mother who attended the conference. She remembered wondering aloud about it to Nana a few years back, and Nana had said, “They don’t want you alone with the hubbies because you’re as pretty as a tickled pumpkin.”

Nana always had a unique way of putting things.

“You forget where we live,” Beth offered. “There aren’t a lot of single men my age. And if they are single, there’s a reason.”

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“That’s not true.”

“Maybe in a city. But around here? In this town? Trust me. I’ve lived here all my life, and even when I was in college, I commuted from home. On the rare occasions that I have been asked out, we’ll go on two or three dates and then they stop calling. Don’t ask me why.” She waved a hand philosophically. “But it’s no big deal. I’ve got Ben and Nana. It’s not like I’m living alone, surrounded by dozens of cats.”

“No. You’ve got dogs.”

“Not my dogs. Other people’s dogs. There’s a difference.”

“Oh yeah,” Melody snorted.

“Big difference.”

Across the yard, Ben was trailing behind the group with his Super Soaker, doing his best to keep up, when he suddenly slipped and fell. His glasses tumbled off into the grass. Beth knew enough not to get up and see if he was okay: The last time she’d tried to help, he’d been visibly embarrassed. He felt around until he found his glasses and was up and running again.

“They grow up so fast, don’t they?” said Melody, interrupting Beth’s thoughts. “I know it’s a cliché, but it’s true. I remember my mom telling me they would and thinking she didn’t know what she was talking about. I couldn’t wait for Zach to get a little older. Of course, at the time, he had colic and I hadn’t slept more than a couple of hours a night in over a month. But now, just like that, they’ll be starting middle school already.”

“Not yet. They’ve got another year.”

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“I know. But it still makes me nervous.”

“Why?”

“You know . . . it’s a hard age. Kids are in that stage where they’re beginning to understand the world of adults, without having the maturity of adults to deal with everything going on around them. Add to that all the temptations, and the fact that they stop listening to you the way

they once did, and the moods of adolescence, and I’ll be the first to admit that I’m not looking forward to it. You’re a teacher. You know.”

“That’s why I teach second grade.”

“Good choice.” Melody grew quiet. “Did you hear about Elliot Spencer?”

“I haven’t heard much of anything. I’ve been a hermit, remember?”

“He was caught selling drugs.”

“He’s only a couple of years older than Ben!”

“And still in middle school.”

“Now you’re making me nervous.”

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Melody rolled her eyes. “Don’t be. If my son were more like Ben, I wouldn’t have reason to be nervous. Ben has an old soul. He’s always polite, he’s always kind, always the first to help the younger kids. He’s empathetic. I, on the other hand, have Zach.”

“Zach’s a great kid, too.”

“I know he is. But he’s always been more difficult than Ben. And he’s more of a follower than Ben.”

“Have you seen them playing? From where I’m sitting, Ben’s been doing all the following.”

“You know what I mean.”

Actually, she did. Even from a young age, Ben had been content to forge his own path. Which was nice, she had to admit, since it had been a pretty good path. Though he didn’t have many friends, he had a lot of interests he pursued on his own. Good ones, too. He had little interest in

video games or surfing the Web, and while he occasionally watched television, he’d usually turn it off on his own after thirty minutes or so. Instead, he read or played chess (a game that he seemed to understand on some intuitive level) on the electronic game board he’d received for Christmas. He loved to read and write, and though he enjoyed the dogs at the kennel, most of them were anxious because of the long hours they spent in a kennel and tended to ignore him.

He spent many afternoons throwing tennis balls that few, if any, were ever retrieved.

“It’ll be fine.”

“I hope so.” Melody set aside her drink. “I suppose I should go get the cake, huh? Zach has practice at five.”

“It’ll be hot.”

Melody stood. "I'm sure he'll want to bring the Super Soaker. Probably squirt the coach."

"Do you need some help?"

"No thanks. Just sit here and relax. I'll be right back."

Beth watched Melody walk away, realizing for the first time how thin she'd become. Ten, maybe fifteen pounds lighter than she'd been the last time Beth had seen her. Had to be stress, she thought. David's affair had crushed her, but unlike Beth when it had happened to her, Melody was determined to save her marriage. Then again, they'd had different sorts of marriages. David made a big mistake and it hurt Melody, but overall, they'd always struck Beth as a happy couple. Beth's marriage, on the other hand, had been a fiasco from the beginning. Just as Nana had predicted. Nana had the ability to size people up in an instant, and she had this way of shrugging when she didn't like someone. When Beth announced she was pregnant and that instead of going to college, she and her ex planned to get married, Nana began shrugging so much that it resembled a nervous tic. Beth, of course, ignored it at the time, thinking, She hasn't given him a chance. She doesn't really know him. We can make this work. Nosiree. Never happened. Nana was always polite, always cordial when he was around, but the shrugging didn't stop until Beth moved back home ten years ago. The marriage had lasted less than nine months; Ben was five weeks old. Nana had been right about him all along.

Melody vanished inside the house, only to reemerge a few minutes later, David right behind her. He was carrying paper plates and forks, obviously preoccupied. She could see the tufts of gray hair near his ears and deep lines in his forehead. The last time she'd seen him, the lines hadn't been as evident, and she figured it was another sign of the stress he was under.

Sometimes, Beth wondered what her life would be like if she were married. Not to her ex, of course. That thought made her shudder. Dealing with him every other weekend was more than enough, thank you very much. But to someone else. Someone . . . better. It seemed like it might be a good idea, at least in the abstract, anyway. After ten years, she was used to her life, and though it might be nice to have someone to share her evenings with after work or get a

back rub from now and then, there was also something nice about spending all day Saturday in her pajamas if she wanted to. Which she sometimes did. Ben, too. They called them "lazy days." They were the best days ever. Sometimes they'd cap off a day of doing absolutely nothing by ordering pizza and watching a movie. Heavenly.

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Besides, if relationships were hard, marriage was even harder. It wasn't just Melody and David who struggled; it seemed like most couples struggled. It went with the territory. What did Nana always say? Stick two different people with two different sets of expectations under one roof and

it ain't always going to be shrimp and grits on Easter. Exactly. Even if she wasn't completely sure where Nana came up with her metaphors.

Glancing at her watch, she knew that as soon as the party ended, she'd have to head back to check in on Nana. No doubt she'd find her in the kennel, either behind the desk or checking on the dogs. Nana was stubborn like that. Did it matter that her left leg could barely support her? My leg ain't perfect, but it's not beeswax, either. Or that she might fall and get hurt? I'm not a bucket of fine china. Or that her left arm was basically useless? As long as I can eat soup, I don't need it anyway.

She was one of a kind, bless her heart. Always had been.

"Hey, Mom?"

Lost in thought, she hadn't seen Ben approaching. His freckled face was shiny with sweat. Water dripped from his clothes, and there were grass stains on his shirt she was certain would never come out.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Can I spend the night at Zach's tonight?"

"I thought he had soccer practice."

"After practice. There's going to be a bunch of people staying over, and his mom got him Guitar Hero for his birthday."

She knew the real reason he was asking.

"Not tonight. You can't. Your dad's coming to pick you up at five."

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“Can you call him and ask?”

“I can try. But you know . . .”

Ben nodded, and as it usually did when this happened, her heart broke just a little.

“Yeah, I know.”

The sun glared through the windshield at baking temperature, and she found herself wishing she'd had the car's air conditioner fixed. With the window rolled down, her hair whipped in her face, making it sting. She reminded herself again to get a real haircut. She imagined saying to her hairdresser, Chop it all off, Terri. Make me look like a man! But she knew she'd end up asking for her regular trim when the time came. In some things, she was a coward.

“You guys looked like you were having fun.”

“I was.”

“That's all you can say?”

“I'm just tired, Mom.”

She pointed toward the Dairy Queen in the distance.

“You want to swing by and get some ice cream?”

“It's not good for me.”

“Hey, I'm the mother here. That's what I'm supposed to say. I was just thinking that if you're hot, you might want some.”

“I'm not hungry. I just had cake.”

“All right. Suit yourself. But don't blame me if you get home and realize you should have jumped at the opportunity.”

“I won't.” He turned toward the window.

“Hey, champ. You okay?”

When he spoke, his voice was almost inaudible over the wind. “Why do I have to go to Dad's? It's not like we're going to do anything fun. He sends me to bed at nine o'clock,

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like I'm still in second grade or something. I'm never even tired. And tomorrow, he'll have me do chores all day."

"I thought he was taking you to your grandfather's house for brunch after church."

"I still don't want to go."

I don't want you to go, either, she thought. But what could she do?

"Why don't you bring a book?" she suggested.

"You can read in your room tonight, and if you get bored tomorrow, you can read there, too."

"You always say that."

Because I don't know what else to tell you, she thought.

"You want to go to the bookstore?"

"No," he said. But she could tell he didn't mean it.

"Well, come with me anyway. I want to get a book for myself."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry about this, you know."

"Yeah. I know."

Going to the bookstore did little to lift Ben's mood. Though he'd ended up picking out a couple of Hardy Boys mysteries, she'd recognized his slouch as they'd stood in line to pay for them. On the ride home, he opened one of the books and pretended to be reading. Beth was pretty sure he'd done it to keep her from peppering him with questions or trying, with forced cheerfulness, to make him feel better about his overnight at his dad's. At ten, Ben was already remarkably adept at predicting her behavior. She hated the fact that he didn't like going to his dad's.

She watched him walk inside their house, knowing that he was heading to his room to pack his things. Instead of following him, she took a seat on the porch steps and wished for the thousandth time she'd put up a swing. It was still hot, and from the whimpering coming from the kennel across the yard, it was clear that the dogs, too, were suffering from the heat. She strained for the sound of Nana inside. Had she been in the kitchen when Ben walked through, she definitely would have heard her. Nana was a walking

cacophony. Not because of the stroke, but because it went part and parcel with her personality. Seventy-six going on seventeen, she laughed loud, banged pans with the spoon when she cooked, adored baseball, and turned the radio up to ear-shattering levels whenever NPR featured the Big Band era. “Music like that doesn’t just grow like bananas, you know.” Until the stroke, she’d worn rubber boots, overalls, and an oversize straw hat nearly every day, tromping through the yard as she taught dogs to heel or come or stay.

Years ago, along with her husband, Nana had taught them to do pretty much everything. Together, they’d bred and trained hunting dogs, service dogs for the blind, drug sniffing dogs for the police, security dogs for home protection. Now that he was gone, she did those things only occasionally. Not because she didn’t know what to do; she’d always handled most of the training anyway. But to train a dog for home protection took fourteen months, and given the fact that Nana could fall in love with a squirrel in less than three seconds, it always broke her heart to have to give up the dog when the training was completed. Without Grandpa around to say, “We’ve already sold him, so we don’t have a choice,” Nana had found it easier to simply fold that part of the business.

Instead, these days Nana ran a thriving obedience school. People would drop off their dogs for a couple of weeks—doggie boot camp, she called it—and Nana would teach them how to sit, lie down, stay, come, and heel. They were simple, uncomplicated commands that nearly every dog could master quickly. Usually, somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five dogs cycled through every two weeks, and each one needed roughly twenty minutes of training per day. Any more than that, and the dogs would lose interest. It wasn’t so bad when there were fifteen, but boarding twenty-five made for long days, considering each dog also needed to be walked. And that didn’t factor in all the feeding, kennel maintenance, phone calls, dealing with clients, and paperwork. For most of the summer, Beth had been working twelve or thirteen hours a day.

They were always busy. It wasn’t difficult to train a dog—Beth had been helping Nana on and off since she was twelve—and there were dozens of books on the subject. In addition, the veterinary clinic offered lessons for dogs and their owners every Saturday morning for a fraction of the price. Beth knew that most people could spare twenty minutes a day for a couple of weeks to train their dog. But they didn’t. Instead, people came from as far away as

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Florida and Tennessee to drop off their dogs to have someone else do it. Granted, Nana had a great reputation as a trainer, but she was really only teaching dogs to sit and come, heel and stay. It wasn't rocket science. Yet people were always extremely grateful. And always, always, amazed.

Beth checked her watch. Keith—her ex—would be here soon. Though she had issues with the man—Lord knows she had serious issues—he had joint custody, simple as that, and she'd tried to make the best of it. She liked to tell herself that it was important for Ben to spend time with his dad. Boys needed to spend time with their dads, especially those coming up on their teenage years, and she had to admit that he wasn't a bad guy. Immature, yes, but not bad. He had a few beers now and then but wasn't an alcoholic; he didn't take drugs; he had never been abusive to either of them. He went to church every Sunday. He had a steady job and paid his child support on time. Or, rather, his family did. The money came from a trust, one of many that the family had established over the years. And for the most part, he kept his never-ending string of girlfriends away on those weekends he spent with his son. Key words: “for the most part.” Lately, he'd been better about that, but she was fairly sure it had less to do with a renewed commitment to parenting than the likelihood that he was between girlfriends right now. She wouldn't really have minded so much, except for the fact that his girlfriends were usually closer in age to Ben than they were to him and, as a general rule, had the IQs of salad bowls. She wasn't being spiteful; even Ben realized it. A couple of months back, Ben had to help one of them make a second batch of Kraft macaroni and cheese after the first attempt burned. The whole “add milk, butter, mix, and stir” sequence was apparently beyond her.

That wasn't what bothered Ben the most, however. The girlfriends were okay—they tended to treat him more like a younger brother than a son. Nor was he truly upset about the chores. He might have to rake the yard or clean the kitchen and take out the trash, but it wasn't as if her ex

treated Ben like an indentured servant. And chores were good for him; Ben had weekend chores when he was with her, too. No, the problem was Keith's childish, relentless disappointment in Ben. Keith wanted an athlete; instead he got a son who wanted to play the violin. He wanted someone to hunt with; he got a son who would rather read. He wanted a son who could play catch or shoot baskets; he was saddled with a clumsy son with poor vision.

He never said as much to Ben or to her, but he didn't have to. It was all too apparent in the scornful way he watched Ben play soccer, in the way he refused to give Ben credit

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when he won his last chess tournament, in the way he continually pushed Ben to be someone he wasn't. It drove Beth crazy and broke her heart at the same time, but for Ben, it was worse. For years, he'd tried to please his dad, but over time, it had just exhausted the poor kid. Take learning to play catch. No harm in that, right? Ben might learn to enjoy it, he might even want to play Little League. Made perfect sense when her ex had suggested it, and Ben was gung ho in the beginning. But after a while, Ben came to hate the thought of it. If he caught three in a row, his dad would want him to try to catch four. When he did that, it had to be five. When he got even better, his dad wanted him to catch all of them. And then catch while he was running forward. Catch while he was running backward. Catch while he was sliding. Catch while he was diving. Catch the one his dad threw as hard as he could. And if he dropped one? You'd think the world was coming to an end. His dad wasn't the kind of guy who'd say, Nice try, champ! or,

Good effort! No, he was the kind of guy who'd scream, C'mon! Quit screwing up!

Oh, she'd talked to him about it. Talked to him ad nauseam. It went in one ear and out the other, of course. Same old story. Despite—or perhaps because of—his immaturity, Keith was stubborn and opinionated about many things, and raising Ben was one of them. He wanted a certain kind of son, and by God, he was going to get him. Ben, predictably, began reacting in his own passive aggressive way. He began to drop everything his dad threw, even simple lobs, while ignoring his father's growing frustration, until his father finally slammed his glove to the

ground and stormed inside to sulk the rest of the afternoon. Ben pretended not to notice, taking a seat beneath a loblolly pine to read until she picked him up a few hours later.

She and her ex didn't battle just about Ben; they were fire and ice as well. As in, he was fire and she was ice. He was still attracted to her, which irritated her to no end. Why on earth he could believe that she'd want anything to do with him was beyond her, but no matter what she said to him, it didn't seem to deter his overtures. Most of the time, she could barely remember the reasons she'd been attracted to him years ago. She could recite the reasons for marriage— she'd been young and stupid, foremost among them, and pregnant to boot—but nowadays, whenever he stared her up and down, she cringed inside. He wasn't her type. Frankly, he'd never been her type. If her entire life had been recorded on video, the marriage would be one of those events she would gladly record over. Except for Ben, of course.

She wished her younger brother, Drake, were here, and she felt the usual ache when she thought of him. Whenever he'd come by, Ben followed him around the way the dogs followed Nana. Together, they would wander off to catch butterflies or spend time in the tree house that Grandpa had built, which was accessible only by a rickety bridge that spanned one of the two creeks on the property. Unlike her ex, Drake accepted Ben, which in a lot of ways made him more of a father to Ben than her ex had ever been. Ben adored

him, and she adored Drake for the quiet way he built confidence in her son. She remembered thanking him for it once, but he'd just shrugged. "I just like spending time with him," he'd said by way of explanation. She knew she needed to check on Nana. Rising from her seat, she spotted the light on in the office, but she doubted that Nana was doing paperwork. More likely she was out in the pens behind the kennels, and she headed in that direction. Hopefully, Nana hadn't got it in her mind to try to take a group of dogs for a walk. There was no way she could keep her balance—or even hold them—if they tugged on the leashes, but it had always been one of her favorite things to do. She was of the opinion that most dogs didn't get enough exercise, and the property was great for remedying that. At nearly seventy acres, it boasted several open fields bordered by virgin hardwoods, crisscrossed by half a dozen trails and two small streams that flowed all the way to the South River. The property, bought for practically nothing fifty years ago, was worth quite a bit now.

That's what the lawyer said, the one who'd come by to feel Nana out about the possibility of selling it. She knew exactly who was behind all that. So did Nana, who pretended to be lobotomized while the lawyer spoke to her. She stared at him with wide, blank eyes, dropped grapes onto the floor one by one, and mumbled incomprehensibly. She and Beth giggled about it for hours afterward.

Glancing through the window of the kennel office, she saw no sign of Nana, but she could hear Nana's voice echoing from the pens.

"Stay . . . come. Good girl! Good come!"

Rounding the corner, Beth saw Nana praising a shih tzu as it trotted toward her. It reminded her of one of those wind-up toy dogs you could purchase from Wal-Mart.

"What are you doing, Nana? You're not supposed to be out here."

"Oh, hey, Beth." Unlike two months ago, now she hardly slurred her words anymore.

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Beth put her hands on her hips. “You shouldn’t be out here alone.”

“I brought a cell phone. I figured I’d just call if I got into a problem.”

“You don’t have a cell phone.”

“I have yours. I snuck it out of your purse this morning.”

“Then who would you have called?”

She hadn’t seemed to have considered that, and her brow furrowed as she glanced at the dog. “See what I have to put up with, Precious? I told you the gal was sharper than a digging caterpillar.” She exhaled, letting out a sound like an owl.

Beth knew a change of subject was coming.

“Where’s Ben?” she asked.

“Inside, getting ready. He’s going to his dad’s.”

“I’ll bet he’s thrilled about that. You sure he’s not hiding out in the tree house?”

“Go easy,” Beth said. “He’s still his dad.”

“You think.”

“I’m sure.”

“Are you positive you didn’t mess around with anyone else back then? Not even a single one-night stand with a waiter or trucker, or someone from school?” She sounded almost hopeful. She always sounded hopeful when she said it.

“I’m positive. And I’ve already told you that a million times.”

She winked. “Yes, but Nana can always hope your memory improves.”

“How long have you been out here, by the way?”

“What time is it?”

“Almost four o’clock.”

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“Then I’ve been out here three hours.”

“In this heat?”

“I’m not broken, Beth. I had an incident.”

“You had a stroke.”

“But it wasn’t a serious one.”

“You can’t move your arm.”

“As long as I can eat soup, I don’t need it anyway. Now let me go see my grandson. I want to say good-bye to him before he leaves.”

They started toward the kennel, Precious trailing behind them, panting quickly, her tail in the air. Cute dog.

“I think I want Chinese food tonight,” Nana said. “Do you want Chinese?”

“I haven’t thought about it.”

“Well, think about it.”

“Yeah, we can have Chinese. But I don’t want anything too heavy. And not fried, either. It’s too hot for that.”

“You’re no fun.”

“But I’m healthy.”

“Same thing. Hey, and since you’re so healthy, would you mind putting Precious away? She’s in number twelve. I heard a new joke I want to tell Ben.”

“Where did you hear a joke?”

“The radio.”

“Is it appropriate?”

“Of course it’s appropriate. Who do you think I am?”

“I know exactly who you are. That’s why I’m asking.

What’s the joke?”

“Two cannibals were eating a comedian, and one of them turns to the other and asks, ‘Does this taste funny to you?’”

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Beth chuckled. “He’ll like that.”

“Good. The poor kid needs something to cheer him up.”

“He’s fine.”

“Yeah, sure he is. I didn’t just fall off the milk cart, you know.”

As they reached the kennel, Nana kept walking toward the house, her limp more pronounced than earlier this morning. She was improving, but there was still a long way to go.