

M. J. Konevich

The Keeper
of the Cove

THE KEEPER OF THE COVE

There were reasons no one ever went down there, reasons ingrained into the very minds of the residents of Oceanview that made them shun the cove. If any of the members of the small seaside community were asked about it, they would reply with answers as varied and elusive as if you had asked them who had killed Kennedy or why Communism had failed. They had plenty of theories, ideas, and vague impressions of what really had happened there at some point, and still did happen, but no one could say, or dared say, exactly what that was. All that was known for certain was that the area was to be avoided, left alone the same way one would leave a wounded animal. A wounded animal would fight to the death in order to survive, and people felt the same way about the cove—that it was a living, breathing entity. By trespassing there you would only awaken the spirits of its dark past, and that was a pointless and dangerous endeavor. People said that whatever you wanted to believe lived, or didn't live there, was entirely up to you, but it was foolish to think just because the eyes might not see something, nothing was there...

ALSO BY M. J. KONEVICH

The Weaver

The Woods Around Carter's Lake

THE KEEPER OF THE COVE

BY

M. J. KONEVICH

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THE KEEPER OF THE COVE
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For Iris

PROLOGUE

There were reasons no one ever went down there, reasons ingrained into the very minds of the residents of Oceanview that made them shun the cove. If any of the members of the small seaside community were asked about it, they would reply with answers as varied and elusive as if you had asked them who had killed Kennedy or why Communism had failed. They had plenty of theories, ideas, and vague impressions of what really had happened there at some point, and still did happen, but no one could say, or dared say, exactly what that was. All that was known for certain was that the area was to be avoided, left alone the same way one would leave a wounded animal. A wounded animal would fight to the death in order to survive, and people felt the same way about the cove—that it was a living, breathing entity. By trespassing there you would only awaken the spirits of its dark past, and that was a pointless and dangerous endeavor. People said that whatever you wanted to believe lived, or didn't live there, was entirely up to you,

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but it was foolish to think just because the eyes might not see something, nothing was there.

The cove could best be described as a small indent along the upper Pacific coastline, not quite in Washington state, but not in Oregon either. It was a tiny parcel of land that had been left floating out in the middle of nowhere Northwest of Portland along the Columbia River and was primarily inhabited by descendants of the same families that helped to settle the area over a hundred and fifty years earlier. The town itself had few buildings and even fewer people; most of them were tied in some way to the original bloodline that flowed there. There were few businesses, and those who didn't fish for a living, commuted to Portland for work. The center of town might as well have been a ghost town with most of the stores boarded up and the cracked streets and broken sidewalks lying in a terrible state of repair. All in all, it was a poor town with poor people. But the pristine coastline still managed to draw enough businessmen with money from Portland to live there year after year that they were able to get by, and what they couldn't provide, the sea usually did. No one, however, ever inquired, nor attempted to buy, the acre of land nestled around the cove.

There were only two houses in the general vicinity of the cove and one of them had been abandoned for years. So isolated was it, no one had even been back there to confirm the old man who lived back there with his wife had died. But it was common knowledge that they both were without religion, which made them outcasts in the town anyway, so not many folk raised an eyebrow when they stopped coming into town for supplies. Even when they were alive the area was generally avoided by the town and rarely discussed except on the few occasions when the body of a transient or hiker would unexpectedly wash ashore in the cove requiring police involvement, but that hadn't happened in several years. When it did though, the rumors would start running through the town like a western brushfire. Most of them, in the end,

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were dismissed, but the ones that always were taken seriously were the ones that involved the cove. The most famous one, if death can truly make a town famous, revolved around a hiker who had gone missing in the woods for several days. After a national news spot on NBC and an exhaustive search, his body washed up on shore. Although the official cause of death had been ruled drowning, there were several officers who openly spoke of other, unnatural causes that may have been responsible for the boy's demise. More than one person the previous night had reported seeing odd lights shining in the abandoned house that rested atop the naked outcropping of rock above the cove. Being the superstitious folk that they were, they claimed the lights never shone except when the keeper stirred from its slumber, so the rumor went away. After the body was identified as being that of a runaway teenager from Portland, the TV crews packed up and left Oceanview, and their fifteen minutes of fame were over. Since then no one had been found dead, mostly because people started listening to the local folk and stopped going up there. All that changed when the Harrison family moved into town.

The only other building there besides the abandoned structure was a newly finished, two-story house, which had just recently been developed on a plot of land overlooking the stagnant waters of the cove. Between the two buildings lay the cove—a long, sloping hill upon whose crest the decrepit structure sat and a thick grove of low growing trees, lush and seemingly impenetrable when viewed from afar. These rose along with the slope of the hillside to the top of the hill itself, where they then became sparse and eventually stopped growing altogether.

When word passed through Oceanview that a new house had been built, not much was said. The businessmen usually built developments along the coastline further to the north, which no one minded, but when they found out where this one had been built, a mighty stir arose from

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many of the old folk, a stir that couldn't be explained to their younger peers. Naturally they would have thought them senile if they tried to explain why no one should ever go down into the placid cove that sat at the base of Ridge Road where the new structure waited patiently for the arrival of its owners. There were too many stories, many so intermixed with myth and legend that separating one from the other had almost become impossible now. These stories though were what had kept the land there unexplored and untouched for the past ten years, which was when the hiker's body had been found, and the last time the lights had been seen shining in the old house.

All these years of peace seemed about to end though as a heavy night fog rolled in thick from the sea, a sure omen of bad things to come. No one had dared speak of the signs they had seen recently, the fog being the most prominent, but not the most unnerving of them. The night prior to the arrival of the new owners, Andrew and Jennifer Harrison, it was reported that strange lights were seen coming from inside the ancient stone cottage, and that thin, curling tendrils of gray smoke could be seen rising up out of the yawning mouth that opened at the top of the stone chimney. Bad weather always followed the fog, but seeing both the fog and the lights could only mean one thing—the keeper was restless again. All the people of Oceanview could do was watch, and wait...and pray.

CHAPTER 1

Alex Harrison was only a shade past ten when his father and his fiancé moved into the house by the cove. It was their third move in as many years and each time his ability to fit in with other kids his age slowly dwindled until it had now all but disappeared. Solitary by nature, Alex found he enjoyed being by himself. Instead of football or other after school activities, Alex preferred the comfort of his own room, reading books or drawing on the sketch pad his mother had given him for Christmas a few years ago, before the cancer took her away from them.

Alex had an imagination that was unmatched, that's what his mother used to say anyway, and that enabled him to draw the pictures his mind created while reading—pictures of pirates on the high seas seeking buried treasure, of strange worlds where swords and magic ruled, or two of his favorites, dragons and ghosts. Sometimes after reading one of his books, Alex would go outside and play with the

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imaginary creatures he'd created on paper, battling against fierce monsters or digging for buried treasure on haunted pirate islands. By using his imagination, Alex could act out the colossal battles he read about between the cruel pirates and the rich merchant ships carrying gold and jewels across the ocean from Spain. Most other times he could be found sitting in front of the television, his life-long babysitter. From TV Alex learned a lot about what real pirates looked like and where real ghosts were said to haunt. He had never seen a real ghost, dragon, or pirate, but he imagined they lived only in his mind anyway. His mother had always told him it was sometimes difficult to determine what was real and what was only in your head, especially if you had a strong imagination. Alex had loved her very much and sometimes could still feel her hands smoothing his forehead before he fell asleep, reassuring him that no matter what happened in his mind, he would always be safe because she was nearby.

Her battle had been quick and painless, one of the blessings of detecting the cancer too late. It had nearly eaten through her body before the doctors had found it. There was nothing that could be done to save her, and in the end death was actually merciful. Alex went to the hospital one day and that was it, his mother was dead. He had expected something more. He didn't know what, but perhaps a scene like on television with doctors and nurses scurrying around trying to save her. Instead, Alex only saw a priest and many machines that were slowly being turned off. He missed her horribly. A small part of his childhood had died that day, and a big part of his innocence. He watched his father cry like a baby when they turned off the last machine, an event a boy never forgets—the first time he watches his father cry. Alex realized then the pain of life can make even the most powerful person crumble before it. Now it had shown an eight year old boy tears didn't stain only the cheeks of children. All that was two years removed; now they had moved on, both emotionally and

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physically. They had left two other towns before settling here, hoping this would be the place that finally allowed them the peace and comfort they needed.

His father became engaged a year after the funeral—a move Alex didn't approve of until his soon to be stepmom, Jennifer, sat him down before she moved in and spoke plainly with him, not as an adult speaking to a child, but as one adult speaking to another. She told Alex something he wanted desperately to hear, something he needed to hear. Jennifer told him she loved him and his father more than she could ever express and wanted them, all of them, to be happy, to be a family. She also said she didn't expect Alex to call her "Mom" if he didn't want to because that would be unfair to him. She was, in her own words, "just Jennifer." Alex loved her too, but the constant moving of the past year had worn everyone's nerves down to the breaking point and one night it came to a head.

"At least they won't move away on me," Alex shouted at them the night before they were moving to Oceanview, referring to the images that flickered past on the TV screen. Smiling faces emanated from a small box, dancing back and forth and glowing with a hypnotizing light. He immediately regretted saying it, and regretted even more not apologizing. But everyone felt the pressure as much as Alex did, so it went unpunished. One thing Jennifer was strict about, however, was what books he could and couldn't read—something he didn't understand as his dad would let him watch whatever he wanted to on television. Alex often wondered if he would ever understand the grown-up mind.

Alex was a frail child, thin and short for his age, making him the perfect target for bullies. He had light brown hair that was always in need of a cut and flopped loosely over his ears, which stuck out awkwardly like a set of open car doors. His appearance not only made him a target for beatings, but also ensured he was the last one picked

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for anything athletic, which angered his father who was always in peak physical condition. Alex had no real desire to be an athlete, though; he would rather be a king or a writer or maybe even an actor on television. Constantly being beaten up, however, wasn't something that helped his fragile ego to develop. It didn't matter what town they were in—Union, Sarasota, and now Oceanview—the bullies would still take his lunch money, but only after subjecting him to the mental and physical horrors only a ten year old boy new to town could know.

To that end, Alex dreaded tomorrow, Wednesday, his first day in the new school. Jennifer had bought him another new set of “first day” clothes, his third set in the past twelve months. She smiled proudly at him while adjusting the collar of his shirt as he stood outside waiting for the big yellow school bus that would whisk him away to Oceanview Elementary School. In the back of his mind Alex wondered if the local bully would wait until lunchtime to get him, or if he would come after him right away so that Alex knew who was in charge. Little things like that always bothered him. Just then, his father came running down the stairs.

“Jen, honey, do you know where the movers put the box with my new suit in it? I wanted to wear it today.” His father peered out the front door of the house at her.

The house was a beautiful two-level structure with white vinyl siding and a large sliding glass window that lead to a balcony in the rear on the second floor overlooking the tiny cove snugly tucked in there. There was also a large porch that wound its way around the side to the back of the house, where it opened up a little bit to give them a view of the spectacular sunsets that Andy, his father, hoped they all could share. The front of the house was plain looking except for the front door, which was large and intricately carved with tiny gothic designs Jennifer had requested. His dad told Alex with a wink that Jennifer said it would bring them good luck. She could be eccentric

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sometimes, but that was her way. The windows were framed neatly with freshly painted black shutters, and the tiny walkway leading to the front door was made up of several dull colored flagstones. Everything was new and completely paid for with the exception of the driveway, which was cracked with wear from the cement trucks and contractor's vehicles that had driven over it. But his father had already hired someone to come in and replace it. By the end of the week everything would be new, a new house and a fresh start for everyone.

Alex's father, Andrew Harrison, was always prepared and always looking ahead; he was a man who hated being caught off-guard. Alex guessed that that was why his mother's sudden death had unraveled his world the way it did. Alex was sure that his father sought to find meaning in the loss, but even more than that, in the loss of control. His dad always needed to have answers. It was just the way he thought, and it was hard to fault him for it. Alex admired him because he was possessed of a brilliant mind, but sometimes, as his father was fond of saying, "with great wisdom there can come a great curse." In his dad's case, the curse had been that he could do nothing to save his mom. Even with his vast knowledge and lifelong work with bacteria and viruses, his father was as powerless as Alex himself was to save his mother or even ease her suffering.

* * *

Andrew Harrison was finally returning to his old self, mostly due to Jennifer's love and counseling. She was a psychiatrist, albeit a child one, but just having someone to talk to had been enough to start the healing process for him. When he began dealing with the real estate brokers and contractors, Andrew sounded more like his old self than he had in a long time. Whether he was trying to impress Jennifer or simply showing off how charming and persuasive he could be when he wanted to, Andrew began negotiating for the acre of land that sat above the murky cove in Oceanview. From the very beginning, he made sure he

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was in control, rejecting the offered sale price several times before making an offer of his own to the broker based on what he thought was fair. After a day's deliberation, the broker agreed.

Andrew was a stubborn man at times, hard even, but he knew enough about the way the world worked to be that way. He served his country when his number was called in Vietnam and took pride in his work. He was the perfect, All-American, self-made man, and he knew it. Andrew wasn't without his flaws though, cockiness being a prominent problem early on in life. But after watching his wife die in his arms with him powerless to do anything but wish her safe passage to Heaven, he had mellowed out considerably. Not to mention the fact that Jennifer wouldn't tolerate him if he acted that way. In his mind a flaw was a weakness, and a weakness could be exposed—that was what the Army had taught him from day one in boot camp, although his war effort was spent more or less in a laboratory. Andrew was recognized early on by his superiors as being an extremely smart and talented man, a graduate of Brown with a degree in biological engineering and an IQ in the upper genius level. However, because of the career path he chose, as well as some decisions he had made long ago, his jobs were also one of the reasons they were constantly moving around.

Andrew had held several jobs in his lifetime, but all in the same field, virology. Simply put, he studied and developed viruses. Sometimes to help, sometimes to hurt, depending on who he was working for. Since Andrew generally worked on a contract basis, the employer could be anybody with enough money to afford him, which meant a lot of government jobs. He didn't mind working for the government. It gave him time to see how far along different sectors were in the battle against cancer, AIDS, and other lethal diseases. After dealing with the pain that only the loss of a spouse can create—the numbing shock of not sharing your bed with the same person any longer, of not feeling the same warm body there to comfort you night

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after night—he decided to involve himself in a worthwhile project, one he had begun in his spare time back in Vietnam, a vaccine for cancer. Even then he knew it wouldn't work, it was considered madness to try and inoculate someone by injecting them with cancer. In many circles it still was. Andrew also knew that his knowledge, no matter how vast, nor his resolve, no matter how strong, could never wipe out all the different kinds of cancer that existed. But he wanted to make a difference and saw this as one way he could help others like his deceased wife Marcie. Currently, however, he was employed in a highly sensitive zone, working for the government engineering new strains of bacteria for the military. They, in turn, would use his strains to develop and test biological weapons. His days were long and he had just married, which meant that any hopes of trying to find the cure for cancer would have to wait until Andrew had more free time.

Andrew remembered one night when Alex had asked him what he did. The explanation he gave his son was probably even more puzzling to him than it was to Alex. How did you explain to a ten-year-old what the term “biological warfare” meant? How could you tell a child that the viruses you created might someday wipe out a million people in some small country halfway around the world? What Andrew did stress to him though was that what he did was only because it was his job and neither he nor Jennifer agreed with the use of any weapons, especially the ones he created. Alex had nodded even though he was sure the boy had no idea what he meant, although he immediately raced over to their set of encyclopedias to check it out for himself. Alex was a smart boy; hopefully smart enough to avoid the line of work Andrew had got trapped in.

“I think we put it in the car with us, didn't we?” Jennifer called over her shoulder, trying desperately to keep the nervousness in her voice in check.

“I can't remember. Did we?” Andrew asked.

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“I think so, Andy. Check one of the travel bags. It’s probably in one of those.”

“Okay, but I still think we put it in one of the boxes.”

* * *

Jennifer shook her head as Andrew shut the front door to go foraging for his new suit. She wasn’t happy about moving again and she knew Alex could tell. Alex let her finish fixing his shirt and then she leaned over and pretended to straighten up her outfit as she smiled down at him. She was dressed very professionally in a short tan skirt with a dark blazer covering the white blouse she wore underneath. She was going to be working in the elementary school as the on-site psychiatrist, which meant she could keep an eye on him. Since the school was broken up into different branches, she wouldn’t be able to see him much during the day, which she was nervous about.

The school was divided up by grade. Kindergarten on one side, grades one through three on another, four and five on yet another, and the final wing of the building, where Alex would be, housed grades six through eight. He had several advanced classes on his schedule, which would inevitably bring him into contact with some of the older students, something he dreaded. Andrew though, was insistent on him taking the best science classes he could, not just because he excelled in them, but because he wanted him to get a better understanding of not only what he did for work, but also of how things worked in the world. As far as Alex was concerned, it only gave more people a chance to see him and beat him up.

Jennifer focused her attention on him while stooping down on one knee so she could look him full in the face. Then she spoke seriously, trying first to read him. He had become used to her doing this and had learned how to fool her into believing things were all right, even though Alex knew she knew better, after all she was a psychiatrist.

“You nervous, honey? You look a little tense.”

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He shrugged.

“Today’s a big day, you know. First day of your new school, new friends, new teachers...”

Alex listened as Jennifer droned on about how important it was to make a good impression with the other students. How she knew he was scared, but being brave even when you are scared is a part of being a grown-up. It was the same speech he’d heard twice already. The only difference between this one and the others was the name of the town.

“Oceanview is just like Union. You remember Union, don’t you?” she asked.

Alex nodded and reflected on their brief stay in Union, a small inland town about ten miles Northwest of Oceanview in Washington. They had lived there the longest, a little over five months. In that short span, he had made several friends, and even genuinely liked many of them. Jennifer had also settled in very quickly there, joining the clubs and organizations Alex found normal parents tended to join. Jennifer was a part of the P.T.A. and the education board as well as many smaller groups that met weekly at their house to discuss the town and what changes needed to be made. They sounded more like a gossip group than anything else, but she was happy there, and so was Alex. His dad, however, was asked to transfer down to the Portland area. It meant more money, longer hours, and a new project. But Andrew Harrison was so good at what he did, people would literally throw money at him to get him to work for them, which is how they had paid for the new house with a personal check—no loans, no mortgages, strictly money. His father took the job without even thinking twice, and the next day there was a yellow Ryder truck outside and they were on their way to Oceanview.

A jolt of sound startled him. From down the street Alex could hear the grinding of gears as the school bus rumbled towards him, coughing out a thick cloud of dark exhaust behind it. He fidgeted nervously and

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wished for a sudden illness to overtake him, a flu that would keep him bedridden for weeks, something, anything, that would prevent him from getting on the rapidly approaching bus. As always, his wishes went unfulfilled as the bus rattled to a stop by the curb and opened its doors while the children already on board stared silently through the windows at the “new kid” who was about to get on their bus.

Jennifer bent down, kissed him on the cheek, tousled his hair, and seemed like she wanted to say something more but didn't. Instead she kissed him again and whispered in his ear.

“Good luck, honey. Tonight we're having your favorite, hot dogs and beans. So be sure to come right home after school. No crazy parties on your first day, okay?”

They both knew Alex would be home right after school, but Jennifer wanted him to fit in almost as much as he did. He stared up at the open bus door and cringed.

Okay, here we go, one foot in front of the other. You've done this a million times before. No big deal, just breathe deep and pick up your feet.

He stood frozen to the spot and turned to say something to Jennifer, but she had already gone, heading back inside to help his father find his new suit. Calling over her shoulder before she shut the front door, Alex was able to hear her remind him again about dinner. It didn't matter though, he was on his own again, a trend he was beginning to get used to.

“Come on, kid, get on. I'm already five minutes behind and it's my ass if I'm late again,” the greasy bus driver called from atop his green vinyl seat. The seat belt was strapped so tightly around him his flaccid stomach was exposed, peering out from beneath his black “Guns n' Roses” concert T-shirt and spilling pale flesh over onto his ragged blue jeans. His face was oily and pockmarked, and he reeked of stale alcohol.

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I bet I can guess why you're running late. Alex trudged slowly up the black, grooved steps and onto the bus. The stench of beer immediately overwhelmed him. Alex knew it was beer because his dad had let him try it once, much against Jennifer's wishes. What he remembered most about it, besides the fact that he hated the taste of it, was the awful smell it gave off, especially after getting warm. It smelled like the bus driver had poured warm beer all over himself, although why he would do that escaped Alex's mind.

Behind him the doors snapped shut and the bus leapt forward as the disheveled driver popped the clutch out too fast. Alex pitched forward, dropping his notebook, and almost fell in the aisle. Instead, he reached forward to regain his balance just as the driver shifted into second gear, causing him to pitch to his left where he felt his hand hit somebody's head. When he had regained his balance, he heard the entire bus *ooh* and *ahh*. He knew he'd just made his first mistake. Why couldn't he have just fallen?

"What's your problem, kid?" a husky voice called as the bus turned a corner and his hand bumped against someone else's chest. He could tell from the voice that this must be the town bully. Their voices were all the same, and Alex considered himself an expert on the matter by now.

Nice job, Alex, you've been on the bus ten seconds and you already have one enemy.

"S-s-sorry," he muttered, trying to gather his fallen notebook, which had snapped open when he dropped it, spilling loose leaf paper everywhere, much to the delight of the other riders. So much for making a good impression.

I wish I could just sail away. Maybe on one of those old pirate ships I drew...

"That's not going to cut it, kid. Hey, I'm talking to you, dork!" the voice continued, shoving him in the back as he was bent over gathering

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up his notebook.

Alex sprawled forward onto his stomach. The children burst out laughing. He could feel his face burning red with embarrassment, and he knew the knees in his new school pants had just torn open.

“Hey, dork! Yeah, you, dork! Turn around!”

He stood and resigned himself to the fact that another beating was soon to follow this verbal abuse. All bullies, Alex had learned, played off of a crowd. If the crowd was enjoying the verbal assault, the bully would continue in that manner until the crowd stopped laughing. At that point, they would then pound on him, or set up a time to do so, generally during recess or at lunch where another big crowd would be present.

He slowly stood up, noticing his pants were indeed torn from the fall. The rest of the bus was silent, even the bus driver seemed to be watching with some amusement in the rearview mirror. Alex turned his head, expecting either a fist to meet him as he did so, or the hot breath of another tirade. To his surprise, he saw something he had never expected—a girl.

She was older, maybe twelve or thirteen. She was tall for her age, much taller, Alex was sure, than anyone else in her grade. Standing out from behind her heavily freckled face, she wore shiny silver braces on her teeth. This combination of height and metal teeth made her different, the same way that being the new kid made him different. Unfortunately for Alex, the way she dealt with being different was by lashing out on anyone who crossed her. In this case, that meant him.

“What’s your name, kid?” She stood, her face red hot with anger.

“A-a-lex,” he stammered with fear as he awaited the beating that was sure to follow.

“Well, l-l-listen, A-a-a-lex,” she stuttered mockingly. “I-I-I don’t w-w-want t-t-to see y-y-you on this bus any more. Got me?”

The way she said “Got me”, helped to put the fear of God into him.

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Alex knew that even though she was a girl, she was still a bully and, if crossed, was capable of hurting him.

The rest of the bus smiled quietly as they watched him quivering beneath the harsh glare of the girl's penetrating stare. Eventually, they settled in as Alex nodded that, yes, he did understand what the repercussions would be should he show his face again on the bus. He figured Jennifer could always drive him, or maybe he could even walk, depending on how far it was. Feeling the situation slowly resolving itself, Alex finished gathering up his notebook and cautiously slunk towards an open seat in the middle of the bus, feeling all the eyes of the students upon him as he went. He came upon a small boy roughly his own age and motioned to see if he could sit with him. The boy shook his head in the negative and pointed to the front of the bus where no one was sitting. He didn't even want the new kid seen sitting next to him.

Alex turned around slowly with his eyes never leaving the gritty floor and walked back to the front of the bus, knowing that by doing so he would have to pass by her again.

Holding true to the form that all bullies have, she extended her leg at just the right moment—as the bus was slowing down, when he was the most vulnerable—and sent him falling forward onto his face for the second time in the past two minutes. The bus erupted with laughter. The girl smiled menacingly at him, daring him to say something, anything that would further provoke her, giving her a reason to let loose on him. He merely kept his head down, his eyes brimming with hot tears of fear and embarrassment while he made his way carefully to the vacant seat behind the bus driver. His notebook was all but destroyed with papers falling out onto the floor. His new pencils and pens were rolling up and down the aisle way, rocking back in forth as they stuck in the tiny grooves. The bus lurched around a corner and up a hill where it stopped at a set of train tracks where the driver opened the

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door and checked for any sign of a runaway train bearing down on them.

The laughter had died down, but the damage had been done. He was an outcast already, someone to be shunned and made fun of, someone to be picked on at any given opportunity, and he hated it. No matter how often he had been the butt of jokes, or the last one picked, if you could even call being the last one left “picked”, it still hurt. From behind him, Alex could hear people snickering and reenacting his fall and his crying. He hated them, all of them, but mostly he just hated his dad for making them move here. He knew it was unfair, but Alex needed to be mad at someone. Since it was his father’s job that brought them here in the first place, he reasoned it was his fault.

The bus started forward again. He leaned his head against the window, gazing out vacantly as the trees and houses flew past. They had just left his neighborhood and were now heading toward the center of town, which was as desolate and deserted as anything he had ever seen. Alex pulled his head back from the window and saw his reflection in the streaked glass. Hanging his head, he could feel more tears welling up within him and fought hard to keep them at bay. There was no point in giving them another reason to laugh at him.

The ocean was on his right side. He could see the sailboats and seagulls clearly from where he sat. At that moment he longed to be either of them. A sailboat, traveling from port to port over a pristine aqua sea, or a seagull, flying wherever the wind decided. Alex wanted that freedom, that independence, more than anything, even more than making friends here. Mostly though, he just didn’t want to be scared anymore.

Someday...someday I will be that free, that strong. Then no one can ever bother me, and I’ll never let them into my world. I’ll shut them all out. Then they’ll be sorry, all of them.

The bus driver cursed under his breath as they came to a red light,

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something about Jesus and Joseph that he didn't quite catch. To his right Alex saw a large playground which was fenced in with metal wire. It overlooked the ocean, providing a breathtaking view of the white, rocky shoreline. On his left side was a small apartment complex, low and sand-colored. The name on the red wooden sign on the front lawn read, "*Oceanview Manor*". It looked like an old age home, similar to the one they had put his grandfather in a few years ago.

Alex missed his grandfather very much too, not as much as his mother. Stephen Harrison, or "Pops", as everyone called him, was a gentle and kind old man. He spent many hours with Alex before their first move to Union, comforting and explaining to him they weren't moving because of something he did wrong. It was because of work and because people needed time to find themselves sometimes. Especially after someone dies. Especially after someone you *love* dies.

It's always because of work, Alex thought bitterly, thinking of his mother and choking back hard on the last wave of tears as they came.

The light turned green and the bus coasted through the intersection at an easy pace heading for the entrance to the school that lay directly before them. He could feel his stomach tightening as the bus pulled up into a line next to the front door along with the rest of the buses. His senses became acute, as they always did right before he left the relative safety of the bus and his isolation. Alex could smell the green vinyl seats—a heavy, thick smell that reminded him of sweat—and thought he felt a panic attack coming on. His sneakers stuck to the floor as if it were made of fly-paper, even the air he breathed seemed tainted by the fear inside him. Jennifer had given him some medication that he took every morning to help him relax, but he had forgotten to take it today. He would have to ask her if not taking one was bad.

"Okay, everybody off! Time to learn, or something," the greasy bus driver shouted over the noisy din of the students. As he looked at him, Alex couldn't help but notice the lumpy, hand-rolled cigarette that sat

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behind his ear.

Taking a deep breath and holding it to slow his heart rate down to normal, Alex stood up, only to feel a strong hand on his left shoulder push him back down.

“I’ll see you at lunchtime, A-A-Alex. You better not chicken out or tattle either, or you’ll really get it. Got me?” the tall girl said, then bent down and breathed heavily into his left ear. “You tell anyone and I’ll pound you until you wish you were back in your little baby bed at home.”

He watched her as she brushed roughly past him and exited the bus, skipping the last two stairs with a mighty leap before mixing in with the crowd and punching a small, fat boy in the shoulder playfully. The boy hit her back and they wrestled a bit before the bell rang. Alex watched them as they moved towards the open doorway where two teachers, a short balding man and a tall skinny blonde woman with glasses, were ushering everyone in. He reluctantly stepped off the bus and froze when he saw the tall girl start mumbling something to her friend and they both turned and regarded him with slitted eyes. She had no doubt just told him about what happened on the bus and now he was involved.

He felt like curling up into a ball and rolling away to some hidden corner, somewhere where no one would bother him. At least she had been right about something though—Alex would much rather be home in his bed away from all of this.

This is a very bad start to what is going to be a very bad day, and I still haven’t even entered the school.

Behind him the bus pulled away. The two teachers urged him forward as the late bell began to ring. Like a martyr walking to his own death, Alex marched forward, head hung high, resigned to the fact that today would end with him in the nurse’s office at the very least. Before entering the school, he glanced off to his right for one last look at the

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beautiful ocean when he saw a ragged looking man being pushed around by the police. They were escorting him into the patrol car when their eyes suddenly locked. For a second Alex was scared, but that feeling passed instantly and was replaced instead by a feeling of curiosity.

Who was he and what had he done to get arrested? His dad had always told him breaking the law was the one of the worst things anyone could ever do, but since Alex had never broken any laws, he didn't know if it was true or not.

Alex watched as the police were unceremoniously shoving the man into the back of the car. He had a rough beard and was extremely dirty. He actually looked more like a hobo than anything else. In order to get a closer look, Alex took a few steps over in his direction until he was close enough to hear the man arguing with the cops. He didn't know why, but Alex felt compelled to ask him something, anything. He just wanted to hear the man's voice, which he was sure had to be deep and rough. It was almost as if he recognized his face from somewhere. But where? Just as Alex opened his mouth to speak, the blonde teacher, seeing the man the police had in their custody, quickly ran over and took Alex's hand, ferreting him away inside the school. The last thing he saw before the doors shut behind him, sealing him inside the school that would be his new source of torment, was the unkempt man driving by. He stared out of the side window from the backseat of the police car, his eyes a faded brown that seemed to hide something far back behind them—something that had been kept hidden for a long while. Their gazes locked again. Alex could sense that this man, this apparently homeless man who he had just watch get arrested, had something important he needed to say, something he needed to say to him. The man's eyes studied him carefully and then suddenly widened as if with recognition. Alex stepped back while the door closed, just as the man put his cuffed hands up against the car's rear window, his eyes

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still locked on Alex's own.

CHAPTER 2

“You must be Alexander,” the tall blonde woman spoke gently, turning Alex’s face away from the scene behind them. “My name is Marilyn Stacy. I’m one of the nurses here at Oceanview Elementary, my specialty though is child psychology. Do you know what that is?”

Alex looked at her through eyes that were as cold as they were angry. After two schools in less than two years, as well as being the child of a mother who contracted a terminal illness not to mention having Jennifer as a stepmother, he was well aware of what a psychologist was, especially a child psychologist. He had been seeing one in each of the towns that they had lived in and nothing had come of it. All they ever said was that Alex should try to be more social and even more willing to participate in after school activities such as baseball or soccer. They told him to watch less TV, read fewer books about nonsensical adventures, and try to not to daydream as much. Basically they asked Alex to come back to reality and stay there, to be

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more grounded. Then they would tell him about his mental condition, something that Jennifer had said was a very common condition, Attention Deficit Disorder. After they diagnosed him with that, they usually gave him a prescription for his medicine to be refilled and sent him on his way, a ten year old with A.D.D. Alex didn't know exactly what having that meant, but in his mind it was just one more thing that made him different from the rest of the children.

He had to take the small, off-white pills three times a day. They had made him drowsy at first, but in time he had grown accustomed to them and even found that he was more focused after being on the medication for a few months. Alex even tried to learn more about his condition by watching a program on television one day. It had said that A.D.D. was a common condition for boys in their early years and then went into several case studies where the medication had worked, and others where it hadn't. And the psychiatrists told him he should watch less TV! The end result was always the same, though. He would be forced into playing one sport or another, something socially stimulating, and then Alex would inevitably get hurt because of his small stature and tendency to daydream. Yeah, he knew what a psychologist was.

"Alex? Did you hear me?"

He nodded his assent and responded as politely as he could.

"I know what you do, Mrs. Stacy. I've been to a few psychiatrists before you and I'm sure I'll have to see more after you. I have A.D.D. and they say that if I would spend less time reading books and watching television I would probably be better off."

She stood before him, her long slender figure highlighted by the tight black pants and gray button-down shirt she wore. Her sandy-blonde hair fell around her shoulders framing her pale face which now held a look of concern on it. She reminded him of one of the high school babysitters his father hired on occasion to watch him while he and Jennifer went out to one function or another. And although she had

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a young look to her, her face was possessed of a more mature nature, one that had seen enough of life to make judgments based not on book knowledge but on experience. Overall, she seemed like a nice person and Alex suddenly felt bad about the way he spoke to her.

“Alex, I don’t want to force you to do anything, okay? I just want you to know that if you want to talk to someone about anything I am available to you. As for not reading books, I can only tell you that you should do whatever makes you happy, no matter what anyone says.”

Her face still held that look of extreme concern, but it was lessening as she led him to the principal’s office where he would be given his schedule of classes. The corridors were wide with low, white paneled ceilings and dark brown painted walls that were smeared with some graffiti and grime. Along each wall were slim gray metal lockers, each one with a combination padlock on it. The cream colored floor shone brightly with a fresh coat of wax, but it was slightly worn from the constant tread of feet upon it. A paper banner hung loosely over one group of lockers, “Great 8,” it read, indicating the imminent graduation of the eighth-grade class. There was no traffic in the hallways as classes had already begun, so Alex craned his neck as they walked by some of the closed doorways, peering in through the tiny windows that were set in the doors and trying to catch a glimpse of what the classrooms looked like. Instead, his eyes met those of the tall girl from the bus. She stared back at him with a mocking smile that seemed to laugh at him and his obvious fear of her. She grinned broadly when he flinched and then pointed to her watch. Somehow the day was still getting worse before it had even begun.

“Alex, this is Mr. Tompkins. He’s our principal and wanted personally to meet you before you started in.”

Alex shifted his gaze from the classroom to a short man, balding in some spots, but with erratic tufts of graying hair sticking out in others. He looked similar to the man who was with Marilyn encouraging the

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students to hurry this morning, but was shorter and had more hair. Compared to him, Marilyn looked like a giant and Alex had to suppress a laugh when he looked at the two of them standing there next to each other. They looked like a giant and a dwarf.

Mr. Tompkins bent over at the waist and extended a plump hand for him to shake, which Alex did slowly.

“Now then, Alex, I was just talking to your mom the other day and she said that you seemed a little nervous about getting started here. I just want to tell you that I know exactly how you feel.”

“She’s not my mom. She’s my stepmother.”

Alex noted the way that Tompkins said *exactly*, as if he had any real idea of what he actually felt like. Like he knew what it was like to constantly be moving around, to try and find new friends or to meet new teachers month after month, only to hear them ramble on about how their school was the best, how their school would be different, and how they would personally be there for him should he need anything. All it ever added up to was another set of grown-ups spilling forth another set of lies into his young ears. They expected Alex to swallow it whole, and by now he was able to mask his real feelings so well that no one could tell what he was really thinking anymore. Well, no one except for Jennifer. Alex reached into his pocket and fumbled around for his medication before remembering he had left it on the kitchen table.

Mr. Tompkins seemed surprised by his reaction and quickly apologized.

“I’m sorry, Alex. I thought that she was your mother. I-I’m sorry,” he finished, looking directly at Marilyn who must have been responsible for the misinformation.

“She works here too, you know,” Alex continued, sensing that both adults were uncomfortable with the subject. He normally wasn’t like this, but being a small fish in a big pond sometimes made him pick the

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smallest battles to fight, battles that Alex knew he could win.

Mr. Tompkins again smiled nervously and looked at Marilyn who shrugged and pretended to leaf through some papers she was holding.

“She works here? At Oceanview?” Mr. Tompkins finally mumbled uncomfortably, his face bright red with embarrassment.

Alex smiled, knowing that he had already won this little fight, when Marilyn suddenly chimed in while pointing at something in her folder.

“Yes. Jennifer Cross-Harrison is one of the school psychiatrists here. She will be working with the lower grades. Probably first through fourth.”

Mr. Tompkins nodded.

“I see. Well, let me tell you more about our school...er...your school. I have no doubt you will be quite happy here. Our students have all the best opportunities...”

Alex made himself smile and nodded eagerly at everything Principal Tompkins had to say. Yes, he would love the new school. Yes, he couldn't wait to try out the new gymnasium and, yes, he would fit in here just fine. As he continued to “yes” Tompkins to death, he could feel Marilyn staring at him, not believing one word he said. She had recovered quickly from the small bomb that Alex had dropped on them earlier and appeared insulted that he didn't volunteer the information that his stepmother was a psychiatrist as well, not to mention a step above herself. Alex would have to keep his eye on her; she might try and make him come in to see her at some point during the day to “talk”. If that happened, and the other kids found out about it, then any chance that still remained of him making friends and fitting in here would be gone.

Alex cringed as he reflected on how many doctors he actually had been to. He had been seeing one even before his mom died, but when she had passed away he had become worse and eventually even his father, at the coaxing of Jennifer, decided to join him in therapy. They

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never really resolved anything, just more medication for him and a bill for his dad to pay. He guessed that his father received his real therapy from Jennifer when he needed it, but Alex was still required to get his prescription twice a month. Sometimes he wondered if other kids had the same problems he did or if he was all alone.

“...and I’m sure that you will absolutely love our recess yard. We had a new swing set, slide, and monkey bars put in just this past summer...” Mr. Tompkins droned on before Marilyn cut him off.

“Uh, Mr. Tompkins, I think we might be overwhelming the boy, don’t you?” she asked, shooting him a look that was supposed to stay just between the two of them but didn’t. Alex was well aware of the sly glances and meanings behind certain looks that adults gave each other, especially around him. This one obviously meant that she wanted the well-intentioned principal to leave Alex in her care for now.

“Of course, of course. The last thing I want to do is bore you.” He laughed, a little too hard.

“Nice meeting you,” Alex replied, shaking the plump hand again and allowing himself to be taken into Mrs. Stacy’s custody. The principal seemed surprised by the maturity of that action, and was at a loss for a moment before replying in kind.

“Yes, nice to meet you too, Alex. If you need anything, please let us know.”

Alex watched him turn around and head back into his office, grabbing a cup of coffee that had been sitting on his desk the entire length of the conversation before losing himself in some paperwork that had piled up in his brief absence.

“He can be a little long-winded at times,” Marilyn explained as she led him towards one of the classrooms. Not just any classroom though, but the one that his new bully was sitting in. Alex hung his head in misery as he realized he was going to be in her class everyday. That meant that a beating today was inevitable, as well as one tomorrow and

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the next day and the next...

She opened the door and smiled as she introduced him to the class, most of whom had already seen him on the bus and were thrilled to have him in their class where they could keep an eye on him. He felt like he was walking through a nightmare as he took his assigned seat, directly in front of his tormentor. The class didn't miss the irony either as many snickered and laughed under their breath. Marilyn was speaking with the teacher, the pudgy man who was outside with her this morning, and they were apparently enjoying a quick laugh about something when he felt hot breath on the back of his neck.

"Lunch-time, Alex Harrison. Lunch-time."

He immediately grew tense and prayed lunch-time would never come, that somehow, for some reason, they would be skipping lunch today. Unfortunately, as Alex knew all too well, wishing for the impossible wasn't a good habit to get into; it hadn't stopped the bus from arriving this morning and it was doubtful it would prevent him from being beaten up in a few hours.

Marilyn said something to the teacher before she left, and then gave Alex a parting last look that suggested concern before closing the door quietly behind her. Whether or not she saw the girl behind him speak into his ear menacingly, he didn't know, but it didn't really matter if she had because there was nothing she could do anyway. The teacher, a gentleman who introduced himself as Mr. Toole, a name undoubtedly transformed by the students into more colorful nicknames, was speaking about a town in rural New England famous for some type of witchcraft or sorcery. Alex tried to concentrate on it, but found his thoughts drifting instead to the scraggly-looking man whom he saw being arrested earlier this morning. There was something about the look that passed between them that had intrigued him, something non-threatening and sad, yet important as well. It reminded him of one of the books he had read recently about a man who leaves his wife after

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twenty years. It was actually one of Jennifer's books, but she let him read it.

The man wandered the country and was amazed by all the beauty of nature and all the richness of life that he had missed while unhappily married. In the end he hears that his wife had killed herself after he left and he encounters her ghost in his wanderings where she tells him that the worst thing to do with life was to waste it the way that he had been. Love is powerful, but to focus all that love on one person, or one object, is to smother and kill the thing that you hold dear, the same way they had killed their marriage.

It was a good book and it had helped him understand his life and why his mother died a little better, but there was much about it that was beyond him. The man weeps bitterly realizing that it was his selfishness that had killed his wife and his punishment was to live the rest of his life with the burden of knowing that secret.

There was something in the homeless man's eyes Alex saw as he drove past in the police car that made him think that perhaps this man also held a secret. He didn't know what it was, not yet anyway. He hoped that he would see him again, if for no other reason but to hear him speak, as he was sure that the man wanted to say something to him.

"...a town known as Norfolk where a number of witchcraft accusations took place, but no known convictions..." Mr. Toole prattled on.

He could have been explaining the meaning of life and Alex still wouldn't have heard him, his thoughts were elsewhere, torn between the fear of lunch-time and his growing curiosity concerning the strange man. It was ten o'clock and he was growing hungry, in two hours Alex would be sitting down in the cafeteria to eat, hopefully with all his teeth still in place.

* * *

"Come on, Tony, we're here. Out you go, there we are," the police

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officer said, helping the dirty man out of backseat and leading him up the stairs into the police station. It was a plain brick building with a large sign containing the words “Oceanview Police Department” printed on it. The brick exterior was a light red in color and an American flag hung limply from a flagpole on the roof. The basement windows of the station had bars on them where the prisoners were detained while the upper windows where the offices had been set up were quite large in comparison, broad and open to daylight, making the building seem almost inviting.

“I didn’t do nothin’. Didn’t do nothin’,” was all Tony, a local transient, said while refusing to walk up the front stairs.

“We know, Tony. We know. Problem is that the parents of Oceanview don’t want their kids coming home after school and talking about the strange man they saw skulking about the playground. It kind of scares them, you know?” the young officer explained patiently.

“But I wasn’t gonna hurt anyone. I was just looking for food, but then I saw this kid...”

“Now you see,” the policeman cut in, “if you keep talking like that, we’re going to have to put you in jail, Tony. You know you can’t be hanging around the school, and why in the world would you be looking for a kid there? I could easily add that to the list of charges I already have against you here. You know better than that, come on.”

The officer dragged Tony up the front steps—pristine gray marble slabs constructed and maintained by the money of the taxpayers of Oceanview—and pushed open the front door. With so much new money coming in from the Portland investors, the community didn’t mind spending some of the extra money on appearances, which were otherwise lacking in most areas of the town. A nice police station, however, implied safety. At least that was what it was supposed to do. To support this belief though, was the fact that there hadn’t been a violent crime of any kind committed there in over ten years, or, as the

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old timers referred to it, “the days before Sheriff Farrell took over.”

Sheriff James Farrell was known as the toughest man in town, an ex-soldier with a short temper and an even shorter tolerance for crime, especially violent ones. After graduating from the police academy, Farrell arrived in Oceanview as a beat cop. He took one quick look around and decided it was his duty to clean the town up, or at least die trying. He was a proud man, a man who went to church regularly and believed strongly in God and family. He still had buddies in the Army who would show up from time to time to tease him about his “real” job, but they were good men and believed in what they did as strongly as Farrell did. He had served his country with them for so long that he considered most of them family. That was what made it so hard for him to say goodbye to them when the time came for him to retire. A large part of him still longed for the danger and recklessness of being a soldier, but age and a pair of bad knees had finally worn him down.

After spending three years as a beat cop, Farrell was promoted to detective, a rather large jump in rank and one that only fed his desire to do the job better. After the old sheriff retired, Farrell was quickly given the job and he immediately sunk his teeth into it. He spent countless hours undercover, ensuring the safety of the town while silently pondering the bright future he saw for it. A safe, clean, and beautiful town with happy, safe, and beautiful residents. Farrell knew he alone could never make it a utopia, but he’d be damned if he wouldn’t at least try.

He was sitting at his desk when he saw Tony Hawthorne being lead through the processing room and over to one of the holding cells. Farrell grimaced to himself, thinking of how many times he had asked that drug-addled shell of a man to leave town. How many times he had been forced to lock Tony Hawthorne up for his own safety, and how many evenings he had spent driving him to the homeless shelter over in Portland. How many restless nights he had spent watching him writhe

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through the withdrawal pains of heroin addiction only to see him stoned the very next week. Nevertheless, there he was yet again, standing before Farrell, stinking like an animal, and high as ever. Tony was wearing the same dirty, olive green fatigues and soiled tan Henley shirt that he always wore—a few missing buttons exposed part of his chest. Farrell shook his head angrily and could feel his heart rate increasing as he stood up from behind his desk and made his way over to Tony, brushing past the other degenerates who were pleading their cases along the way. These people were imperfections in the perfect world he had created and they had to be dealt with quickly and, if necessary, forcefully.

“I’ll take him from here, Les,” Farrell said to the doe-eyed officer who had brought Tony in. He grabbed Tony by the handcuffs and watched Les as he turned and went over to his cluttered desk to begin processing the paperwork. He would never understand how these kids could manage to get anything done by keeping their work areas in such a messy state.

Organization is the key to success.

The Army had also taught him that, along with the saying “only the strong survive.” This second one he held almost as high as a direct order from God. Farrell had seen the child abusers, the drug pushers, the addicts, the con-men, and the criminals of this town come and go. They were the weak and they didn’t survive, not here, not in James Farrell’s town. Tony Hawthorne once was a Vietnam War veteran and a good man, but now he was an eyesore in James Farrell’s town—a homeless man, a man with no friends and no family and therefore, no business in Oceanview.

“Les, don’t bother writing the report, I’ll handle it myself,” Farrell said, keeping his eyes locked on the dirty, stinking man that stood, shoulders slouched heavily, before him. Tony was shivering violently even though it was at least eighty degrees outside. Les gave him a

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quizzical look, but then nodded and tore up the paper he had been frantically writing on and walked over to get a soda from the Coke machine in the break room. Another thing that Farrell would never comprehend. How could someone drink soda first thing in the morning? What ever happened to the traditional black coffee and a donut to start the day?

“H-how are y-you, J-Jimmy,” Tony stuttered, keeping his eyes on the spotless white tiled floor beneath him.

Farrell sighed, studying him, before finally using his keys to remove the handcuffs that bound his wrists together.

“I guess a better question would be, ‘How are you doing, Tony?’ but I don’t really care anymore. Tony, we’ve pulled you away from that school three times now this month, in most states you’d be doing five to ten, minimum, for using and peddling drugs in a school zone, but your Sheriff here has a good heart and hasn’t reported you to the state...yet.”

Farrell hooked his thumbs into the belt loops in his pants and continued.

“Now here is what I suggest to you, and bear in mind that the next time we pick you up, you are going to prison, I’ll make sure of it personally, got it? I suggest you stop living out in those woods down by Ridge Road and make your way up to Portland to one of the shelters to clean yourself up. Get some help, get clean and then maybe find a job.”

Tony tried to interrupt, but Farrell raised his hand to stop him.

“I know you hate it there, but my hands are tied on this one. There are only so many times I can let you walk before people will start asking questions. So just do me a favor, okay? Stay out of trouble and stay away from that school. And another thing, take a shower or something, you stink.”

Tony pulled his bloodshot eyes off the floor for a quick second to look into Farrell’s eyes, sharp, clear, and blue as chips of ice. His hair

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was cut short, as it always was, and his ears stuck out a little, making him appear younger than he actually was. His uniform was too tight, he was getting softer as the years drifted past, and as a result Farrell's belly was beginning to show signs of rolling over his pants. Pretty soon he might even need a new hole for his belt, but not for at least another year. Funny how very little remained of the man he had known, of the man he had once thought was his friend. Tony hung his head again.

"Come on, Tony, I'll give you lift to Portland and this time try to stay there okay?"

"Yes, sir," he responded, sharply saluting Farrell.

Several of the other men who had been milling around the small office now stopped and looked over to see what was happening, to see why this obviously stoned junkie was saluting their sheriff. Farrell looked around nervously and laughed a little, trying to ease the tension that had suddenly fallen over the room. He reached his hand out and pulled Tony's arm back down to his side, recuffing him.

"What do you think you're doing?" Farrell muttered under his breath as he lead Tony out to his patrol car, which was parked out front. "If you're looking for trouble, then keep this up, okay? I've done everything I can for you and still you try to make me out to be the bad guy, now stop it."

Tony didn't open his mouth, he simply allowed himself to be stuffed into the backseat of the cruiser. Once Farrell had started the car and pulled into traffic, he closed his eyes and tried to think of another place, of another time, anything other than the Portland Outreach Center where they were now headed. Back to a time before the drugs took over his life, before he began living in those cursed woods, and before he knew why no one ever went out there. He shook his head, trying to clear some of the haze from it, and remembered.

* * *

Tony Hawthorne had been someone once, someone important,

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someone who had saved the lives of dozens of men more important than Sheriff James Farrell. Someone who gave and demanded respect. However, in one of life's cruel twists, he now found himself in his current situation—penniless, homeless, strung out on drugs, and without the respect of anyone, even himself. His life had been spiraling downward for several years, but the past few months had seen him finally hit rock bottom. He'd been hearing voices out in the woods, strange, high pitched voices that came and went with the wind. The other junkies Tony hung around with told him about the cove where he lived, about the missing bodies and mysterious deaths, until he grew scared. Whether they were real or a result of the drugs, he didn't know, but they were in his head, embedded there like a shard of glass in his mind, rubbing, scraping, and pushing him over the brink. The voices spoke to him infrequently at first, but now they called to him day and night, sometimes showing him things from the past, the present, and the future. No matter how hard he tried, Tony could never manage to cook up enough heroin to kill himself. Whatever it was that spoke to him wouldn't let him go, he was at its mercy; he was a slave to it as much as he was to the brown dust. In his mind there was only one solution, and he needed to be in Oceanview to complete it, which meant disobeying Farrell's orders and leaving Portland. He would wait until tomorrow before returning, maybe even the next day, but no longer than that. There was something Tony needed to do, someone he needed to talk to, a boy whose face held an unmistakable resemblance to someone he had known a long time ago, when he was someone else. Tony looked up into the rearview mirror and smiled to himself absently.

* * *

Farrell saw Tony smiling and wondered what was so amusing to him now, probably another drug induced hallucination. He hated dealing with him when he was high. In fact, he didn't even want to

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know what Tony was so happy about. He just wanted to remove this parasite from his town before he latched himself onto something.

CHAPTER 3

The bell rang, pulling Alex out of a deep daydream he'd been having where he was sailing across the ocean as an outlaw captain of a pirate ship bound for an unknown port. His cargo was Spanish gold, stolen from a merchant freighter after a mighty battle. Now they were returning from Spain to hide their plunder on a deserted island, uncharted and fabled to be haunted by the ghosts of the ocean—those killed while at sea.

The class stood up, almost in unison Alex observed wryly, and like robots they moved out of the classroom and into the hallway where other students were already boisterously shouting and pushing each other. Alex was rising out of his seat when he heard her voice again, chilling him immediately.

“One more hour, Alex Harrison. You better be there.” She brushed past him roughly, knocking his notebook off his desk and onto the linoleum floor. Holding her index finger up for emphasis, she added,

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“One hour.”

He stooped to pick up his notebook for the second time that day and glanced up at the clock, just to make sure of the time.

Eleven o'clock. He had less than an hour to think of a way out of this.

Alex watched her turn her head before leaving the room to give him a fierce look that showed unequivocally that she had every intention of being there, come Hell or high water, as the saying went. Mr. Toole watched all this with mild interest from his desk at the front of the room, but looked away when Alex tried to make eye contact with him, pretending to be enthralled by the papers piled before him.

No one cared.

After stuffing the last of the spilled papers into his now tattered notebook, he walked past Mr. Toole, giving him a “I know you saw that” look as he went. Out in the hallway things were chaotic, students rushed back and forth, crisscrossing in front of him like insects. With more than a little struggle Alex managed to find his way to his next class, which was thankfully one of his better subjects, science.

He walked along the hallway, staring at the door numbers, 110, 108, 106...

“Where is room 102,” he thought impatiently as the hallway began to rapidly thin.

Finally he found the right class, “Room 102, Science Lab,” faded yellow lettering read on a light brown door. Alex pushed it open and made his way in just as the bell indicating the start of class rang. For the most part the room was deserted, except for a few older looking kids who were huddled around one of the laboratory desks in back playing with a Bunsen burner and a book of matches. Alex cringed as he watched them turn the gas on full tilt and then throw a match at the valve from a safe distance back. The match ignited the volatile gas and it exploded in a small blue plume of flame that quickly reduced itself to

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a low burn. They burst into laughter and prepared to do it again, but stopped when they saw him walk in. One of them stepped forward and spoke.

“Who are you?” a tall, muscular boy asked stepping forward. He was wearing a blue tank top with a white “13” written on the front and the name “DeVecci” on the back. He seemed to be the leader and spokesperson for the rest of the group.

“A-Alex. Alex Harrison,” Alex heard himself saying from what seemed a million miles away, part of him hoping that he had wandered into the wrong class.

The other boys continued to stare at him until finally DeVecci spoke again.

“New?”

“What’s that?” Alex asked nervously.

Although he had heard the question, it was a natural reflex for him to ask “What?” whenever he was scared, and right now he was terrified.

“Are you new?” one of the other boys chimed in, moving one step closer to him. Alex could feel his heart racing in his chest and a damp perspiration developing under his arms. Was he going to be beaten up for entering the wrong classroom? What kind of school was this?

Sensing his fear, DeVecci approached him with his hands held palms up. “Hey, kid, relax. All we’re asking is if you’re new here. You look like you’re about to explode for Christ’s sake. You’re here for Science 300, right? Mrs. Duncan?”

Alex nodded, although still not sure what was happening. Was this a set up, a trick?

“I’m Tom, Tom DeVecci,” he said, extending his right hand and shaking Alex’s own, which he limply extended. “This here is Joe, Mikey, and Stevie. Hope we didn’t scare you there with that little explosion.” He laughed.

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“I-I’m not sure I’m supposed to be here, I...”

“Well, let’s see your schedule then,” Tom said, walking over next to him, opening his notebook and leafing through a few pages until he found his schedule. “Here we are, Alex Harrison, eleven o’clock, Room 102, Science 300, Mrs. Duncan. Nope, you’re in the right place, kid. Welcome to the club.”

Just then a short woman entered the room carrying a brown paper grocery bag with plastic tubes and glass containers spilling out. Her hair was frazzled in such a way that she looked like a female Albert Einstein except the coloring was brown with smatterings of gray instead of a stark white.

“Sorry I’m late, guys, but I thought of a great experiment we can do next week, assuming I can get the school board to agree on it, of course.”

She rolled her eyes when she said this, indicating she must have had unpleasant run-ins with the school board before. She stopped and smelled the air before smiling and looking directly at Tom.

“DeVecci, what am I going to do with you? You know you can’t just turn on the gas like that. What if you blow up the school? Christ, you’ll be the death of me yet!” She laughed.

“It wasn’t me, Mrs. Duncan. It was Alex.”

Alex’s mouth dropped open as Tom pointed his finger squarely at him.

“Alex? Who is Alex?” she muttered, burying her head halfway into the grocery bag she had placed on top of the black laboratory desk.

“Alex is the new guy. We think he might be a pyro.”

Mrs. Duncan looked up then and stared directly at him. Alex could feel his face turning red and his stomach begin to tighten up.

“You a pyro, Alex?” she asked with a serious face.

“I-I, well maybe, I don’t know what...”

She smiled widely and the class burst out into laughter.

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“Sit down, Alex. We’re just giving you a hard time. And, Tom, why don’t you work with Alex today, you know, show him the ropes, okay?”

“No problem, Mrs. D.,” Tom replied pulling on Alex’s arm and leading him back toward one of the open lab desks.

“And no more with the gas!” she shouted in a playful way.

“You’re going to need some of these...” Tom stuffed some matches into his pockets. “...one of these and you have to wear these, I know they make you look stupid, but they work,” he continued as he handed Alex a thick black lab apron and some safety glasses. By the time Tom was done with him, Alex was equipped with an entire array of lab equipment, most of which he had never seen before, let alone used.

“Now the fun begins,” Tom whispered over to him once they were sitting down at the desk that they were going to share for the day. “Mrs. Duncan is one of the best science teachers in the state and she is also the most outrageous. You’re going to love her.”

Alex nodded and managed a weak smile. He didn’t want to get his hopes up as the day had already produced one bully and a scheduled lunch-time fight, but maybe *this* class wasn’t going to be so bad after all.

“Okay, everybody sit down,” Mrs. Duncan spoke, scratching her head in a distracted way, as if her mind were on other things. “Today I want to explore acids and bases. Not exactly the most exciting thing in the world, but I think with a little imagination we can make it fun. You’ve got to have a good imagination to make science fun sometimes, right, Tom?”

Tom poked Alex in the ribs and winked.

“We always make it fun,” he replied, then, whispered to Alex, “Ever mix an acid with a base?”

He shook his head and Tom smiled.

“Well, today you can see what happens when you do.”

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From the front of the room Mrs. Duncan called out to him.

“Tom, don’t make him mix the acids with the bases unless you want to clean up after it explodes everywhere.”

Tom smiled. “Whatever do you mean, Mrs. D.?”

She winked at him. “Just don’t do it, DeVecci.”

Alex joined the class in a good laugh, and for the first time since Union, he felt welcome. It was a good feeling and he hoped it would last, but something was still gnawing at him. Was it the lunchtime fight? No, he knew better. It was the homeless man.

CHAPTER 4

James “Jimmy” Farrell had a tough history, and a long one. One that involved more than his personable demeanor and friendly “good cop” nature sometimes indicated. As he drove along Route 9, a coastal road that led out of Oceanview and into Portland, his memories of exactly where he had been and what he had seen over the course of his forty years of life came flooding back like a bad dream. Triggered, no doubt, by his passenger. The fact that he had Tony Hawthorne sitting in the back of his car didn’t help matters at all. In fact, it made the memories rush back to him fast and furious, like a nightmare Farrell had forgotten that came back twice as bad the second time around.

Farrell cleared his throat and spoke to former Sergeant Anthony “Tony” Hawthorne. *His* former sergeant from Vietnam when Farrell was enlisted in the Army, Platoon Black 17, also known as “Black Cobra Operations.”

“Tony, I know the years have been rough on you, but they have on

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everyone, believe me. I was lucky to land any job when we got back, but my dad knew someone in the Academy and after that, well, like I said, I guess I got lucky. No one wanted to have to go through what we did. Christ, I doubt we thought we would have to, but sometimes life isn't exactly what you want it or expect it to be. Life can suck, Tony, I know that, but it doesn't give you the right to expect me to turn a blind eye to your breaking of the law. I have a job here now. I'm a respected man in this community, respected because I uphold the law and hold the same beliefs these people do. Without me here this town would never be in the position it's in now, and I intend to keep it that way."

He was right. James Farrell had saved Oceanview from turning into yet another dingy suburb filled with mini-malls and 24-hour burger joints. He had, in fact, managed to keep the town safer than any other in the state, something he was extremely proud of. James Farrell was the best at what he did and wasn't afraid to gloat about it on occasion.

"Tony, you know I love you, right? So why keep making me do this? You know that if there was something I could do I'd have done it by now. You know that, right? Remember I told you that? Remember?"

Tony sat tight-lipped in the back seat, picking at the dirt beneath his fingernails. He looked at his arms, laden with the tracks of a heroin user and smiled. He remembered things all right. When times were different, when roles were reversed, when James Farrell was a private working under him on a reconnaissance mission deep behind enemy lines outside of Saigon right after it fell to Communist North Vietnam. Tony's addled brain still remembered an awful lot, and one day in particular all too well. As the car rolled along the smooth highway, he let himself remember.

* * *

The jungle heat was oppressive to say the least. A better description would have been "overwhelming," but Tony had long since lost the words to describe the hell he lived through. He was leading his men

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through a tangle of crisscrossing vines and sagging trees that slowed and eventually stopped their progress. From far ahead of them Tony could hear the sporadic chatter of gunfire and the muffled explosions of hand grenades. He didn't want this mission; he didn't need it. His men were tired and worn down past the point of exhaustion; forcing them into this humid mess was pushing them to their limits. The only reason they were still in Vietnam at all was because of a rumor that an American scientist, one who had been working on a top secret project, had vanished with all the information concerning a new experimental weapon, one that utilized airborne bacteria. If Tony had had it his way, he would have called the man for what he was, a war-profiteer, a traitor. Someone trying to squeeze a few dollars out of the waning days of the conflict by selling the secrets of his own nation to the enemy. Tony hated these people with a passion, but orders were orders and in the Army you followed your orders even if it meant going against what you believed in. In this case, it meant that he couldn't kill the man they were hunting; he needed to be taken alive. From ahead of him, a green private fresh from boot camp named Jimmy Farrell was running back pale-faced and holding his automatic rifle in front of him with the safety switched off.

"Sergeant," he began breathlessly, "we have a dozen plus just on the other side of an incline about two hundred yards ahead. Mostly automatics, some small munitions and grenades, but it appears they are without a working radio."

Tony scratched his rough chin, two full days worth of stubble—it was hard to shave without a mirror—and nodded slowly while thinking. They could go around and avoid any contact with them, which is what he would have liked to do. At the same time, however, they were running low on ammunition themselves, and if they could take these guerrillas out quickly, they might be able to acquire whatever remained of the munitions after the battle.

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“Good work, Private Farrell,” Tony muttered absently, having made up his mind. “Fall in.”

He held his right fist up, motioning to his men, who totaled a paltry eight, all told, to stop. An open hand indicated silence, and in unison everyone switched off their safeties and crouched low, awaiting his next order.

Such precision, such teamwork. They would do anything I told them to do, the same way I would do anything my superiors ordered. Blind faith. That’s what it was, blind faith that whatever decision I make will be the right one.

He pointed to the right and held up three fingers. Immediately three men fanned out to the right side to prepare to flank whatever was ahead. He did the same with the left side, which left only himself and Jimmy to cover the center. Tony was about to whisper something to him when he saw how nervous Jimmy looked, sweat beading and rolling off his forehead like raindrops. Tony put his strong hand on the trembling boy’s shoulder and spoke in a commanding voice that demanded to be heard.

“Soldier, we are rushing that ridge in a minute and I need you, we need you, to be at your best. I know you’re new to the platoon, but we need you to mature faster than you normally would. And that’s an order.”

Jimmy nodded, but Tony had seen the fear peering out behind his wide eyes. Tony didn’t have the time to give pep talks or boost wounded egos right now. All that mattered was that they took out the enemy as quickly and quietly as possible. Jimmy’s heart wasn’t in it, though, not in the moment, not in the conflict, and Tony knew it. But there was never any time then, no time at all.

“On my mark...and...” he raised his hand and made a circular motion. All the men moved out.

They stood up from their crouches and scampered like rabbits up

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the slight incline, endless months of training and experience showing itself as only Tony, and not their target, could see the six men closing in around the camp ahead. Once they crested the hill, he called for a halt by holding his right fist straight in the air. Everyone stopped and again awaited the next order. Tony could hear Jimmy breathing heavily, not from the short run, but from nerves. If he didn't need Jimmy here, he would have sent him back down the hill, but oftentimes Fate ignored the wishes and prayers of men. Fate, as they say, can be a real bitch.

Beneath them Tony could see about a dozen men, all Vietnamese, milling about. Jimmy had at least been right about the radio, as he saw one of them tinkering with a blocky communications pack for a few minutes before slamming it down in frustration.

It's broken. They are radio isolated. Tony smiled. Better to get this done ASAP before someone does manage to fix it.

He held his right hand up and then motioned a circle with his index finger. Immediately his men rushed in from the flanks with a tight spray of machine gun fire leading the way. He grabbed Jimmy by the shoulder, pulling him to his feet, and together they raced down the hill at breakneck speed. They were crouched low and firing sporadically into the chaos that the camp in front of them had become. With any luck most of the damage would be done by the time they actually reached it.

Tony watched his men as they poured in from the left and right sides like an army of ants while Jimmy and he closed the loose circle, trapping the enemy just as they had done during exercises back at Quantico. The Vietcong cried out in surprise and terror as they were cut down by screaming bullets. Bodies flew all around them, some living, some already dead before they hit the ground. One or two grenades went off, but the explosions came from where his men had originally attacked from, not where they were now. There were pleas for mercy in

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a tongue Tony still didn't fully understand, followed by a sharp gunshot and then all was silent. The roar of gunfire died off and the only sound they heard now was that of the jungle, a whining hot sound that seemed to be judging them, disagreeing with what it had just seen, tensing and then relaxing like a giant muscle, a giant heart. The camp itself was completely destroyed; shattered bodies lay about in different positions of death. Mostly young men, Tony noticed with no dismay, much younger than himself and his platoon, men who were now staining the damp ground crimson with their blood. They would receive no funerals; no letters would go home to their parents explaining what happened. Their graves would be right where they lay unless some animal dragged them off.

"Ten," he counted to himself. "There were more than ten when we first counted. Where are the rest?"

Tony motioned with his hand for his men to come to him. Without a word, everyone congregated. When they were all accounted for, he addressed them.

"Okay, here's the situation, we still have at least two, maybe three more of them out there. They either saw us coming and hid or ran off into the jungle when the fire-fight started." He sighed. "Either way we need to be careful from this point on. No talking until we get back into friendly territory or find that asshole scientist, got me?"

They all nodded in unison. Their sweaty faces were smeared with dirt and gun oil, as well as a hint of fear, indicating that the rush of the kill was beginning to wear off, leaving them tired and weak. Tony hated this part of the war, not that he particularly liked any one part better than another, but the aftereffects of the kill always left a man, even a good man, questioning his morality and his place among God's creatures. That was why he never lingered around the men they killed, and also why he refused to let his men see their faces—it made the act too personal. If they began thinking of these men as human beings with

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wives and children, with fathers and mothers, then they might as well call it quits now because no one, not even the hardest soldier, would kill someone while he pictured that man's family in his head.

"That's all then," Tony continued. "We'll move double-time north by northeast till we reach the city limits of Saigon. We'll break up from there. Now fall in, single line formation, safety off, and silence unless you see something."

The men began to take their positions in line and Tony had been prepared to do the same when suddenly a soft thud made him stop dead. The noise was the sort of sound that an ordinary man, one who lived back in the real world, would just ignore and carry on with his business without a second thought. In the jungle though, a sound like that could mean two things, a fallen tree branch or a grenade.

From behind him, he found out which one it was.

"Holy shit! Grenade! Down, get..." someone shouted before an explosion ripped through the jungle. Thankfully, Tony didn't see what happened to that man. He knew he had died, but seeing one of his men's bodies blown apart like a doll wasn't good for the mind.

Instinct immediately took over, as it always did during battle. His first priority was to find out where the grenade had come from. That answer presented itself in the form of two dozen Vietcong standing on the hill above them, mowing his platoon down like cattle. They were moving through the jungle expertly and coming from every direction, which could only mean one thing. They had been followed. Everything suddenly went blurry. Tony saw images, broken forms and horrible nightmares, rush past him like clouds on a windy day. He struggled to his feet, brushing the thick cotton web of confusion back from his eyes as the scream of gunfire rose in his ears and he saw his men being shredded. The gunfire poured forth from the metal mouths of the gun barrels like dragon's fire, consuming the lives of the men it touched until he saw there were only two left. Jimmy, who was lying on his

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stomach bleeding from a shot in the left leg, and himself. Another body lay broken off to his right among the underbrush, but it was barely moving.

Tony heard himself still giving orders, a thought that was amusing to him at the time because he was sure Jimmy couldn't even stand on his own let alone carry out any order he might be giving him. He crawled over and shook Jimmy hard to make sure he hadn't gone into shock from the wound. He hadn't, but he was bleeding badly and crying just as hard. It looked like an artery had been severed, which meant time was of the essence. The Vietcong still fired down at them, turning the earth into hot dust around them. Tony knew he was yelling something at them, but he wasn't even sure they were words. Their response to him came in the form of gunfire, which they continued to spray across the ground in front of them. For the first time since he had taken control of the platoon, he didn't know what to do. He was scared, and all he knew was that he couldn't leave a man behind. Tony was going to save Private James Farrell if it killed him.

He crawled on his belly like a worm, making his way in front of Jimmy to protect him from the gunfire that was increasing in frequency. They had apparently been seen and in time they, too, would be killed. He had to resign himself to the fact that his time had finally come—he was going to die.

Not without the fight from Hell though. I'll give those bastards something they'll be telling their friends about for years to come, maybe even bring a few of them down with me.

As he was thinking this, a roaring sound from above made the gunfire stop momentarily—a continuous monotone beating sound, the sound of a helicopter dropping out of the sky.

Tony heard the Vietnamese nervously shouting, then felt three sharp pangs rifle through his body, two in his legs and one in his shoulder. He'd been hit. He looked down and saw the dark blood

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flowing from his right leg just above the kneecap; he could tell his shoulder had also been broken. Like an overprotective mother, he refused to leave Jimmy, covering his young private with his own body, opting to give up his own life in order to save that of his men's. From somewhere behind him he heard another voice, it sounded like someone in pain and it was definitely another one of his men. Who it was though, he couldn't be certain. Then he heard Jimmy moan with terror.

Looking down at his face, Tony could see he was obviously scared about something other than his wounds, and whatever it was had him in a state that was bordering on madness, although in the heat of battle everything was madness. He guessed that it was the realization that he might die, that he was mortal after all.

The dull sound of the helicopter increased and he reflected on his life. He had been a good man. Maybe he could have been more religious, but perhaps the big man upstairs would forgive him just one more time and let him sit with his men once more around the campfire in Heaven. He was passing out and was pretty certain that he wouldn't be waking up. He lifted his eyes up to the sky, at least what he could make of it from between the broad palm leaves and vines of the jungle.

Dark shadows.

He saw shadows, dressed in black army fatigues...sliding down black vines.

Angels.

They were coming for him; his time was up. The helicopter beat heavily like an ancient drum somewhere far above him in the sky, beckoning him to give up, to release his life to God.

His next memory was that of flying. He was flying, and Jimmy was flying with him, and someone else too, but he couldn't see who it was because he was covered head to toe in bandages.

We're going together. Jimmy, we're all going to see Him together.

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Don't embarrass me okay?

Tony could hear other voices too, but didn't recognize any of them. Then he heard someone panic and begin firing a machine gun into the vast emptiness that surrounded them. He struggled to sit up and blacked out again.

Dying was so unreal it was frightening.

CHAPTER 5

Alex found himself laughing, really laughing, with Tom and the others when the lunch-bell rang. The bell was like a dagger in his heart because he knew what was coming and knew that there was nothing that he or anyone else could do about it. Even if he told Tom and the rest of them about it, he doubted they would fight someone for him, especially a girl. Christ, they just met him today, he was lucky they even liked him. No, he couldn't ask them for help. He would have to do this on his own and hope it worked out all right.

The classroom doors opened and the students spilled out into the hallway, rushing towards the cafeteria like cattle heading to the feed bin. People pushed and shoved each other like there was a strong possibility that when they finally arrived at the cafeteria all the food would be gone, miraculously eaten by the first ten students who had beaten the rest of them there. Alex cautiously followed a large pack of students toward the dining area, knowing that somewhere among the

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messy din of bodies around him was that tall girl, and he knew she'd be looking for him. During class he'd been able to equate it to the laws of the animal kingdom. Simply put, she was a shark swimming in a sea of tuna, and he was the wounded fish, struggling to keep up with the others. She saw it as her duty to eliminate the weakest the same way a shark would first attack the weakest in the school of fish.

Irony, even in the animal kingdom they call it a school.

The flow of the crowd was leading him back down through the same hallway he passed this morning. Alex noticed that Principal Tompkins was still sitting at his desk, drinking his coffee and reading through someone's file. A slight smile played at the corners of his mouth like he too knew about what was going to happen during lunch.

Someone's whole academic life put into print and condensed to fit into a manila folder. That must be a great way to get to know your students.

He then watched him flip open the cover of the file and noticed that written along the top in dark print was his name, "Alex J. Harrison". He seemed quite interested in it. No wonder he was smiling. After the principal's office, Alex passed the gymnasium and then the nurse's office which was stationed nearby, another touch of irony that he quickly picked up on. Finally, the hallway opened up into a vast room filled to the brim with long wooden tables and chairs teeming with students and stinking of grease and cold pizza.

He fumbled around in his front pocket for the dollar and change Jennifer had given him for lunch. He never brought lunch unless he made it himself, which he never did. Alex considered himself a connoisseur of cafeteria food having eaten so much of it. He had acquired a palette that allowed him to tell exactly how long the French fries had been sitting in the metal serving pans and how outdated the milk really was. A good cafeteria usually measured in around two hours sitting time for the fries. This place, however, seemed to have

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enough students to ensure the food was constantly being refreshed, maybe an hour and a half.

“High turnover rate,” his dad would have said. Again, just words with no real meaning to him, but at least they were words directed at him without malice.

Alex stood in line behind a group of obnoxiously loud girls and tried to keep a low profile, one eye cautiously on the look-out for trouble while the other watched the line. He could almost taste the danger in the air the same way a frightened animal could moments before the attack. His danger wasn’t going to take the form of any animal in nature though; his would come in the form of a lanky blonde girl with braces and a bad attitude. He took a plastic yellow tray from a stack of about ten others. It was slick with lukewarm water, and he slid it along the metal railing carefully picking out what he wanted. There wasn’t too much he liked, but he wasn’t hungry anyway so it didn’t really bother him that much. After putting his money onto his tray, Alex walked over to the cash register, which was manned by an elderly-looking woman who appeared sad but diligent, and who smiled at him through broken teeth as he approached.

“Hi ya, hon. One milk, one package cookies, and one piece of cake. Not too healthy, hon. One twenty-five.”

Alex watched her take the dollar and quarter off his tray and reminded himself about the seventy-five cents he had in his pocket for a soda after school.

“Thanks, hon,” she said absently as he walked away from the register with his tray, his eyes searching around the vast room for any signs of Tom or his crew. They would probably let him sit with them. His eyes scoured the busy cafeteria, but could not find them anywhere. He knew he had been standing by the register too long as he began to feel the eyes of some of the other students on him. Panicking, he quickly walked over to an empty table and sat down just to be rid of the

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pressure of trying to find someone to sit with. The table he chose was over by one of the large windows that looked out onto the recess yard where some of the kindergarten kids were busy playing. He watched them with mild interest before focusing his attention on his food. It turned out that he was actually hungrier than he had originally thought as he tore into his cookies like they were the last morsel of food on the planet. He gulped down a big swallow of milk and took another cookie from the package of three he had bought when he felt someone staring at him. No, that wasn't right. It was more than one person, it felt like about three hundred, and it had suddenly become quiet, really quiet.

He began to sweat, a cold dewdrop that started under his arm and slowly trickled its way down his side.

Now what did I do?

"Alex Harrison," a painfully familiar voice said. "It seems that our paths continue to cross, quite convenient for me, not so for you. This is *our* table. Get up."

Alex didn't want to look up, he knew who was standing there and he knew that by inadvertently sitting at her table he had just doubled his beating. He could feel her eyes burning into the back of his neck and wanted nothing more than to be one of those kindergarten kids outside playing, blissfully unaware of how the world worked the older you became. And he was only ten! What was it going to be like when he was in high school? Would he have to cross a minefield to get to class?

"Now, kid, move it!" another voice said impatiently.

He felt like crying, but didn't want to give them the satisfaction. Instead he stood up, being sure to avoid eye contact with them, and slunk away towards another open table on the other side of the cafeteria, hoping that they would just leave him alone. The entire room was watching him now; he could feel their eyes on him. He took a deep breath to try and keep from throwing up and wished desperately that he could turn into that seagull he saw flying this morning or that boat that

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was sailing across the ocean, or even that homeless man who seemed to have something he wanted to share. However, his wishes never came true.

Alex should have seen it coming, but didn't. The trip, the push, the spilled tray, and the mess that resulted were all things he had been through before, although that didn't make it any more bearable this time around. As he gathered himself, absently brushing at the milk that had stained his shirt while trying to ignore the raucous laughter that had broken out when he hit the floor, he noticed something was different, something was wrong, something wasn't working.

His arm.

He looked over at his left arm and saw that his wrist was twisted and contorted into a position that human bones weren't supposed to be in, not unless they were broken. He didn't feel the pain right away, but when he saw the broken limb, the hot, searing pain that came with the realization of a broken bone flooded in upon him quickly. He instinctively grabbed for his wounded arm as the tears began to flow freely, not simply because of the pain alone, which was bad enough, but because they were still standing over him, and they were laughing at him. He wondered how someone could enjoy, let alone relish, the fact that another person was in pain, pain that they themselves had caused. But that wasn't even the worst of it.

The elderly lunch woman saw what had happened and was shouting something at his blonde attacker, but she either didn't hear her, or didn't care. Most likely the second. She was too busy kicking him in the ribs and shouting loudly at him, cursing at him and laughing at him before Principal Tompkins finally pulled her off.

Alex lay face down on the cafeteria floor, mortified beyond belief and nursing a broken wrist. His spilled milk and cookies were a brown mush on the floor and part of his face was in it. There were people who saw him go down initially and those were the people he hated the most.

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Surely they had seen his arm buckle and crack as he tried to brace himself, surely someone could have at least stopped her from kicking him when he was down, but no one had, and he could never forgive them that. Oceanview was just like all the other towns before it, cruel and indifferent. The same way the world was, and he was being beaten up by it, just like the homeless man had been.

One of the school nurses came rushing over after the girl had been restrained by Principal Tompkins. She was followed closely by Marilyn who still wore a concerned look on her face, but now it was focused on Alex's wrist, not his mental state. He almost felt like asking Tompkins if he still thought his file was amusing. As the two women led him out of the cafeteria, he saw something that he had never seen before, something that actually restored some of his faith in Oceanview Elementary. Tom, Joe, Mikey, and Stevie had become engaged in a fight with the blonde girl and her friends, and were being just as merciless to them as they had been to him.

They're standing up for me! He cradled his shattered arm in close to his chest. *They are fighting for me. Maybe they actually want to be friends...*

He desperately wanted to see the outcome of the fight, wanted to see the girl and her friends beaten as badly as he was, but Principal Tompkins was already breaking it up, shouting at both groups that were involved.

Alex looked down at his wrist which had immediately begun to swell up, not a good sign, judging from the look on Marilyn's face.

"Come on, honey, we're going to take you to the hospital and get you all fixed up. Just stay calm, all right?"

He was anything but calm. He couldn't focus on anything because the tears that stained his face had blurred everything into one giant smudge. He could tell, however, that the bone had broken through the skin because the students were yelling and muttering uncomfortably as

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he passed by. Alex listened to them with his head hung low.

“Oh my God. Look at that kid’s arm!” one said.

“I bet they have to cut it off,” another added. “My dad said that his brother had to have his arm cut off...”

Alex ignored them and allowed Marilyn to lead him to the nurses office where he would have to wait for the ambulance to take him to the hospital. Through all the pain and embarrassment though, one thought continued to race through his head, one thought that should never have found its way into his fragile mind, let alone stick there.

What did he want to tell me? What did that homeless man want?

CHAPTER 6

“What are you smiling about back there?” Farrell asked, peering into the rearview mirror with concerned almost nervous eyes. “Something amusing about being a junkie that the rest of us don’t get?”

Tony smiled and replied in a quiet manner.

“Nothing special, Jimmy, just thinking back on the old days. You remember them, don’t you? The old days?”

Farrell knew exactly what Tony was talking about, but let it slide, focusing on the radio instead.

“What do you say we listen to some music, huh?” he said, flipping on the car stereo and pushing one of the preprogrammed channels. The Rolling Stones “*Gimme Shelter*” came on and he cringed, provoking another smile from Tony.

“What’s wrong, Jimmy, something familiar about this song? Does it strike a chord with you?” he asked menacingly, his drugged eyes suddenly sharp and clear.

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Farrell shook his head, "I don't think so, should it?"

"It damn well should, you son of a bitch! Don't you tell me you don't remember this. And don't tell me you've done all you can for me, because if this is all you can do, then I should have left your sorry ass back there in the jungle to die. I bled for you, and so did all the others. They died out there in that mess! And you want to know why? Do you?"

"For God and country, right? I know the story, Tony. I was there remember?"

Tony ignored him. "Do you know why? Because I've given this a lot of thought over the years. When you don't have anything to do but jab yourself in the arm all day with dirty needles and hope that it's enough junk to kill you, it tends to give you plenty of time to think about the past. *Our* past Jimmy, yours and mine. And you know what I've been thinking about? You know what I've finally been able to figure out after all these years?"

Farrell tensed up, perhaps sensing what was coming next, or growing angry because of the tone in which he was being spoken to. He slowed the car down and growled while looking at Tony in the rearview mirror.

"What? What have you been thinking about, Tony? Tell me. I really want to know. But before you do, tell me something else first. Tell me why you won't leave town. Tell me why you shoot twenty bucks worth of smack into your veins every day and then drink yourself to sleep. Tell me why you can't just leave me alone to do my job without having to make me feel guilty every time one of my men picks you up for something. Tell me that! Tell me!"

Tony fell silent in the back seat of the car, a smug smile sitting on his lips.

"You can let me out here. Portland's not that far and I'd prefer to walk anyway, I know the way."

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Farrell jammed the brakes on hard, causing Tony to slide forward in the seat and smash his head against the wire meshing that separated the front seat from the back. He tore open his door, moving with an angry-red face around to the back door, violently pulled it open and yanked him out by his scraggly hair. He removed the handcuffs and forced Tony to look into his face.

“I’m going to drop you off here and that’s it, you got me?”

Tony let his head slump.

“You’ll look at me when I’m talking, God dammit!” Farrell pushed his chin up so they were again face to face. “The next time you come into Oceanview, I’m telling my men to shoot you dead. I don’t care if you’re on the beach collecting seashells or selling smack, you’re dead. I don’t care what anyone else says about you. You’re a loser and a bum and the only reason those men died back there is because you didn’t bother to check our rear that day like you were supposed to. You always had to do it your way and look where it got you. You wiped out your entire platoon because you were so damn bull-headed. Now the tables have turned. Your life went straight into the toilet while I worked my ass off to get to this point. You’re in my town now and I make the rules, and right now I only have one rule and that is if I see a junkie, I shoot a junkie.”

Tony watched him with amusement as Farrell worked himself into a small fury before looking past him with distant eyes—old, sad eyes that were searching for something, searching for meaning.

“You know what keeps me up at night the most, Jimmy?” he said suddenly, catching the irate officer off guard. “I can still hear those men screaming and see their blood spilling out from holes the size of baseballs. I see those poor bastards writhing in pain as their life leaked out of them. I must have replayed that day over in my head a million times and you know what I always think about? I think about who was assigned to cover our rear that day. My brain might be shot to shit from

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the drugs I've pumped into it, but I'll never forget that day, Jimmy, never. It was July seventeenth, the thirty-fourth day of our tour together. Which means it was almost the end of our fifth week and the beginning of our sixth."

Farrell nodded grimly, recalling that in the jungle there was little else to do besides count the days and shoot at the ghosts they were fighting.

"There were eight in our platoon including you, and I always covered the rear every seventh day."

Farrell nodded again, remembering.

"I would usually have Washington or someone else who had time in cover the front, leaving the remaining six to watch our flanks for an attack. Now if it was day thirty-four of your tour then that would mean that I wouldn't be covering the rear, where the attack came from. Do you remember the schedule I made you memorize the first day you came into the platoon? The one I made everyone follow?" Tony asked, growing quiet and staring into his eyes, the cold knowledge of years spent figuring out what went wrong finally rushing to a head. "The schedule that everyone in our unit, in all of Cobra Company, kept? You must not have, otherwise we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"What are you talking about? I can't remember the schedules we keep at the station now, let alone twenty years ago!" Farrell yelled.

"Let me refresh your memory then. Platoon leader covers front on day one of the week and rear on day seven. Fresh men cover front on day two and rear on day six. From there it went up in ranking order until it got back to me."

Farrell stood tight-lipped.

"In case you can't add that fast what I said means that no one had our rear that day because someone forgot how to count." Tony shook his head sadly and turned away from Farrell, walking along the shoulder of the highway toward Portland which was a good fifteen

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miles away. Now that he had finally said what he had wanted to all these years, maybe a few days of being clean wouldn't be so bad after all. He'd held in his anger and blame for far too long, burying it under layers of cocaine and heroin. He felt like he'd been given a clean slate; maybe now he could die without a guilty conscience.

From behind him he heard Farrell cursing, but not at himself, as he should have been for neglecting his duty, but at Tony.

"You just show your face in town once more and I'll make sure you're never found. You got me? And if you don't believe me, just try me! Just try me!"

Tony wanted to say more about what else had gone wrong, but when he turned around, all he saw a cloud of dust spilling out from underneath the patrol car's tires, a plume of dirt, and debris that spread across the road, blurring his view of Sheriff James Farrell.

Gimme Shelter. Haven't heard that one in a while.

* * *

"...it's just a shout away, it's just a shout away..."

Farrell turned the radio down with a sharp twist of the knob, making the song barely audible while keeping his eyes focused on the rearview mirror. He wanted to make sure Tony didn't turn around and start walking back into town. If he even took one step in the direction of Oceanview, he would shoot him dead. Fortunately for him, Tony didn't make a move toward town, instead he merely hunched his shoulders and ambled away toward Portland. It would take him the rest of the day and then some to walk it, unless he hitched, which he almost certainly would. Just to be sure, he'd call the clinic in Portland tonight to make sure he showed up and didn't try to sneak back into town under the cover of darkness.

Thirty-fourth day. What the Hell was he talking about? How could anyone remember what day that was? Days in the jungle all blended together, no matter how hard you tried to keep track. Christ, his drug

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filled head was so full of holes he probably had no idea what he was even talking about.

Still though, there was something about that fateful day that Farrell could never forget, and the more he thought about it, the more he let the past creep back into his mind. A past that made him go cold, cold with fear.

"...if I don't get some shelter, oh yeah, I'm gonna fade away..." the radio softly hissed.

* * *

His breath came in short rasps as his heart pounded. Private Farrell had been running through the slop and mud of a South Vietnamese jungle for almost an hour without seeing anyone. He had gone ahead, following the damned schedule the platoon leader had made him memorize, in search for any enemy activity ahead. His primary duty though, was to provide a warning for the platoon in case there was something there.

There's nothing out here but mosquitoes and rats and rain. He swatted at a large blood-sucker on his arm. Just because I'm new to the platoon doesn't mean that I'm a slave. I should march right back there and tell Sergeant Hawthorne exactly how I feel.

From somewhere just over the small rise in front of him, Farrell heard low mumbling and the faint sound of a radio crackling to life, sputtering, and finally going dead. This was followed by animated sounds of other voices, foreign voices. He dropped to the ground immediately, crawling on his stomach like he was taught to at boot camp, hearing his heart hammering in his head like a bass drum as he moved. He was new to the platoon and this was his first *real* combat situation. He hadn't proven himself to the others yet and viewed this as a chance.

Farrell eased his way silently up the hillside until he could view what was going on below him. He froze as the strange, musical tongue

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of the Vietnamese floated up to him. He could see a small, makeshift camp spread out over thirty feet, haphazardly arranged with squat green tents in the center and low burning fires around the outside to keep the bugs off them. There were about a dozen or so men, all of them Vietcong, fumbling about with weapons and other military gear. Gear, he noticed, that looked like it had been taken from Americans. He felt his anger surge as he pictured these men prying weapons out of the dead hands of his brothers in arms.

One man stood up suddenly and shouted something that Farrell couldn't understand, but it was apparently very important because each man loaded his weapon and stopped talking. A stifling tension filled the air that hadn't been there only seconds earlier. Did they see him? Maybe they heard him crawling up the hill? A thousand possible scenarios played themselves out in his mind before he saw that the man who had spoken was fiddling with the radio while cursing it in a combination of broken English and Vietnamese. He smiled and thought to himself that no matter what language you spoke, shit still meant shit.

The radio operator shouted something else and then pushed the radio aside, picking up a rifle and moving it closer to him before returning his focus to the inoperative hand radio he was desperately trying to repair. Tiny wires were sticking out everywhere, each one ending in a severed connection. It appeared to be beyond saving.

Farrell had seen all he needed to and made his way back down the hill silently, sliding like a serpent across the rotting vegetation that littered the jungle floor. He had to get back to his platoon and warn them about the danger ahead when he suddenly had a bad feeling.

Ahead. Why do I have the feeling that I'm not supposed to... He pushed the thought out of his mind.

Once he was certain he was out of earshot, he stood up and began running back in the direction he had just come. All the while though, something was gnawing at him, something that he had forgotten, or

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was forgetting.

“No time for that crap now,” Farrell muttered to himself. “Just get back to the platoon and pass along the information. Do your job.”

He ran faster and faster, not because he was afraid of what was waiting behind him, but because he was starting to remember part of what it was he had forgotten. His stomach caved as he could hear Sergeant Hawthorne’s commanding voice ringing in his ears as he ran.

“Everyone has one day up front and one day out back each week. I always take the last rear duty of the week, and always the first front one. Then the “Greeny,” er, new guy. After that it goes by seniority, Washington, then Wilkes, then...”

His voice droned on in his mind as he listed the names of the small platoon until he had finished. He then spoke directly to Farrell as if he were a child.

“That means that tomorrow is your day, Farrell. I want you to bring up the rear. There shouldn’t be anything back there, but it will give you a chance to get a little more comfortable walking the trail alone for a stretch.”

He had nodded then, listening to “*Gimme Shelter*” with the others while stoned on some cheap weed that Washington, a giant, wiry black man who was on his third tour with Farrell, had bought in the last village they passed through.

“Yeah, I gotcha, Sarge,” Farrell slurred through bleary eyes.

Suddenly, it hit him.

The rear! I was supposed to watch the rear! Maybe if he just told Tony that he forgot—no, tell him that he had followed the enemy to their current location. They had circled the platoon and he had followed them. Yeah, tell him that.

“I said, do you get that, private?” Hawthorne barked.

“Yeah, I get it.”

But Farrell didn’t get it, in fact, he blew it. He was taking the front

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guard today, which meant that there was someone else along the trail up here with him, but no one in the rear for coverage. Since he had been up earlier than the rest of the men, he would be ahead of whoever was actually supposed to be covering the front.

Shit, shit, shit.

Even as he thought this, Farrell rounded a bend in the trail and almost knocked Washington over. He recovered, training his rifle on him as a look of surprise spread across Washington's face.

"Farrell? What the hell are you doing up here? You have the rear today! When I tell Hawthorne, he's gonna shit..."

But he didn't let Washington finish, he didn't want to be told he was wrong, that he screwed up, that the new guy was an idiot. So instead he lied.

"I followed them from a trail behind us," Farrell breathed heavily, pretending to be more tired than he really was. "Long trail, but once I saw where they were headed I knew I had to get back. Thank God you're here."

Washington eyed him warily and then peered over his shoulder to see what was behind him.

"What are you talking about? Followed who, the VC?"

"Of course, the VC! Who else would be out here in this shit? We've got to tell Sarge right away."

Washington nodded, still not believing him but having no choice.

"Well?," Farrell asked. "Are we going to tell him or what?"

"Huh? Yeah, yeah, come on," Washington said as they ran back double-time to the platoon. Every now and then Washington would shoot him a look that doubted his story, but Farrell ignored it and just put his head down and ran harder. By the time they reached the others, both men were out of breath.

Tony listened attentively as Farrell told his fabricated tale about following a convoy of Vietcong that were circling behind them along

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one of the other trails. Tony raised his eyebrows skeptically. He didn't buy it either, but he couldn't prove otherwise and wasn't going to risk his men's lives on something that he just didn't want to believe. He scratched his chin before finally giving the order to move out. Everyone quickly and methodically packed up their gear in silence, breaking down the tiny camp they had set up in a few short minutes. They filed in and headed back toward the hillside camp he had discovered where almost everyone but himself and Sergeant Anthony Hawthorne would meet their end. Of course, they didn't know it then, none of them did.

After they had left, the half-dozen Vietcong who had been hiding in the tall reeds behind their small camp fanned out, knowing exactly where they were going and knowing that they had no idea that they were being followed. If only Farrell had followed orders.

* * *

"Goddamn you, Tony," Farrell yelled, pounding the steering wheel with his hand. "You had to go and dig around in the past didn't you? Shit. If I knew they were there—if I knew, don't you think..."

He started to choke up, but fought back the tears.

It's not my fault, never was. He just wants to blame me for his mistake. He should have been covering the rear, not me. He knew that I wasn't ready for it yet, not on my own. He knew it. God I hate him.

Tony's face was contorted in pain, but not by any type of physical pain. This was mental, which was always much worse. He let his hand slide down to the revolver resting comfortably on his right hip. Its power coursed through him and he felt a little better. He sighed and quickly pulled his hand away from the weapon.

Too much violence, far too much.

The car drove on while he stared blankly out the window. He passed the elementary school on his right before turning off and heading back to the police station where a big cup of strong coffee was

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needed and maybe later on, a few beers to erase the day's memory. An ambulance was pulling away from the school as he drove by, and Farrell nonchalantly switched on his police radio to see what had happened.

Maria's voice, the police headquarters' dispatch, crackled on, "...broken wrist. Yes. Alexander Harrison, age 10. Yeah, we're trying to contact his parents now..."

He reached down and switched it off. Some kid with a broken wrist was hardly worth his while. Everything appeared to be under control anyway. He had more important matters to attend to, like what he was going to do with Tony when he tried to sneak back into Oceanview, which Farrell knew he was going to do. No matter what Farrell might have said or thought, they both knew that he couldn't kill Tony. But what else was he supposed to do?

CHAPTER 7

Alex lay in the back of the ambulance nursing his arm. The sirens had been turned off as a broken wrist was hardly a serious injury, no matter how he felt about it. Marilyn had sent the other nurse to get Jennifer, and she had come running immediately to his side to ride along with him in the ambulance. Jennifer's face was lined with worry, showing him that she was concerned and scared for him, not just because of the broken wrist, but because of how he had got it. Once Alex was in her care though, he felt safer. He watched her thank and then dismiss Marilyn back to the school to find out what had started the fight in the first place. He was still scared, but just having her there made everything feel a little better. Also with them in the ambulance was an EMT who had applied a splint to his arm. It was designed to brace his arm and protect it from any bumps that might occur along the way to Portland Municipal Hospital, the nearest pediatric facility, which was really a satellite branch located just outside of town.

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Alex sat quietly, complacent after the ordeal in the cafeteria with his lanky, silver-toothed, blonde-haired attacker. He knew that she was going to receive a serious reprimand from Principal Tompkins, maybe even a suspension, but all that would really do would be to add fuel to the burning fire within her. Once she returned to school, it would only be a matter of time before he wound up back in the nurse's office, the hospital, or worse. But Alex didn't want to think about that right now, instead he looked down curiously at his arm which was numb but throbbing dully from the wrist up. The pain was tolerable, which surprised him. He had always assumed a broken bone was a much more traumatic event—a belief he guessed had been implanted by hours spent watching gangster movies on TV where the characters always wound up having arms or legs broken. They always screamed and howled like the pain itself was enough to kill them. All Alex felt was a powerful embarrassment because he had cried.

"Alex, are you okay, honey? You seem a little quiet," Jennifer said, startling him slightly.

He looked up from his arm to her round smooth face and smiled feebly.

"I'll be all right, I think. It just feels weird, that's all."

"And it will until we can get it set at the hospital," the EMT said, checking the splint for the third time.

He was a plump man in his early thirties dressed entirely in loose white clothing and, Alex noticed, his eyes had barely even seen him yet. He was focusing his attention instead on the young psychiatrist who was along for the ride.

"Is-is he your son?" he suddenly asked awkwardly.

Jennifer had seen this coming and winked at Alex before answering.

"Who? This little man? No, he's my boyfriend," she replied, smiling and taking his good hand into her own. "Aren't you, honey?"

Alex couldn't keep from laughing and the plump gentleman snorted

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in disgust, realizing she was making fun of his advances.

“Well, we’re almost there, so if you could contact your boyfriend’s mommy and let her know what’s happened, we would feel much better about admitting him.

They both stopped smiling when he said that and Alex stared at him through hate-filled eyes. Obviously this man couldn’t know that his real mother was dead, but saying something like that to him only made the dull pain in his arm spread throughout his body and into his heart. He felt heavy and empty all at once.

“His mother is dead, you asshole,” Jennifer said, the anger in her voice surprising him as well as herself.

The EMT’s face immediately flushed a bright crimson.

“I-I’m sorry, kid. I had no idea. I-I’m sorry.”

Alex nodded at the clumsy man as he fumbled through an apology. Jennifer was furious with the EMT, but Alex looked at her and smiled and she calmed down a little. He knew she cared about him and his dad, and she knew that they both cared deeply about her, but Jennifer also knew that she could never be Alex’s real mother no matter how hard she wanted or tried. It might have been strange, but that made him love her all the more.

Alex was smiling as he thought about his mother when he absently peered over Jennifer’s shoulder and out the rear window of the ambulance. His eyes scanned a lonely stretch of road that was expanding behind them, thin yellow lines that stretched endlessly, when he suddenly did a double-take and sat up. Walking along the shoulder of the road, looking even sadder and more haggard than before was the homeless man who had been arrested outside of the school this morning. How he managed to travel so far on foot in such a short period of time was amazing.

“*Maybe someone picked him up.*” Alex gazed intently at the strange man shuffling along.

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The homeless man still wore dirty pants and ruddy shirt as he paced solemnly down the road, but his mind seemed to be elsewhere. He seemed like he had something he wanted to say, but couldn't find the right words for it. As if sensing other eyes on him, the man glanced up, just as the ambulance began to take a left turn into the hospital. Their eyes met again, and once more Alex could feel the man's sadness and isolation, yet at the same time a burning need to share something, feelings that he himself was very familiar with. However, he also saw something else, something that seemed to be screaming out to him with importance, a warning maybe, or a threat. Alex couldn't tell what it was, but there was something there that he was supposed to get from this man, something extremely important. He couldn't explain it; he could just feel it. It wasn't something tangible, but rather something in his gut that told him this, a primal instinct, a deep feeling that compelled him to watch. The man opened his mouth and appeared ready to say something when the ambulance slowed down and began to turn away preventing him from seeing what he had been trying to say. Just before he lost sight of him, Alex saw his face expand in surprise as he craned his neck around suddenly to look behind him. At the same time everyone inside the ambulance heard the horrible screaming of rubber tires on hot asphalt and then watched as the man was catapulted into the air, struck by a passing car.

"He's been hit!" Alex heard himself shouting over Jennifer's voice, who had been still giving the EMT an earful before they heard the tires. He pointed with his one good arm out the back window to where the car that had struck him had stalled and was now struggling to turn around in the middle of the road, causing the on-coming traffic to spin wildly off the road to avoid it. Finally the engine caught and the car sped off in the opposite direction in a cloud of searing rubber, a giant dent from where the automobile had struck the man shone clearly in the afternoon sun . Jennifer was the first to react.

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“Stop! Stop the ambulance, that man’s been hit!”

The EMT snapped out of the lull of rejection he had been dwelling in and slapped twice on the wall behind the driver’s side. A panel in the wall slid open and a tough sounding voice spoke.

“What? We’re just waiting for a van to move out of the way...”

“No, stop right now! Some guy on the roadside was just hit by a car.”

“What?”

“He was hit. Call it in and help me!”

The vehicle stopped short and spun around, heading back the way it had just come. Alex could hear the woman’s baritone voice on the radio speaking to the hospital.

“...approximately middle-aged man. Struck by automobile traveling northbound. We’re on it, but send out a black and white to follow up on this one.”

Within a few minutes they were back at the shoulder where he had seen the man get hit. A few people who also saw the accident had stopped and were calling out to the paramedics to come over. One man in particular was shouting and waving his arms wildly. His face was stark white like all the blood had been drained from it. On his tan colored shirt and light pants was enough blood to explain why he looked the way he did. He was frantic and seemed about to pass out from what he was looking at, yet he refused to move away from the dying man on side of the road.

The rear doors snapped open and the EMT jumped out, carrying a black metal box that looked like a tool box with him. He was met immediately by two others from the front seat and together they rushed into the scrubby weeds that grew just off the roadside to administer aid. He could hear other emergency vehicles arriving and began to wonder again who this man really was. Was it just a coincidence that he had seen him twice in the same day? Where had he been walking to? But

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the question he really wanted to know the answer to was, “*What was he trying to tell me?*”

The EMT ran back over to them and spoke slowly and clearly to Jennifer, explaining that because of the circumstances time was of the essence and he was going to have to move Alex out to make room for the injured man. Jennifer nodded and helped him to his feet, then down the short steps in the rear of the ambulance and onto the ground where a sizable crowd had gathered, some offering help, others merely there observing, open mouthed and horrified. For some reason, seeing an accident or injury always drew a crowd, the same way being picked on by a bully did. Alex often wondered if it was because of the human compulsion to help others in need or because of the human desire to *see* others in need. He thought it was probably the latter rather than the former.

More vehicles arrived on the scene, police cars and ambulances blocking traffic on Route 9, the only major highway into and out of Oceanview. After speaking rapidly into his radio, a young officer stepped out from his cruiser to take control of the situation. He held his arms up and spoke in a voice that only a policeman or Army sergeant could possess.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a situation here and I would like your cooperation. If everyone could please return to your vehicles and be on your way, we can do our jobs much more efficiently.”

No one moved and he repeated himself, his voice raising an octave.

“Again, everyone please return to your automobiles and be on your way.”

He repeated the same two lines over and over for about five minutes before the crowd finally began dispersing, wandering back to their cars and slowly driving off, most though, still peering back to catch one last look at the bloody scene they had just been a part of.

Once the majority of them had left, the officer motioned to the

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paramedics that it was now okay to move the injured man. On a white board stained red with blood, the homeless man was carried toward the ambulance Alex had just voluntarily vacated. He didn't look good, in fact, he looked dead. Alex could see it in the faces of the people who were carrying him; they were staring down at him like were staring at a corpse, not a man.

They passed by so closely that both Jennifer and Alex were able to get a good look at the strange man. He was just as unsightly up close as he was from afar with scraggly, thin hair on his head and oily half-bearded stubble on his face. The rest of him was covered up with a white sheet which was a sickly looking wet red color that was getting darker and wetter as precious seconds ticked by. They loaded him into the ambulance and inserted an IV into his arm, causing him to jerk his head up in shock from the needle. The man's eyes immediately sought and locked onto his own, making him shiver with fear, but also causing him to again ask himself what was so important about this man that he should feel so close to him. His face was familiar, almost like he was an uncle or an extremely close family friend. Then the man did something very strange, something that only made him seem more familiar. He winked at Alex and smiled, a thin trickle of blood running away from his lips. His eyes moved past Alex and up in the direction of the cove where they widened in fear. Then he fell back on the stretcher and began shaking convulsively.

The doors slammed shut just as this happened and the ambulance sped off toward the hospital, which was only a stone's throw away from the accident scene itself. Already the young officer, whose name tag proclaimed him "Les," was questioning a small group of people that had been declared witnesses. They were being asked to give statements about what they had seen, and Alex felt a slight chill run up his spine as he thought about what he had just seen. In his left hand he held a ballpoint pen and in his right, a small, official looking black notebook,

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the true weapons of the law. Even as he scribbled frantically, he managed to peer up from his note pad long enough to see Alex standing there with Jennifer and nodded. He then abruptly ended the question and answer session before politely thanking and excusing himself from the group of people who had volunteered information.

He walked over to them with an eerie calm about him, a sense of self-worth and satisfaction that didn't sit well with Alex. He hated authority and cockiness, probably because he possessed neither, but he still thought they were bad traits to have. Alex also noticed that the closer the man came, the older he looked. His hair was cut close, tightly cropped and neat looking. At his side was a large revolver and gun belt filled with a multitude of gadgets that could hurt, stun, and even kill a would-be felon. He tipped his hat politely to Jennifer, who reached down and clutched Alex closer, and then spoke in a deep, but friendly voice.

"Hello there, son. How are you doing today?"

Alex looked down at his wrist and then back up at the policeman. Was he serious? How was he?

Realizing his rather foolish error, he quickly corrected himself.

"Looks like you got banged up pretty good there, huh? Were you hit by the same car that hit that guy?" he asked, covering himself and directing the conversation to where he wanted.

Alex shook his head.

"No, huh? Did you see what the car looked like that did hit him?"

He nodded.

The officer pulled out his note pad again and motioned to Jennifer that he wanted a moment alone to speak with her. She complied and bent down to speak with him.

"I'm just going to be over there talking to the policeman, okay? I'll be back in a minute, just stay put and everything's going to be all right. We're going to call Andy...er...your dad as soon as we get to the

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hospital, okay?”

Alex nodded and she rubbed his head with her hand, messing up his hair up in a playful way.

“How’s your wrist?”

“It hurts, but not as much as before. I think that guy needed to get to the hospital more than I did, though.”

Jennifer smiled distractedly as the officer politely interrupted them to begin interrogating her.

They walked about ten feet away from where Alex was standing, just far enough away so that he couldn’t hear what they were talking about, although he could probably guess. He watched as Jennifer nodded her head and answered the policeman’s questions, occasionally shooting a worried glance over at him. At some points Alex was sure the officer believed that he and Jennifer were somehow involved in the accident. The policeman was looking at Jennifer with accusing eyes until he was done asking his questions, then his eyes returned to their earlier friendly look. He handed her a card, wrote a number on the back, and then they walked back over to him together.

“Thanks, buddy,” he said, bending down and shaking Alex’s good hand. “We’ll get the guy who did this, but we might need to talk to you again about what the car looked like. Do you think that would be okay with you?”

Alex looked up at Jennifer who nodded, indicating that it was okay to trust this man, then he looked at the name tag on the police badge again. It read “Lester Worthy.” The more he thought about it, the more certain he was that this was the same policeman who had arrested the homeless man this morning.

“I guess it’s okay, but I think I need to go to the hospital now, my arm really hurts,” he replied warily, cradling his wounded wrist closer to his body.

“Of course, I’m sorry, pardner. Come on, I’ll give you a ride

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myself. You can even sit up front.”

Alex didn't like him, not at all. There was something about him that he didn't trust, something menacing. Maybe it was because he was in a position in power, but he doubted that it was just that. There was something about the way he spoke to him that didn't sit well in his stomach and the fact that he had arrested the same man who was just hit this morning yet didn't seem to recognize him, only made him feel more wary about talking to him.

“Come on, Alex, we need to get your arm looked at,” Jennifer spoke, urging him towards the patrol car. “It looks like it's swollen up even more, maybe if we didn't have to answer questions for ten minutes we could have had it set by now,” she finished, making sure she said the last part loud enough for the officer to hear.

If he heard it, the officer pretended he didn't and opened the door for them. Alex opted to sit in back with her; he felt safer. Turning on his flashing lights, the cop merged into traffic and sped off in the direction of the hospital. Alex saw that Jennifer didn't like him either, even though she tried to hide that fact behind a weak smile. Riding in the back with the metal screen separating the front and back seats he felt like a caged rat and a criminal. Judging from the look on her face, Jennifer felt the same way.

They were at the hospital within a few minutes and as Alex was getting out of the back of the car he saw something on the seat, something he had been sitting on. It was dull bronze in color and he reached back into the car with his good hand and picked up the irregularly shaped skeleton key that was sitting there. He held it in his hand and gazed down it curiously. It had a wide, half-moon shape on one end where it might fit on a key chain and then on the other it tapered off into a ragged set of pointed teeth. It was faded and worn with age, yet seemed to have a certain power to it, an irresistible force that commanded him to possess it. His eyes grew wide with excitement

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just from holding it.

“Alex, honey, you okay?” Jennifer asked, walking over to his side.

Alex quickly stuffed it in into his pants pocket before either she or the policeman saw it and then walked with them to the Emergency Room entrance. It felt strange just having the key in his pocket, but strange in a way that wasn’t necessarily discomfoting. For some reason it made him feel closer to the homeless man, almost as if he had purposefully left it there for him knowing Alex would be in the back seat of the same patrol car later that day. He shivered as he thought of this, it was certainly more than coincidence that Alex saw him twice today and now it felt like there was a further, deeper connection as well. He let his fingers rub over the worn metal in his pocket and thought he felt a strange current of power course through him.

Alex was walking hand in hand with Jennifer when he looked up and saw his father standing in the doorway waiting for them, his face strained with the worry that had been building up in him since he had first been telephoned at work. Alex ran over to him as soon as he saw him and hugged him tightly, as if by his sheer love and concern he could mend his shattered bone. She had managed to stay composed, but upon seeing the love exhibited by her husband, Jennifer finally dropped her tough facade and let the tears come. Tears of concern, of worry, of love, but mostly because she was sorry. She knew, Alex was sure, what had happened in the cafeteria, how his wrist had been injured and she felt bad for putting him, the closest thing to a son she had, in that position. He reached his unbound arm out wide and hugged both her and his father back and then stopped to tap her on the shoulder.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your new boyfriend? You know how jealous I can get.”

She laughed and his father gave him a quizzical look.

Alex let go when he saw one of the nurses approaching, a short rosy woman in her late fifties who, along with a broad, friendly smile, also

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wore a loose-fitting sky-blue sweater and a long, old fashioned white skirt. On her feet, completing the dated outfit, were orthopedic white shoes that made her look like a nurse straight out of the 1960's.

He stifled a laugh and Jennifer elbowed him in the ribs playfully, knowing why he was so amused, before allowing the nurse to take over. She politely introduced herself to Jennifer and his father and began ushering them toward the sliding glass doors that lead into the emergency room.

"And you must be Alex Harrison?" she asked in a friendly, non-threatening manner, that reminded him of every cliché he had ever heard about nurses. "I'm Abigail Monroe, but most people here call me Abbey. Now what do we have here, a broken wrist?"

Alex nodded, looking down at his broken appendage.

"Not too bad. We'll have the doctor fix you right up. Don't worry one bit."

Alex still had to struggle to repress a giggle as she poked and prodded at his arm, all the while still chatting away and leading him inside. Once there, she continued on with her little speech about his wrist and how everything was going to be fine, a phrase that obviously wasn't true as thus far everything was anything *but* okay. His wrist was still broken and he was still in pain, not to mention that he had just seen a man get run over by a car. Still though, she was nice and meant well, so Alex allowed himself to be led through the waiting room by her plump hand, her voice a nonstop procession of outdated words and old-fashioned sayings, most of them about herself.

"Doctor says my arthritis gets worse when it's cold out. Like I didn't know that!"

He simply grinned and walked on.

Once inside Jennifer immediately analyzed the scene, taking control of the proceedings for Andy by handling the paperwork and insurance information, which would allow him to be with his son the whole time.

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Andy kissed her gently on the cheek and then went over to be with him.

The automatic doors hissed shut behind them and the buzzing sound of the medical personnel busily running about met his ears, along with the whining of different pieces of equipment that were visible. But somehow Abigail Monroe's voice still continued to rise above all of the other sounds. He paused in the waiting area for a second, waiting for Jennifer and his father to catch up with him. Abbey had let go of his hand in order to begin questioning Jennifer about his medical history, allergies, blood type, and other information he didn't know. While he stood there waiting for them, his father had wandered over to help fill in the details that Jennifer didn't know. They held hands while Abbey wrote down every word they said.

What a strange day it's been. Broken wrist, car crashes, what's next?

His answer came soon enough as he heard a doctor shouting for aid in a nearby room to his left. He slowly drifted over toward him, drawn by an unseen force which compelled him. He saw that the man yelling was covered in blood, his blue smock stained red with blotches of someone's vital fluid. Beyond him he could see into the room where there were several doctors and even more nurses scampering around a table with a man on it. He seemed to be in some sort of trouble, dying maybe, but not quite ready to give up yet. Alex thought back to the homeless man, the one who had winked at him, and realized that the man dying on the table was the same man. The greasy beard, the scraggly hair, even the ragged pants indicated that the man he was looking at was undoubtedly the same one Alex had just seen get hit. Suddenly, the man's arm twitched, and one of the doctor's shouted again for something while a whining noise sounded from somewhere inside the room. Amidst the confusion, one of the nurses saw Alex standing outside the doorway staring in at the dying man's fight with death and ran over to shut the door, at the same time motioning for

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Abbey to get inside as her services were needed before pulling the door closed tightly behind her.

Abbey handed the clipboard she had been holding to one of the other admissions personnel and raced past Alex, opening the door into the room where all the confusion was. “Got to go, Alex. You’ll be okay though,” she smiled, then turning to address his parents. “Mrs. Harrison, ask for Jill. She’s my assistant. She’ll finish getting you guys checked in.”

“I want an IV drip now. Clear the room except for essential personnel...” Her voice trailed off as the door slammed shut in front of him, sending a clipboard that had been hanging there onto the floor.

Alex was amazed at the transformation she had just undergone in front of his eyes. One minute she was as sweet as someone’s grandmother, the next she was a battle hardened warrior prepared to take control. Abigail Monroe was definitely a strong woman.

He blinked once and thought hard to himself.

Will he live? I have to at least find out who he is. There has to be more than chance involved in this. I just know it.

Alex walked over to the door and picked up the chart that had fallen when the nurse had slammed it shut. From inside he could hear Abbey’s voice, strong and loud, shouting orders at the other nurses while the doctors tried to save the man’s life. He read the chart. There were some doctor’s notes just above the section marked *name*.

“Man identifies himself as Anthony Hawthorne, U.S. Army? No ID? Until further proof list as is”

“He’s in the Army?” Alex asked out loud as Jennifer called for him.

“Come here, Alex, and put that down. It belongs to the doctors. They are going to fix your wrist up now, okay?”

He nodded distractedly and walked over to her. His wrist still throbbed, but his mind was on the soldier dying in the room not ten feet from where he stood. His mind was on Sergeant Anthony Hawthorne,

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the homeless man, the victim, the criminal, the man who seemed to have a secret he had wanted to share with him, a secret that he would, if he lived.

CHAPTER 8

It took the doctor less than ten minutes to set his wrist and an additional ten to wrap it in the wet plaster that would harden it into a cast. The only part that really hurt was the initial setting, where Alex could actually hear his fragmented bones grinding against each other before locking into place. His father and Jennifer stood by him the whole time, watching his face for any sign of pain.

“And that’s it,” the weary doctor announced from behind his thick glasses. “You’re going to have to keep this on for about three months to make sure it heals properly. It was a bad break, but it looked a lot worse than it actually was.” He stripped off a pair of white plastic gloves he had been wearing and washed his hands. “When it breaks through the skin like that, it can tend to be messy. You should really spend a few days in bed too, just to let your wrist set properly and get some rest. I’ll write up a note if your school requires it, of course.”

Alex looked down at his left arm now encased in the smelly white

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plaster up to his elbow. It had already begun to harden, making the throbbing in his wrist start up again. His father thanked the doctor, who had already pulled another pair of gloves onto his hands in preparation for the next patient. He handed Jennifer his card, pointed out his phone number, and told her the hours he would be available in case of an emergency. They thanked him again and the doctor left, making his way down the hallway to mend other broken bones.

“Well, I guess this little adventure is finally over.” Jennifer looked down at her watch. “It’s almost four o’clock. Andy, you should really get back to work. I can take Alex home.”

His father looked from Alex to Jennifer, smiling broadly with relief for having both people he cared most in the world right there with him safely in one piece.

“You’re sure?” Andy asked, knowing Jennifer was more than capable of doing so.

“Andy. You need to get back there and you know you do. You’re already going to be behind and we don’t want you working eighteen-hour days again. It just isn’t worth it.”

He nodded, remembering the not so distant days when he did work that long.

“Don’t worry about us. I think Alex and I wanted to take a drive around town anyway. Didn’t we, honey?”

Alex grinned widely and nodded.

“Well, okay, but we’re going to have dinner together tonight, so don’t run off anywhere, all right, sport?” Andy gave Alex a light punch on the shoulder.

Andy leaned over and kissed him on the forehead then stood and whispered something to Jennifer before giving her a longer kiss on the mouth, his lips lingering on hers for what seemed an eternity. Alex still wasn’t used to his dad kissing anyone but his mom, but he didn’t mind so much as long as it was Jennifer. Andy smiled at her and whispered

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something else that made her smile and blush slightly before he winked again at Alex and went out the door, heading back to work.

Jennifer stooped down so she could look him in the face.

“You know you don’t have to go to school tomorrow. I’ll get a note from the doctor myself. I’ll also make sure Leslie doesn’t pick on you anymore.”

Leslie. Her name is Leslie. Alex rubbed his arm, remembering the events of the day.

“Mrs. Harrison, make sure he stays at home tomorrow and rests. I can get his note for you,” a nurse who was present said as she moved out the door and into the hallway. “I have to go now, but I can fax the note over to the school for you first thing tomorrow morning.”

Jennifer thanked the nurse and handed her one of her cards that had her phone and fax number at Oceanview Elementary on it.

They both watched as the nurse disappeared down the hall and into one of the side doors where another crisis seemed to be occurring. Jennifer looked down at Alex through tired eyes; she was emotionally spent.

“Come on, sport, let’s get some ice cream.”

Alex instantly perked up, not only because they were getting ice cream, but because she had called him sport, the same nickname his father always called him. Sometimes the smallest things were the most important to him, and he felt closer to her now than he ever had before. Together, they started down the hallway toward the exit. As Alex passed the door where Sergeant Hawthorne had been, he tried to picture in his head what the man might have been like when he was younger, when he wasn’t homeless. Alex imagined that the sergeant was a proud man, someone who was used to getting what he wanted, not through fear, but through respect. Alex saw him in charge of an entire army, protecting a fortress against impossible odds. He saw him fighting a battle he couldn’t possibly win, but had to try regardless, for honor’s

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sake. He wasn't like any of the heroes or captains he read about in books or saw on TV, he was the real thing. Oddly though, Alex also imagined him being lonely, burdened perhaps because of something he knew. Then he thought of the key in his pocket and wondered even more.

The door was still closed and the lights inside the room were off as they walked by. Alex looked over and saw that the chart on the door now said "Eric Gale". They must have moved him, or he was dead. Either way Alex was pretty certain he would never get a chance to meet the mysterious Sergeant Hawthorne, and that meant that he would never know what was the secret the man had wanted to share with him. None of that mattered right now though. Walking hand in hand with Jennifer, he didn't even care.

* * *

Tony awoke underneath a flood of fluorescent lights, the same kind he remembered laying under in a hospital in Laos twenty years earlier. The only difference was that then he had been shot, simple entry and exit wounds that the medics easily found and patched up. This time he knew he was in worse condition, not because of the hospital or the doctors, but because he could feel his entire body throbbing as if he were completely broken. He felt like a child's doll that had been dropped to the floor. He was uncomfortable lying on his back and tried to roll over which sent shooting pains into his back and sides that immediately planted him back to where he lay. He could hear some movement from his right side and tried to shift his eyes in that direction.

"You are certainly a resilient one, aren't you?" a cold, familiar voice spoke. "You couldn't just die when you were supposed to. Instead you make me come all the way down here to finish the job."

"I knew it would be you," Tony replied, trying to free one of his arms to defend himself, "Only you would come when I couldn't defend

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myself.

"I should hope you would know I was coming. *I* certainly knew it would be me." The man laughed, a cruel, emotionless laugh. "I told you that you should never have gotten involved in the first place, but you did anyway. There are forces at work here that you can never understand, not with your drug-addled brain. Now, give me the key," the voice finished.

"I don't have it. It's gone."

"Gone indeed. The boy has it then?"

"What boy?"

He laughed again.

"You never were any good at lying, Tony, especially to me. You shouldn't have involved him, he's just a kid. Now I have to take care of him as well."

"He's just a boy," Tony hissed.

"I know, but a boy who is now involved thanks to you. I'm sorry, Tony."

Suddenly Tony was blinded as a pillow was placed over his face. He struggled feebly against his attacker, but possessed no strength in his current condition to save himself.

Smothered.

Tony knew this would be his end. He knew that doing what he did was a mistake, getting involved had killed him just as he always thought it would, but now he had someone else's blood on his hands as well, that of the boy. This was to be his penance for all the years he had kept his secret, but he never wanted the boy to get involved. Slowly, peacefully, Tony's struggles ceased and his convulsions stopped. Slowly, peacefully, he drifted away from the hospital, away from the fluorescent lights, away from his transient existence, away from Oceanview, away from mortality and most importantly, away from the cove. His fear had gone and he actually felt happiness, a good, clean

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happiness, fill his body. Then Tony Hawthorne died.

As soon as the monitors began whining, indicating that Tony's pulse had ceased, the killer removed the pillow and placed it on the bed next to him. Leaning in close to his face, he spoke one last time.

"I told you I would find you, you bastard."

As the man turned to leave, he paused and reached into Tony's soiled and torn pants which were folded neatly on a chair next to his bed. Fumbling around in one of the pockets, he found what he was looking for, a key ring. He stared at the shiny object for a moment and suddenly his face grew tight with anger; it was empty. There were no keys on it. He stared in disbelief at the emblem of the Army engraved onto a piece of metal that was dangling loosely on it. The key was missing and the only other person who could have it was the boy. It would still be his in a matter of time.

Putting it into his pants pocket, he coolly walked out of the room, brushing past a plump nurse who looked him directly in the eye as he passed. Not a good sign—for her. "Abigail Monroe, Sr. Nurse," her plastic name tag read. He would have to come back to see to it that his face wasn't remembered.

"Sir, excuse me, but you shouldn't be in here with this man. He's very unstable at this point. Are you family or a friend? Sir?"

He put his head down and walked quickly out of the building having accomplished most of his mission. Behind him he could hear the nurse shouting for the doctors. No doctor could save Tony Hawthorne now though. He was as dead as the platoon he led back in Vietnam. All that mattered was that the boss was happy. If he was, then you got paid, if he wasn't, then you got killed. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to get paid for this, but he probably wouldn't be shot either. The nurse was now shouting something else, something that sounded like "security," but he wasn't sure. There was no sense in taking any chances though, so he broke into a light run once he was

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outside, moving quickly but not conspicuously through the parking lot toward his car.

The killer tried to picture the doctor's and nurse's reactions as they entered the room and saw Tony still warm lying dead in his bed. They probably wouldn't even think twice about him, as they shouldn't. He was after all, only a transient, an eye sore that was now gone.

He would have to call Meridian, his boss, with the good news as soon as he got far enough away from the hospital. He had killed Tony Hawthorne and retrieved the key chain, no key, but he knew where it was likely to be found. He was told he would be paid handsomely if he was able to find the long, bronze skeleton key that contained the information they were looking for, information they would sell for even more money.

As the killer pulled out of the parking lot, he saw a police car come racing to a halt in front of the emergency room entrance where the officer met with some of the hospital security guards and the nurse, Abigail Monroe. He didn't have to be able to read lips to know she was describing him to them. Now he would definitely have to pay her a return visit.

* * *

Alex got peppermint stick ice cream, his favorite, and Jennifer got a fat-free frozen yogurt. There was something about fat and calories that Alex didn't quite understand yet. He was bright and observant for his age, but there were an awful lot of things about being a grown-up that he just didn't get, like why you would eat a flavorless yogurt when you could have sweet ice cream instead.

They ate their cones on the drive home, Jennifer talking non-stop about how worried she had been and how his father was going to try and leave the office early to have dinner with them. Overall, he felt special. He felt wanted and he felt loved, things that he had to break a limb in order to feel. Although Jennifer was really smothering him at

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this point, Alex didn't mind, and let her ramble on as they drove up Ridge Road and pulled into the driveway. She put the red Jeep Cherokee in park and walked around to open the door for him, but his dad beat her to the punch.

"Hey, sport, I decided that the work can wait. Hope everyone likes Chinese." Andy scooped Alex out of the front seat like a puppy. His dad was a remarkably strong man for someone who never worked out and rarely ate well, if at all. Because of his long hours, fitness and eating well were two things that never found their way into his schedule. He swung Alex high over his head and plopped him down on to the ground, sighing heavily.

"Andy, what are you doing home? What about work?" Jennifer asked, kissing him on the mouth. He smiled slyly as if to say "You know why I'm home early," before returning his attention to his son.

"All right, now what really happened today, Alex? Marilyn at the school told me you were in a fight? Isn't it a little early to be making enemies here?"

Alex knew the tone of voice that his father was speaking in. It was his "You need to be responsible for your actions," voice and the speech that was sure to follow would be his "I work too hard to have you causing problems at school. Can't you just behave yourself and fit in like the other kids? For our sake?"

Alex hated both speeches intensely, but it was always difficult to listen to because he felt like he was letting them down. It wasn't like he didn't try either. Alex struggled to fit-in, he desperately wanted to, but he couldn't. He just couldn't be what they wanted him to be and his father was trying to bend and twist him into shape nonetheless. It was for his own good, Alex realized, but it still didn't make it any easier. His dad was trying but failing to force his only son to be the star athlete, the straight A student, or at least the popular kid, things that he himself, never was. Unfortunately for Alex and his dad, there were no

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set parameters that he comfortably fit into. Not in Oceanview, probably not anywhere.

“...and we work our fingers to the bone so that you can have everything that we didn’t. Are you even listening to me, sport? I don’t want to be the bad guy here, but you really need to try and stay out of trouble. Do you think you can do that for me?”

Alex nodded, hung his head and pretended to be ashamed of his behavior.

God forbid someone breaks my wrist. He stomped off into the house and headed directly to his room. He would be sent there eventually anyway so he might as well save himself some time.

“Where are you going, sport? I have Chinese food. I’ll get something else if you want...” Alex could hear him calling from behind him, but he was already inside.

Jennifer put her hand on Andy’s shoulder and sighed.

“You have to go easy on him, honey. It’s stressful enough on all of us to be constantly moving not to mention the fight...”

“I know, I know. I just worry about him. I only want him to be happy, and safe.”

Alex ran up the flight of stairs to his bedroom, his eyes filled to the brim with tears of frustration. He wouldn’t let them fall though, he couldn’t; he had already filled his allotment of tears for the day. Alex reached his room and slammed the door shut behind him just as Jennifer and his father entered the house. He made sure to time it that way so they would hear him, then he flopped down on his bed and let it all come out. The tears of embarrassment, the frustration, the fear, the anger, all of it poured out onto his pillow.

After he convinced himself that he couldn’t possibly cry any more, even though he had promised that he wouldn’t cry at all, Alex walked across his room to the window that overlooked the cove and small forest that grew just beyond the reach of the ocean’s waters. The tide

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was low and he could see the dark mud and silt that comprised the sea's floor. He wondered how dark it was down there when the water swept over it; he guessed it was as dark as he felt now. Alex slowly let his eyes rove along the rugged shoreline and up into the forest itself, the setting sun illuminating the trees a fiery orange for him.

The shore contained little of interest to him, but the small forest beyond seemed to draw him to it. It had a bizarre allure that made him gaze longingly at it. The strangely shaped trees and thick cover made it seem so mysterious, and he yearned to explore it. He imagined what adventures he could have up there, in the darkened corners of that grove, what creatures he would see and, most importantly, what was on the top of the hill. Alex also thought of what Tony Hawthorne might have seen in his days as a soldier. Did he ever explore a wilderness like this one? Had he ever imagined he was something else, or someone else? Tomorrow perhaps, if he was able to, he would take a walk down there and examine it up close.

Alex started to draw the blinds when he saw a white flash from somewhere on top of the hillside, deep within the woodland. Just one quick flash, then it was gone. He was wondering if he had imagined it when it happened again, this time repeatedly flashing at him, matching his quickening pulse. He tried to mark where it was on the hillside, struggling to find some landmark by which he could guide himself to it tomorrow. Suddenly, as the sun sank below the hillside he could see what looked like a tiny house set into the hillside itself. It was very far away and all the way at the very peak of the hill, but it was definitely reachable, assuming there were some footpaths for him to travel on. Alex couldn't be sure from this distance, but the house appeared to be made of stone with a large chimney sticking up into the sky like an old bony finger. It was from just below this chimney that he was seeing the light, perhaps from a window, but he couldn't say for sure from this distance. As abruptly as it arrived, the flashing ceased, but not before

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he had been able to mark the stone structure's position by a tall evergreen tree growing just below it. It was rare that an evergreen should grow by itself with no other similar trees nearby and the fact that it stuck out so much made it the perfect landmark. From somewhere to the right of it, someone or something had been flashing a white light and Alex was going to find out who, or what, was responsible for doing it.

He closed the blinds and shuffled back across the room, taking his medication off of his bureau and tossing a pill into his mouth. It tasted terrible, but he hadn't taken one all day and Jennifer had told him to be sure to take at least one each day. Alex forced himself to swallow it and felt it slide down his throat and into his stomach. He walked over to his bed.

As he lay down thinking about the odd house, the greasy smell of the Chinese food drifted its way upstairs and into his room, finally overpowering his frustration and embarrassment and making his stomach rumble with hunger. He would have to eat eventually, but first he thought again of the key in his pocket and slowly removed it. Alex let his fingertips run over it curiously. It looked like an ordinary old key to him, nothing more, yet there was something about it, something that went deeper than appearances. The smell of fried rice overpowered him and his stomach growled in protest. Giving in to his hunger, he placed the key down on his bed stand and stood up to go downstairs when something caught his eye. On one end of the key was a large V. It had been engraved into the key itself and was barely visible as time had worn it down to almost nothing, yet there it was before him now plain as day.

There was a knock at his door. He grabbed the key and hid it under his pillow.

"Alex, honey? Your dad and I want to talk to you. Can we come in?" Jennifer said softly.

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“Sport? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you earlier. I just want you to be as happy as you can and sometimes I forget that I might be pushing you a little too hard,” his father quickly added.

“Hold on,” Alex replied, moving the pillow so that it completely covered the key.

He walked over to the door, pushing aside the unopened boxes that held his toys and books inside and opened it up. They both were standing outside, his dad had his arm around Jennifer’s waist and then he saw something else. There was a ring on her finger, his mother’s wedding ring.

“Alex, there was another reason we wanted to talk to you. Jennifer and I have been married for a little while now and since we are I thought, well, I wanted...I guess...”

Jennifer laughed.

“Andy, I think he sees it.”

“You gave her mom’s ring?” Alex asked, his heart filling with more happiness than he could remember feeling since before his mother had died. It was a strange joy because even though it closed off one part of his past, it also had opened a brand new door for him. It was a curious mix of feelings, the past and the future crashing into each other, but he didn’t mind it at all.

They nodded and his dad had a nervous, goofy grin on his face that only made Alex laugh.

“Sport? Are you okay with this? I know I never really mentioned it to you, but...”

He ran over and hugged both of them tightly, and they hugged back, the unspoken words passing between them making the whole horrible day seem trite by comparison. He was part of a family again.

CHAPTER 9

Alex woke up early the next morning. He was always up early, not because he liked it, but because his dad always made so much noise when he was getting ready.

“Jenny, where are my shoes?”

“Next to the bed, Andy,” Jennifer replied from downstairs in the kitchen where the rich smell of coffee slowly spread its way throughout the house.

“No, they’re not. Are you sure that... Oh wait, you’re right.”

Alex pulled back the covers and got out of bed, walking to the window to gaze curiously down at the cove and the tiny copse of trees. He didn’t know what he expected to see there; he just knew that he had to look. He guessed it was mostly to reassure himself that he wasn’t losing his mind. From the same area in the forest where he’d seen the quick flash of light the previous evening, there now rose faint tendrils of smoke out of a stone chimney. He hadn’t just been seeing things;

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there really was a house at the top of the hill. It was barely visible and obscured heavily by the trees and a light morning mist that had come in from the ocean, but it was there nonetheless.

Alex fumbled around on the bureau for his medication and forced himself to swallow another sour pill, tossing the container onto his bed. The pill went down as slowly as it usually did, and he nearly gagged on it while thinking about the tiny stone house. What made him tingle with curiosity the most was the fact that someone had actually lit a fire at some point during the night, which meant that someone was up there. He watched as the remaining wisps of gray vapor spiraled up into the sky and disappeared.

Again, Alex marked the area in his mind, using the same lone pine tree as a landmark, and then closed the blinds to get ready for breakfast. He carefully pulled his slippers onto his feet and bounded down the stairs two at a time.

“How’s your arm, honey? Still hurt bad?” Jennifer asked while serving up her famous homemade waffles. These had raspberries on top, Alex’s favorite, and he knew immediately why she had made them. They were her “I have to ask you to do something for me,” waffles.

“It doesn’t really hurt all that much anymore. It’s just weird with the cast and all.”

“That’s good to hear, honey,” she replied, then paused. “Alex, I know this has been a bad start for you and you probably feel, well, like it’s unfair. And it is, but this is a new beginning for all of us and, well, today I...”

Alex didn’t let her finish, as she was already struggling with the words as it was.

“Don’t worry about it. Go to work. I’ll be fine.”

Alex had spent more time at home by himself than probably any ten year old in the country. One more day wasn’t going to scar him any more than the previous ones had. He knew Jennifer worked hard and he

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also knew she loved him, which was why he never gave her a hard time. His father, on the other hand...well, he loved him too, but sometimes Alex questioned whether the feeling was mutual or just misguided. Regardless, he had let Jennifer off the hook again, and she had bribed him again with raspberry waffles. In his mind it was a fair trade-off. Plus, without anyone around it would give him time to explore the cove and the strange house in the woods. His mind flashed to the key still hidden underneath his pillow, and a tingle of excitement ran through his body. He was going to go exploring in the forest, just like he was a soldier, like Tony Hawthorne.

Jennifer sighed and hung her head for a moment, then looked at Andy, who was silently drinking coffee. She looked tired.

"Thanks, honey, we owe you one. Don't we, Andy?"

His father grunted something from behind the science section of the newspaper, a part of the paper his dad and maybe three other people in the country read religiously every day. His hand snaked out from behind the wall of print only long enough to grab his coffee cup again before disappearing once more behind the paper.

Alex doubted his dad even heard anything that was being said. At times his father was the most caring man in the world, and at others he was the most ignorant and self-centered one. It was give-and-take with him and probably always would be, but that was also part of his charm, the ability to be so giving and so selfish within a few minutes of each other.

Jennifer sighed again and glanced up at the kitchen clock, an antique timepiece that time had faded until the face had yellowed and begun to crack slightly. The hands pointed militantly at twelve and eight.

"Andy, you're going to be late. It's almost eight o'clock."

Andy grunted something inaudible and finished off his coffee in one gulp. He folded the paper shut with a strange look on his face and

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stuck it under his arm without looking at either of them before standing up and walking out the front door. He was even more aloof than usual, and both Alex and Jennifer could sense it. Alex thought perhaps the fact he was starting a new job might have something to do with it, but deep down he knew it was something more than just work. Andy had never been bothered by taking new positions, in fact, he seemed to enjoy it.

"I've got to go now too." Jennifer pulled on her jacket and fumbled around in her purse for the car keys. "Are you sure you'll be okay by yourself?"

Alex rolled his eyes and she smiled at him.

"Honey, I, well, we actually, we want you...what I mean to say..."

"I love you too," he said, saving her from another bout of fumbling over herself. "Now go to work."

"Thanks, Alex. I'll be home after school to check up on you, so just stay in bed and watch TV or read. And if you need me, my new number is right there on the refrigerator. I'll see you tonight okay, sport?"

Jennifer bent over and kissed his forehead before walking out the front door, juggling her purse and a travel mug filled with coffee. Alex watched from the kitchen window as she started the engine of the Jeep and pulled out of the driveway, disappearing down the street. His dad had already left.

Alone again.

Alex quickly gathered up the breakfast dishes and scraped what remained into the trash under the sink before stacking them neatly into the dishwasher. He had a busy day of exploring ahead of him and he wanted to get started right away. Somewhere within the thick coverage of the trees there was a house, a mystery, and an adventure waiting for him. A journey was about to begin, all he had to do was take the first step.

* * *

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The cast made his left arm useless. Although he could still clutch weakly with his hand, it was difficult for him to sustain any type of grip on anything. After finishing with the dishes, Alex returned to his room to change out of his pajamas. He put on an old pair of jeans, a worn T-shirt, a thick gray sweatshirt two sizes too big over that, and a pair of construction boots on his feet. Then he walked over to his bed and reached under his pillow, grabbing blindly for the key that lay hidden there. He felt the smooth coolness of the metal on his hand and grasped it, pulling it out to take another quick look before stuffing it into his front pocket. He checked himself in the mirror and noticed how the cast made it look like there was a giant muscle bulging underneath the sweatshirt. He smiled at how ridiculous he looked and then laced his boots up tightly and walked back downstairs to go out to the garage. Every adventure had to start with the gathering of supplies, at least in all the stories he had read said so. Therefore his would too.

The garage was full of large cardboard moving boxes, most of which had yet to be opened from the move. It was to these that he went first because he was searching for something specific—a tiny hunting knife his father used when they went fishing to clean and gut the fish. If he was going into the forest, Alex reasoned, then he should at least be prepared to defend himself from an attack. He didn't know what kind of animals lived out there, but it was better to be prepared for the worst. His father taught him that. The smoke indicated someone might live up there, so it couldn't be that dangerous, although anyone who would build a house that balanced so delicately on the edge of a cliff was either a genius or completely insane. He hoped for the former rather than the later.

Along with the knife he would need a few boxes of matches, some candles, and his old lunch box which he planned to fill with a sandwich and snacks for later on. Every explorer had to eat, no matter who they were, especially a new traveler like himself.

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After tearing through eight boxes, Alex finally found what he was looking for. The knife was small, smaller than he remembered it being, but its dark steel curved sharply and tapered off to a razor sharp point that gleamed in the faint morning light streaming in through the garage windows. The blade itself was in the shape of a sickle, which helped to carve through the fish's flesh. The handle was a rusty crimson in color, made of wood and badly worn from years of use. His father had told him once when they were out on the pier in Union, that his father had once used the same tool to help him scale his first catch the same way he was helping Alex now.

Alex remembered how the knife had fascinated him. How the cruel curve of the blade tore through the living flesh, shredding and tearing whatever it came in contact with. He recalled watching as his dad would move it skillfully back and forth like a conductor directing an orchestra, until all that was left of the fish were two filets and a greasy pile of guts and bones. It was Alex's job to toss these over the pier's railing and back into the sea where the seagulls and other fish waited to consume what remained. "Always recycle the unused parts," his dad had said. "In nature nothing is wasted."

Alex put the blade down on the floor and continued rummaging through the other boxes until he found everything he was looking for. He was careful to close up each box as he finished with it, and to make note of where each object was taken from in case he was unable to return them until after his dad and Jennifer had come home from work. As he was closing the last box, he saw his father's blue gym bag sitting on top of an old workbench and paused.

"*Just be sure to return it,*" Alex thought as he reached over and grabbed it. It would be easier to carry all the objects in there instead of his old metal lunch box, and he could even put that in the bag as well. One by one, he placed all the different items into the gym bag and then slung it over his right shoulder. In addition to the matches and lunch

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box, he added a flashlight, some more candles and from inside, an extra sweatshirt, two cans of Coke, a bag of chips, and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich he made with extra peanut butter. All the food went into his old lunch box, a battered metal square with a faded picture of “The Muppets” on it. Kermit was in the center, smiling broadly, his pointed tongue sticking out at him. He was surrounded by all the others, including Gonzo and his chickens, that were flying through the air out of control after being shot out of a smoking cannon visible in the bottom left of the picture.

Checking everything one last time, Alex took the house keys out of his pocket and placed them in the fake plastic rock by the back door, after making sure no one was watching. Satisfied he was as ready as he was going to be for his adventure, he checked his watch. It read 8:45. Then he felt in his pocket for the strange key that he had found in the police car. It was still there.

“Okay, here we go,” he said loudly as he marched across the lawn. Alex imagined himself dressed in dark fatigues instead of second-hand clothes. His knife was actually a heavy machete that he held in front of him as a warning to any evildoers to stay back. The flashlight was really a gun, the candles were spears, and the matches were flares. He was armed to the teeth and no matter what he ran into out there, he would emerge victorious, just like Sergeant Hawthorne would. From atop the hill the tiny stone house looked as immense and dark as a baron’s castle and just as ominous.

Alex walked out of the backyard, a tiny browned-out patch of earth that struggled to sprout even crab grass from its soil. His father would take care of that problem soon enough. By the end of the month, they would have a luscious green lawn worthy of being in *Better Homes & Gardens*; that was just his dad’s way. For now though, it was nothing but a barren scrap of land. Beyond the dirt lawn, the ground became a sloping hill that led down into the cove itself. It tapered off slowly and

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ended some twenty feet below the level of the house. Alex breathed in deeply and let the morning air rush into his lungs. The day was slightly overcast, with a light fog that had come in off the water lingering slightly over the cove and obscuring the house from view. It seemed to be quickly burning itself off, making the going a little easier for him. The tide was in and full, the subtle waves that lapped the marshy shoreline barely made any noise as he made his way down the rocky slope. Twice he stopped when he heard a scurrying noise from somewhere ahead of him. At first, Alex only saw a tail, but then one of them paused and sneered at him. Wharf rats, usually not dangerous, but not exactly harmless either. One crossed in front of him, racing along the cove's floor. It was much bigger than he thought it would be, almost two feet from head to tail, but thankfully it didn't pay any attention to him and he pressed on. He knew now he would have to be on his guard at all times. Alex remembered seeing a program on television about rats and what they ate, which it turned out was basically anything they could find. He didn't care what they ate; he just didn't want them eating him.

The angle of the slope sharpened slightly, making the going slower, but not impossible. Eventually he reached the bottom of the incline, which took him down to the base of the cove, a vast yellow marshland that spread out endlessly in all directions before blending into the forest roughly four hundred yards in front of him. To his left lay the ocean itself, green and blue meshed together into a sacred purple that bled softly onto the land. To his right the base of the hill continued along for what seemed an interminable distance before disappearing into a vile smelling swamp.

The rats must live there. In a domed hut made of damp earth and decaying branches. Hopefully he wouldn't have to go anywhere near that place.

He turned away, but as he did so, he noticed something he hadn't

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seen before. In the middle of the swamp there actually was a giant rounded hut of some sort. Not big enough for someone to live in, but definitely too large to have been built by animals.

But these aren't ordinary rats remember? These are wharf rats, and they probably built that to drag their prey into before they eat it.

He shuddered at the thought and shook his head. It seemed like his imagination was beginning to get the better of him. His mind was playing tricks and that usually meant it was time for his medication. Having A.D.D. and trying to remember when to take your pills was a contradiction in itself, but one Alex had been living with long enough to get accustomed to. He fumbled around in his pockets for several minutes before he realized he had left them on his bed. It wasn't a big problem as he could always double the dosage later by taking two pills, but he had forgotten to take them yesterday as well. *Or was that another time?* Sometimes his only peace of mind lay in knowing he had his medication with him, without it he usually allowed himself to drift off mentally, often to the point where he would miss things, things like the mound of rounded dirt sitting complacently in the swamp. He couldn't have missed that giant nest of earth and mud the first time he looked over there, could he? Either way Alex had no intention of going over and seeing it up close, so he slung the bag over his shoulder and started walking across the wet marsh. His medication would have to wait until he got back. *Hadn't he already taken one before he left?* Alex rubbed his head with the palms of his hands. He was having a hard time concentrating.

Here and there on the cove floor large rocks jutted out, while pieces of wood and trash hung themselves loosely upon the incline behind him, an example of how high the tide could rise if the weather willed it. He took notice of a few tires that had somehow found their way halfway up the hill.

A powerful storm must have dropped those off. I wonder how long

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ago that happened.

Alex began walking back to look closer when he stopped and shook his head.

Focus. Who cares how long ago that happened? The house, remember the house.

He turned his attention back to the cove and walked forward. Ahead of him lay the marshland and beyond that his goal—the small grove of trees which would hopefully lead him up to the curious house where his real adventure would begin. There was something about poking around in an old house that was somehow appealing to him. If it was indeed inhabited, then he would simply walk away. But if it was abandoned, then he would have to explore it, at least for a little while. Just thinking about it made him quicken his pace.

The yellow sea grass crunched beneath his feet as he walked. The smell of salt and brine washed his nostrils clean as only the sea air can, yet his eyes didn't lose focus on his goal. From somewhere above him a seagull called out before touching down lightly in the cove's calm waters. It watched him curiously as he moved across the marshland. Alex peered at it from the corner of his eye as it called out several times. He turned to stare at it, but it still kept its gaze fixed on him, almost like it was spying.

He didn't like the way the gull was making him feel, so he bent down and picked up a smooth rock from the ground. Steadying himself, he tossed the stone at the bird who was still watching him stupidly from the water. The rock skipped twice and landed five feet from it, disappearing into the dark water. The gull cried out angrily and flew off to deeper waters then paused in mid-flight to turn toward the forest where it beat its wings furiously and headed off and out of sight. Alex watched it fly and began scratching his cast nervously.

Could it be going to the house? Or coming from the house? Did it see me?

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Alex stood for a moment listening to himself think. It wasn't unusual for his mind to be so overactive, especially since he missed his medication yesterday, but he suddenly didn't feel like this was an adventure for fun anymore. In fact, he felt like he was being watched.

Nonsense, you are being paranoid again. There is nothing out there but a few rats and some seagulls. You just forgot your medicine that's all.

Alex felt a little better. Sometimes he needed to reflect on where he got some of his ideas from in order to ground himself in reality again. It was actually Jennifer who originally made him stop and think about what he thought he was seeing and feeling before acting or responding to it. He didn't like it at first because it made her seem less like a friend and more like another psychiatrist trying to figure out why he was so screwed up, but sometimes it did help him make sense of the things around him. Alex assumed that must have been why Jennifer had him do it in the first place.

He drew in a deep breath to focus his energy, and slowly let it flow out of his lungs, a relaxation technique that Jennifer had also shown him. Feeling better and less paranoid, Alex pressed on across the marsh. Even when another of the giant rats raced in front of him, causing him to pull out the knife, which seemed to have grown larger and sharper in his hands, almost like the machete he had imagined, he still remained calm. When a second one came racing after it, hissing like a cat at him, Alex reacted without even thinking by tossing the hunting knife at it. He missed his mark by a good foot, but that wasn't what he saw. The knife he threw was no longer really a knife; it was more of a sickle or small sword. He coughed loudly and felt his head swim. He was starting to feel a little strange.

"Maybe I should go back and take my medicine," he thought as the earth began to sway beneath him. The air around him seemed to shimmer with reflected light, as if the air itself was made of tiny

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crystals and he was just now realizing it. Alex swooned, but caught himself, using his good arm to prevent the fall from happening. He suddenly wished he had just stayed at home, but there was another part of him, a stronger part, that wanted to press on, to find out who, if anyone, lived in that house. A loud hiss brought him back to reality.

The rodent that followed the second one was over two feet long including its tail, which was thick and black. Its fur was dark brown and crusted over white with salt and its claws scratched noisily across the rocks. What caught his attention the most were the eyes, small, red, and beady. They stared right through him, past his own eyes into his mind where they roamed about until they found what they were looking for. After finding it, or perhaps deciding that chasing after the other rat was more interesting, it hissed loudly once more at him, baring a tiny set of razor-sharp fangs before racing off across the salty plain towards the large hut that stood coldly in the swamp.

Alex breathed a sigh of relief at the passing of the abnormally large and audible rodent and pressed on after retrieving his knife. He was almost at the edge of the forest now and knew that he couldn't stop here, especially not because of a few rats, no matter how big and malicious they were. He had to find the house. He didn't know why, but he was being drawn to it now. It no longer was his choice to seek it out as it had been when his adventure started ten minutes earlier. Alex was no longer looking for it as much as he felt it was looking for him.

He took the last few strides of the marsh almost in a run, stepping off the crunchy dead ground and landing on the lush green grass of the grove. Apparently, it was also the high tide line—the point where the ocean would rise no further—for it was littered with trash and debris. It was still a welcome change from the dry, dead marshland he had just traversed. He could sense there probably weren't any rats living up here so far away from the water, although he could be wrong.

I'm so close now. It's just up there above me somewhere. I have to

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keep moving.

Alex looked up and saw clearly for the first time the stone chimney of the house. It was crooked and crumbling, yet stubbornly held its form. He struggled to see what lay below it, but the tree tops cut into his line of sight so that he could only see the chimney itself. He wasn't certain, but it appeared to be made of granite or something close to granite in color, a whitish-gray with flecks of mineral that sparkled brightly in the morning sun. Having seen part of it up close, he needed desperately to see the rest of the house and started moving up the hill toward it. He felt around in his pocket for the key, which almost seemed to be humming.

The trees were sparse and low at first, but the further he walked along the taller they became, making the cover more dense. Alex was suddenly very glad he had brought the flashlight. He wouldn't need it just yet, but if the trees continued to thicken, then he would be engulfed in darkness before too long. The ground was oddly damp and cool and smelt of decaying vegetation. The grass was wet with early morning dew and the grove was silent as he plodded along. To his left and right he saw thorn bushes growing; their needle sharp pricklers scraped and stuck to his pant legs as he walked. He sighed and brushed at them absently. As he was cleaning his pants off, one of the tiny barbs stuck into his hand, causing him to shout in pain.

As if an alarm clock had suddenly gone off, the forest exploded with noise and he froze with fear. The sounds were odd, familiar, but not comfortably so. They were the types of sounds he expected to hear in a tropical jungle, not in the Oregon woods. He heard strange cooing sounds, loud, brackish groaning, and the screaming of some exotic birds. Alex suddenly felt very uneasy. He could feel something was wrong, yet he continued on, driven by his imagination and his desire to see the strange stone cottage atop the hill.

Steady, just remember to breathe. Slowly now, in and out, in and

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out...

After a while his head began to clear. Alex noticed the ground had begun to slope upward. It wasn't much, but enough to be perceptible. He also saw the cover had become visibly thicker; the darkness that had been creeping in the corners now blanketed him. The sound didn't seem to carry very well in this part of the grove either. In fact, it seemed to be swallowed by the crooked, leering trees. There was also a brackish stench to the air that he didn't necessarily like. He reached into the duffel bag and fished out a can of soda that he nervously popped open and drank while trying to calm himself down. He knew the house was directly in front of him on the hill. He only needed to find his way through the maze of brush and overgrowth that had so far successfully blocked his path to get there. Alex heard the faint sound of the waves crashing somewhere in the distance as well as the high pitched whine of a seagull. His heart continued to race as he sipped at the Coke in his hand.

The trees themselves weren't familiar to him at all. He thought he knew what types of trees should be growing here, having lived near the water most of his life, but these trees were strange, almost bizarre looking to him. Alex felt like he was walking through an ancient forest, one that had been resting undisturbed for eons until today, until he arrived. He coughed again as the sour smell continued to grow stronger and the trees thicker, casting strange shadows on the ground around him. He felt almost as if he was under some type of spell, like the very grove had enchanted him, possessed him in a way, and was now directing him along its paths, taking him where it wanted.

Alex still felt uncomfortable, but he had come so far now that to turn around because he was scared, scared of something in his head, something that wasn't real, wasn't an option.

The stillness of the grove pulled him away from his thoughts for a moment and made him shudder slightly, as did the chill that had crept

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into the air. He could hear but no longer smell the ocean, which made him nervous. In fact, he began to pick up on another smell, one even more pungent than whatever had been lingering in the air. It was the smoldering scent of burning wood. His heart leaped.

The house? Already? Have I traveled that far already?

That's when he remembered that in his haste to start his adventure, he had forgotten to mark where the tall pine was. Without that landmark to guide him, he was lost.

But the burning wood could only be coming from the house. Unless someone else lives up here.

All he could do was to continue to head up the hill in the vain hope he would blindly run into the house. He cursed himself for being so stupid, so careless, so eager to rush into things. Now he was lost. Besides walking up to the top of the hill, his only other option would be to try and find his way back out of the grove and then locate the large pine tree from the marsh below. That, however, would take time.

Alex looked down at his watch again. Ten-fifteen. He still had time.

Jennifer always worked school hours, which allowed her to spend a lot more time with him, but also sometimes that meant she was never back until he was already home from school. That usually meant between two and two thirty. If he hurried, he could find the tree, reenter the grove, and maybe find the smoking chimney and the dark house it was attached to before anyone knew where he was. Alex figured he would need about an hour to get back and replace everything before she returned, so he had to decide now what he wanted to do. It was either give up for the day and go back home, take his medication and sleep—which a large part of him cried out to do—or take the chance that he could get back in time to return everything to the boxes in the garage. Although Alex knew going home was the smart thing to do, the adult thing to do, he didn't want to quit, not just yet.

The thick smell of smoke continued to permeate the air, but it didn't

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smell like wood burning anymore. It somehow smelled thicker and saltier. He didn't like the way it tasted in his mouth. It reminded him of when his dad had invited some of his friends over for a pig roast. The smell of the dead animal's flesh roasting on a spit had left an indelible impression on him, which was why he rarely ate red meat, and never pork. The smell of charred flesh was the only one that he could identify this new odor with. It wasn't pig's flesh that was burning though, and he knew it. The feeling of being watched suddenly returned again and he froze, his breath held tightly in his chest. Alex could actually see the smoke now, gray tendrils that wound their way in and out of the branches above him. The air had grown stale and cold, cold enough for him to see his own breath. Instinctively he knew he had to get out of there, and fast. He didn't know what was burning. It was definitely an animal of some kind. At least he hoped it was an animal. But he did know it was coming from somewhere ahead of him because the breeze was blowing slightly in his direction. Quieting down his overactive imagination momentarily, which had him thinking of cannibals and head hunters, he tried to find a path that would lead him back down the hill without making too much noise.

Being as quiet as he could, he began backtracking toward the marshland, each step sounded like he was slamming two trashcan lids together. Right now, all Alex could think of was being back in his house sitting on the couch, drinking a cold Coke, and munching on microwave popcorn while flipping through the last of the morning cartoons.

What am I doing up here? I should be home in bed like the doctor told me. I should be watching Scooby-Doo and Batman, not wandering around in this place.

He could still do that; he just needed to find his way back. After five minutes of walking though, he knew something else was wrong. Alex had forgotten to mark his trail on the way up, now he was

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completely lost.

Stay calm. Don't panic. Try to find a familiar landmark. Alex let his eyes crawl over the thick trees of the grove, each one an identical match to the one before it. He sighed in desperation, he was hopelessly lost.

Remembering something he had read once about being lost, Alex stopped walking. He was breathing heavily from the combination of the fears that were real and the ones that were taking root in his mind. He was having a difficult time separating the two of them and was beginning to feel an anxiety attack coming on. He fumbled again for his medicine before remembering that he didn't bring it with him, and then put his right hand to his ear, straining desperately to hear the ocean. The lapping waves, the cry of a seagull, the motor on a boat, anything. His ears were met with nothing but restrained silence, as if something were in the grove with him causing everything to remain silent, something animal.

The rats! They followed me!

"Calm down," Alex said out loud. "Nothing followed you. It's just your imagination. Just walk back down the slope and eventually you will come back to the cove." He coughed and waved his hands in front of his face to clear the air. The sour smell had returned.

Even with his imagination flowing on all cylinders, Alex still wasn't completely convinced there was something out there watching him. And even if there was, it didn't seem to be a malevolent presence, more of a curious one. That didn't help comfort him; it only made him feel even more terrified. His fear intensified triple fold when a branch snapped loudly from somewhere behind him to his left. That was the first noticeable sound he had heard besides the bizarre cooing and howling of strange animals since he had entered the tiny forest, and it sent his heart up into his throat. His overactive mind now only had one thought racing through it and it wasn't a fabricated tale.

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Run! Run for your life!

Alex ran, dropping the duffel bag to the ground, never looking back, and heading directly into the thick trees to his right. He crashed through the first layer of thorn bushes, feeling them rip into his skin through his jeans and sweatshirt, and continued on into the vast darkness beyond. He stumbled several times, falling to the ground and feeling his broken wrist begin to throb. Still, he could hear something plodding along behind him, which made him run faster. After running for what seemed hours, he thought that he had outpaced whatever had been chasing him. Alex wasn't sure how long he had actually been running through the grove, smashing through the small trees and tripping over the bushes, but his body abruptly gave up on him and he had to stop. He tried to force himself further, but ran out of breath and collapsed face down on the ground. His left wrist throbbed with a dull pain. He desperately wished he had thought enough ahead to pack aspirin, but he hadn't. The distant sound of something moving through the bushes came to his ears and he sat up, listening to see if he was still being followed. He strained his ears and was more than relieved to discover the noise had stopped.

It was just some animal, that's all. There was no one following me, just a rabbit or a raccoon.

He was safe and that was the good thing. The bad thing was that he was now completely lost. He couldn't even remember what direction he had run in to begin with. All he knew was that he had been running directly uphill. The air hung heavy with a powerful odor, one that he instinctively hated, and his imagination took over.

The rats. They were chasing me. They are trying to force me toward the swamp to eat me.

"There are no rats," Alex shouted to himself, trying to convince himself it was true, but not entirely succeeding.

Breathing heavily, Alex did the only thing he could think of to stop

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his mind from thinking such insane thoughts. He reached over to take a sandwich from the duffel bag when he suddenly realized that it was gone. He had dropped it when he started running. Now he was really in trouble. Not only was he lost, but even if he did manage to get back home, he had lost his father's gym bag and all the supplies he had packed inside.

The sound of a soda can opening shocked him as it echoed loudly throughout the forest. His mind froze as he spun around to see who had opened it. He couldn't see anything in the thick darkness that the trees had created. In fact, he could barely see anything at all except for the ground below him. Alex wished he had held on to the flashlight.

"What do you think you're doing, kid? Don't you got no manners? You can't just be litterin' around up here, tossing your junk onto the floor of my house," an angry voice called out from somewhere nearby.

Alex couldn't tell which direction it came from as it seemed to be coming from all directions at once, a trick the forest was playing on him.

He glanced around quickly, reaching for the knife, which he had also put into the bag.

"Where is it? "Where did I lose it?"

"Looking for something, kid?" The voice laughed. "Maybe you should've held on to that bag of yours before you went running through the thorns, huh?"

"Leave me alone!" Alex cried, feeling his fear getting the better of him. "Just go away!"

"Go away? From where? From my home? No, I don't think so. I'm afraid you are mistaken, son. You are the one who is my guest here. And as your host I'll be the one who decides who stays and who goes. Now then, I think this is what you were looking for in that blue bag you dropped, wasn't it?"

A soft thud behind him made him wheel around. Sticking out of the

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ground with the blade buried in the soft earth up to the hilt was the fishing knife.

Alex's mouth dropped open. From his left a dark figure walked out from behind a thick tree, one that was much thicker than the surrounding ones, a pine tree. In his hand was the blue bag Alex had packed everything in earlier, the same one he had dropped moments ago during the run. Alex looked from the bag to the knife and then slowly focused his attention entirely on the blade sticking out of the ground.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, it began changing before him. He thought about his missed medication and wondered if he was going crazy as the tiny blade extended into a longer one, the curve becoming greater as well. It bent and moved before his eyes, changing as if it were being molded by a blacksmith. Just as quickly as it had started, it stopped, leaving him to stare blankly at it. He gasped and stumbled backwards when he realized what it had become. A machete. A machete exactly like the one he had imagined when he started walking this morning.

"Now," the voice spoke, a dark hand reaching down to pick up it up and hold it. "As your host, I've decided you should stay for a while."

Alex was frozen to the spot with fear.

"And you can relax. I'm not going to hurt you, kid."

"Are-are you magic or something? How did you make the knife do that?"

"Do what? I haven't done anything." The man looked down at the spot where the knife was. "I'm not magic either. I'm a man. A regular man."

"But it changed. I-I saw it change," Alex managed to stammer.

"If it did, then it wasn't me who did it. It was you, along with some help from the cove, of course."

"What do you mean 'I did that'?" Alex asked, puzzled but no longer

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scared to death.

“You should know what I mean.”

“I don’t even know why I’m here let alone what just happened.”

“I know why you’re here, Alex.”

Alex shuddered when he heard his name. How did he know who he was?

The man continued, “You want to see the house, right? I haven’t had a visitor up here in a while. A few passers-through, but no real visitors. If you really want to see it, then I can show you, but—”

“But what?” Alex asked, suddenly bold.

“Nothing. Maybe we should sit down first. Your arm doesn’t look too good.”

Alex glanced over at his arm and noticed the man was right. It did look pretty bad.

“It doesn’t hurt that bad,” he heard himself lying.

“Even still, I’d better have a look at it just to be safe.”

Alex cringed as the bushes cracked and the dark figure stepped forward into the light.

CHAPTER 10

The man who stepped forth from the grove was tall and muscular, with a thickness about him that reminded Alex of the football players he saw while watching TV with his dad on Sundays. The man was black and he spoke slowly and purposefully, the same way he walked. His attire was as ragged as the homeless man, Tony Hawthorne's, had been, maybe even worse, but his voice was kind and soft and he seemed genuinely nice. His jeans were stained brown with dirt and grease and his black army boots were tattered and worn through in places. He had the appearance of a man who had been living out in the wild for some time. What struck Alex the most though was the faded green jacket that he wore. "Private Darrell Washington," it said in faded gold lettering and a worn patch on his right shoulder said, "Army."

Another soldier?

Washington watched the Alex, studying him, and was amused by

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his interest.

"Is there something you want to say?" he asked after a few minutes of awkward silence.

There was, but Alex didn't know how to say it. Timidly, he pointed at the patch with a shaky hand.

"That patch. Were you in the Army too?"

Washington immediately lost his friendly demeanor and covered the patch with his hand. He cast an angry look at Alex, his dark eyes piercing through him and making him appear more like a monster than a man. His hair was uncombed and wild-looking, which only added to the animal-like appearance. Nervously, Alex stood up and took a small step back away from the large stranger.

"No-no, wait," Washington spoke softly, holding his hands out in front of him to show he meant no harm. Cautiously, he approached Alex and dropped the hunting knife he had been holding onto the ground before him.

"I'm really not gonna hurt you, kid, honest. I just don't want *anyone* coming up here and bothering me, you know? This is my home."

Clearing his throat, Alex responded.

"What do you mean your home? Isn't there anyone else who lives in the house with you?"

Washington smiled, showing all of his broken, yellow teeth to Alex, teeth that made him look like a human jack-o-lantern.

"My house? God, I don't *live* there and I sincerely hope that *you* didn't actually intend on going inside. No one even comes into this cove anymore besides me and one other guy, and even he hasn't been around for a few days." Washington glared at him. "But no one ever goes inside that house."

He studied Alex's face for a moment.

"You really don't know anything about this place do you? Probably too young. You don't even know about the stories, do you? No matter,

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you will.”

Alex hesitated as Washington turned and walked off into the grove.

“You might as well come along, kid, I know you’re lost,” he called over his shoulder. “Trust me, I ain’t gonna hurt you. It’s just that only company I ever up here is that asshole Farrell trying to bust me for something. He wants his town clean, free of blemishes. Not filled with people the likes of me. That’s why we have to live up here, away from town.”

Realizing his predicament, Alex slowly followed the man into the thicket.

“How did you make the knife change shapes like that? D-did you use black magic or something?”

Washington laughed.

“Black magic? No. The only magic up here is whatever the cove left behind, but that goes way back.” He shook his head as he thought about it. “No, it sure as hell didn’t come from me.”

As Alex walked with Washington, he reached into his front pocket. Deep within it, almost at the bottom, he felt something rub up against his hand. He paused, reaching all the way in, and pulled out a ball of blue pocket lint along with the shiny bronze skeleton key. He held it up and studied it briefly in the wan light. It also seemed to bend and move before his eyes, just as the knife had. Alex shook his head, confused and scared. Maybe he should’ve gone back and taken his medication after all.

The cover overhead thickened and the light diminished. Alex found that if he focused hard though, he could still see enough to make out an emblem engraved upon back of the key, on the opposite side of where the V was. He saw a tiny seal that had some writing scrawled on it in what he guessed was another language. Moving it up toward the faint light to get a better view, Alex observed the light reflecting off of it wildly. It seemed to dance across its smooth surface, tracing strange

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patterns that lingered in the air before him. It literally seemed to be moving, trying to jump out of his hands. He wondered where Anthony Hawthorne had found this key, for he was certain now that Anthony had left it in the patrol car for Alex to find. He didn't know anything about the man except his name, but felt a kind of affinity for him, a closeness that might have been because of the unspoken secret they shared before Anthony had died. Alex tried to remember exactly what the chart on the hospital door said.

Sergeant Hawthorne of the Army? No. Sergeant Anthony Hawthorne, U.S. Army?

That was it.

"Anthony Hawthorne, Sergeant, U.S. Army," he said aloud, proud of himself for remembering the name exactly.

In front of him, the stranger stopped walking and turned around.

"What did you say?" he asked. "What did you just say?" he asked again, walking back toward Alex now, his dark eyes gleaming a fierce yellow that matched his teeth.

"I didn't...I mean I..."

"You said Anthony Hawthorne, didn't you?"

"I-I was only remembering what I, what I read..."

"Read what? What were you reading?" the man asked, roughly reaching out and snatching the key out of his trembling hands. The man's skin was rough and leathery when it came in contact with Alex's own, making him jump back in fright. "Was this what you were reading?"

The stranger held the key in front of him and an expression of awe slowly spread across his face. He studied it, rolling it over in his hands again and again, trying to see it from every angle.

Alex moved back a step. He felt himself beginning to grow extremely scared of this man. His erratic behavior was a good indication that he might be crazy, and crazy people were dangerous. He

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saw a news program about them on TV that told him so.

“Where did you get this?” the man asked suddenly, his eyes looking both angry and sad at the same time. “Did Tony give it to you? Do you know where he is?”

“I found it in the car.”

“What car? Your car? Did your parents pick Tony up? Where is he?”

“No, not us. We didn’t pick him up. He was hit by a car when I was on my way to the hospital.” Alex held up his wrist as proof for him to see. “He was just walking on the road by himself. I saw the whole thing,” he blubbered. “I saw the car hit him and he flew through the air and landed in the weeds by the side of the road and then I saw him in the hospital later on...”

The stranger paced back and forth thinking hard, his worn boots shuffling through the fresh grass. Alex could see part of one of his dark toes peering through his left boot, a tiny spot of black skin contrasting with the greenness of the lush grass. He abruptly stopped pacing and looked at him. He was in tears.

“Is-is he okay?”

Alex didn’t answer, he didn’t know how to, but rather stared down at the ground. He had no idea what to say or do. Judging by the stifled sobs coming from the man, however, Alex knew that he didn’t have to say anything more about what happened.

“He’s dead then,” the man said. It was more of a statement than a question. “The bastards finally found him. They finally got him.”

“Y-you knew him?” Alex asked nervously.

He looked Alex directly in the eye and then fixed his gaze on the key in his hand. He appeared as though he wanted to say something more, but didn’t know how to begin. Finally, he just motioned for Alex to follow him.

Alex hesitated again. He didn’t entirely want to follow this stranger

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any further than he had already, especially since he had just told him that a friend of his had been killed. It was obvious he was upset and possible that he might be crazy.

"If he gave this to you, then you should hold onto it," the man said to him nervously. He seemed afraid to hand the key over, but even more afraid to hold onto it. Then he composed himself and spoke in a calm tone, breathing slowly.

"Come on, kid. I can't tell you much about Tony, but I can show you who he was, and why this area was so special to him. I imagine you already have a pretty good idea why that is though."

"What about the house? Did Tony live up there?"

The man spun quickly on his heel and put a finger to his lip.

"Quiet!" Then, moving closer to him and whispering, "You have to be quiet about that place. Never mention it when we are so close. I told you I would take you there to see it, but that's as far as we go. We'll see it, that's all. And no, Tony never lived there. He never let anyone to go there. Ever.

He had his reasons too. I guess they finally caught up with him. Let's go. You need to keep up with me. This isn't the safest place in the world."

Reluctantly Alex sped up and fell in next to the tall, dark man who was fighting back tears that had started to fall as freely and large as raindrops. Alex felt badly for him because he knew what it was like to lose someone close to you.

They walked along together in silence for awhile. He was staring at the saddened man as he wept over the loss of his companion when the key began humming again. Alex looked down at it curiously. He wanted to ask more questions, but didn't know how to broach the subject, so he decided to wait.

They continued to walk up the tiny incline until they came upon a small clearing. There was a small fire burning, a tiny wooden shack,

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and two logs laying on their sides in front of the fire pit for sitting.

The man sat down on one of these and motioned for Alex to sit on the other one. Once they were settled, he sighed heavily and pointed at the blue duffel bag.

“Any food in there? I’m starving.”

Alex nodded, reaching over and pulling out a Coke and the bag of chips he had packed before handing them over to him. He watched as the man with the Army jacket and faded name patch that read “Private Darrell Washington” popped open the soda can and drank deeply. He swallowed and tore open the chips, stuffing a large handful into his yellow mouth. After he finished chewing, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, a photograph. Leaning over, he handed it to Alex and told him to look at it.

“That there, kid, is Sergeant Anthony Hawthorne. The best damn sergeant the Army ever had. He was a great man, and a great soldier. And since we came to this dump together so long ago, he was probably my best friend.”

Alex took the picture and looked at it quickly.

“But you said that you were going to tell me about the house.”

Washington stood up, shocked and with a slight look of disappointment on his face.

“Maybe you should look closer. I’ll tell you about the house, maybe even about the cove here, but in order to understand it, you need to know a little about Tony and me. I haven’t even introduced myself have I? How rude of me. My manners are a little off, I guess. I’m Darrell Washington,” he said, extending his hand.

“I know. I read it on your jacket,” Alex replied as he studied the photograph in his hands. It was of the two of them, apparently taken a long time ago. It was a black and white picture with Washington’s thick arm around the shoulders of a young, strong looking white man. Anthony Hawthorne, he assumed. They were sitting on a moss-covered

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rock smoking cigarettes and laughing about something. They seemed close. Behind them, a brooding jungle loomed with vines and broad leaves of a type he had only seen on The Discovery Channel. There was something about the jungle that Alex didn't like. It seemed almost *too alive* to him, the same way this very grove seemed to be breathing earlier. It was as if the jungle were waiting for them to enter so that it could swallow them up. He shivered and imagined a dark monster creeping out of the woods to snatch the two men up.

"Careful what you think of up here," Washington warned suddenly. "Things have a way of, shall we say, happening, when you don't necessarily mean it to," he finished, looking around warily.

Alex shot him a puzzled look.

How did you know what I was thinking?

"I didn't, kid, but sometimes you can tell what's running through someone's mind by the look on their face, and you looked scared as hell which means bad thoughts. You want to avoid those up here."

"You never told me how you knew my name."

"It was on your lunch box. Right there, Alex Harrison. Although I don't think you live in Sarasota anymore. Any more questions?"

"The house..."

"Besides the house? I'll take you there, I told you, but not now. Here, let me see the picture for a minute." He took the photo in his hands. "That's me and Tony in Vietnam, toward the end of the war. A few days after that he was nearly killed in an ambush by the Vietcong."

"Vietcong?"

Washington saw the confused look on his face. "Those were the bad guys, Alex. Took out most of our platoon that day," he reflected, thinking back to the battle.

"After that, nothing was ever the same," he shook his head sadly. "They blamed Tony for the whole thing. Never even gave him a chance to explain what happened. They demoted and publicly blamed him,

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forever scarring a brilliant military career and ruining a decent man's life. None of it was true, mind you, but the Army has agendas like most everyone else."

Alex stared more closely at the picture and saw part of someone's face off in the background to the left of the two men. The longer he looked at the man, the more he was certain he had seen him before. But where?

"They just called me Big Washington then," he said, smiling at Alex through his broken teeth. "It was my nickname. What's yours?"

"Alex. Alex Harrison."

"I know that, Alex," he replied nodding, but don't you have a nickname?"

He thought for a moment.

"No, just Alex, I guess."

"Alex it is then." Washington paused to take a sip from the soda can before turning to him with a serious expression. "I need to ask you this, for my own peace of mind. How well did you see the car that hit Tony?"

He fidgeted nervously, but answered. "I saw it enough to know that it wasn't an accident."

Washington frowned and thought for a moment, shaking his shaggy head.

"I wouldn't imagine it was an accident either. Tell me more about the car though. Do you know what kind of car it was?"

"I only saw it for a second."

"Color?"

"It was black."

"Are you sure about that? You just said you barely saw it."

"No, it was definitely black. And it had a weird symbol on the hood. Up front."

"Up front? You mean the hood ornament? What did it look like?"

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“It was shiny. Really shiny, and it looked like a shield.”

Washington eyed him. “Are you sure it looked like a shield or are you just imagining that it did?”

Alex had to think about that for a second. Considering what he had just been through, maybe he did imagine it. “No, it was real. I mean, it was a shield.”

“A shield, huh?” Washington reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette, lighting it with the matches that were in the blue gym bag. He sucked hard on it and thought. “A shield.”

Alex watched him exhale slowly, the cloud of smoke circling his head before drifting off into the air. He took another long drag and spat on the ground, coughing as he did so.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” Alex said softly under his breath, repeating the “Stop Smoking” slogan he had been bombarded with at school and seen countless times on TV.

Washington looked at him seriously for a second and then nodded his head laughing.

“Yeah, I know. I’ve been trying to quit for awhile now, but it’s not that easy. A black car right? Anything else? Did you see who was driving?”

He shook his head.

“Did you see the license plate?”

Again, he shook his head.

“Shit. Do you remember anything about the car at all? Anything?”

“I remember sitting in the back of the ambulance when I saw Sergeant Hawthorne walking along the side of the road. We made eye contact right before he was hit. He looked sad. No, I don’t know anything else.”

Alex didn’t like the way he was suddenly being interrogated. It made him uncomfortable, like maybe he had done something wrong. He knew that Washington was trying to find out who was responsible

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for killing his friend, but Alex just didn't have the information he was looking for. After a few more questions Washington realized this and stopped.

"I'm sorry to do that to you, Alex," he said after he finished. "It's just that Tony and I made a lot of enemies around here. There are a lot of people in this town who know we live up here and don't like it. And a lot of them wouldn't mind seeing us disappear."

"Disappear? Why? Do you guys steal stuff from them?"

Washington shook his head, "No. We live off the land. *Our* land. We eat whatever we can catch and kill. Rabbits and squirrels mostly. Neither one of us has ever stolen anything from anyone in Oceanview, but that still doesn't stop them from wanting us out of here. People have other reasons too..."

"If you don't bother them, then why would they want you to leave?"

"Some people," Washington said, clenching his teeth, "think we're an eyesore. Others just don't want to know that we live up here and eat animals to survive. They think there is something vile and primitive about it. And there are still others who are afraid of us, because of the cove."

"What about the cove?"

Washington paused and reflected for a moment, sucking the cigarette down to the filter and then flicking it into the fire.

"I'll tell you about it later, if there's time. Some things, Alex, you are better off not knowing, especially about this place. Tony must have had his reasons for making sure that the key wound up in your hands though. I need to think about it."

He shifted on the log and resettled himself before continuing.

"In the old days they didn't care about us at all. Even when we were over there fighting for their damn country. We ate bugs and whatever else we could get our hands on when we had to. Not very tasty, but it

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kept us alive to fight another day you know? As long as the public didn't have to see it or hear about it, then it was okay because it never happened. And if it never happened then, it shouldn't happen now. At least that's how they view it."

A long silence fell between them and Alex began to fidget again. He looked down at his watch, it had just passed noontime. He should already be heading back by now. Sensing his anxiety to leave, Washington stood up and pointed to a narrow trail that was barely visible among the thick trees. It appeared almost out of thin air. Alex watched in amazement as the trees seemed to part slowly to reveal it. If he hadn't been shown exactly where it was, he never would have seen it at all. Washington smiled.

"Pretty good trick, huh? You can do it too."

Alex gave him a quizzical look.

"Hey, you already have, remember? You just need to focus harder. Not everything up here is bad, Alex. The problem is that most people just refuse to believe it."

He stared up at Washington with a look mixed of puzzlement and awe, realizing all at once that he had created the trail for him. Their eyes locked briefly and he felt the same curious rush that came over him when he first saw Tony out in front of the school.

"You should be able to get back home if you follow that trail, just don't stray from it. You will come to a fork about five minutes from now. Take the left fork and that will lead you back to the cove. You know your way from there I'd imagine."

Alex nodded.

"And stay away from the swamp, it's not safe."

He fidgeted at the mention of the swamp.

"Darrell?"

"Washington, call me Washington."

"Washington? What lives in that swamp? It feels...cold."

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Washington rubbed his chin before responding.

"There's nothing more there than what you think is there. Now get going before you get in trouble."

Alex started walking and then stopped.

"Is it okay if I come back? I mean you never really told me anything about the house or how you did that," he said, pointing to the trail that had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

Washington laughed loudly, scaring him a little.

"You have to come back now, don't you? If you didn't want to know more about that house, then you never would have come up here in the first place."

"So you will show me how to do that? And the house, we can go there?"

He nodded.

"I'll show you, Alex, but there is a lot you will need to learn first. Fear is your biggest enemy. I can feel it all around you. Until you can control the things that scare you, you will find it difficult to be up here. Fear makes you vulnerable, remember that."

"I will," Alex replied, thinking about how very similar Washington's words were to his own father's.

"Good. Come back tomorrow."

"But I have school tomorrow."

"Then come afterwards. I'll be here."

"Okay. But how will I find you?"

He grinned.

"You'll find me, kid, don't worry about that. I guarantee you will have no problem finding me up here."

Alex threw the duffel bag over his right shoulder, checking to make sure it hadn't been torn in the run, then carefully zipped it up tightly and started walking down the path.

"Alex!" Washington called just before he was out of sight. "Be

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careful. If someone really did run Tony down on purpose, then they will be sure to take precautions against any witnesses who may have seen them do it.”

Alex stopped dead in his tracks and walked back.

“What do you mean *precautions*?”

Washington pulled another cigarette from his army coat and lit it.

“I believe you when you said you didn’t think it was an accident you saw. I think that Tony was killed on purpose.”

A boat’s horn sounded in the distance, the first one Alex had heard all morning, and it helped pull him back to reality.

“Just watch yourself okay? Especially with that bastard Farrell. He’ll ask you enough questions to put you to sleep. And don’t mention that you were up here either. If he thinks that I’m involved, then he will come after me for sure.”

Alex nodded again and turned back to the trail at a light jog. If he wanted to be home before Jennifer, he would have to hurry.

* * *

Washington watched Alex run off down the trail and dropped his cigarette to the ground, crushing it out with his worn boot. He knew that by staying in the cove, he was taking a big risk, but living up here in the first place had been a risk. If he thought it through rationally, he should have been packed up and on his way to Portland right now instead of concerning himself with this boy. There was a part of him, however, that knew how dangerous the type of murderers who killed Tony were. And how seriously they would deal with witnesses. Leaving Alex to fend for himself would be like leaving a sheep out with the wolves, plus Tony had left this boy his key. It was only a matter of time before he would have to bring him up to the house.

He wondered why the boy had really come up here in the first place. Most likely he was drawn to it. They always were. There was something about this cove and the house that drew them here,

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something that he couldn't explain. It wasn't always a good experience, as he could tell that Alex's had been. Sometimes, if the cove didn't like you, it could find ways to make sure you never came back. With the cast on his arm, the journey must have been difficult for him to manage, not to mention the additional weight that the bag he had slung over his shoulder added. There was something about the boy though that reminded him of Tony. Some small part of him knew that he was, or soon would be, in great danger. Whoever had the key always was. Tony was proof of that.

Still, the way Alex came prepared, the way he sensed Washington's presence before running, and the way he asked and answered all of his questions directly and without fear, impressed him. Those were traits Tony possessed and had passed on to him as well as the rest of the platoon. Now that he was dead, there might not be any battles left to fight, real or imaginary. Unless he intended to protect Alex from the storm that was sure to come.

"Tony, what do you want me to do with him? You shouldn't have gone so soon. There is too much I don't know."

Thinking about his friend as he lit yet another cigarette, Darrell Washington, all six feet of him, sat down on his fireside log and wept bitterly.

CHAPTER 11

Farrell was sitting at his desk nursing a slight hangover when the report came in early the next morning. Fatal hit-and-run on Route 9 heading towards Portland, the first one ever reported in Oceanview. No one knew yet what had happened for certain and he wanted answers. Farrell hadn't been too concerned about it at first, figuring it was probably some drunk teenager from the city who would turn himself in once he realized what he had done. Farrell's interest in the case changed, however, when he came across the name of the victim.

Name of Deceased: Anthony Hawthorne

D.O.B.: 12-30-45

Address: None

Occupation: Sergeant United States Army

He stopped reading the identification information and skipped ahead to the details of the accident, searching for anything useful.

"...hit by car while walking on shoulder along Route 9 heading into

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Portland. Victim was D.O.A. upon arrival at Portland Municipal Hospital Pediatric Care Ward, although resuscitation was attempted. Two witnesses of import, one Jennifer Cross-Harrison was in ambulance in route to hospital with son Alex Harrison (age 10). Boy claims to have seen the car hit victim before driving off?"

The last statement taken ended with a question mark for a good reason. His police department had an unwritten rule that children were no good as witnesses because of their tendency to exaggerate stories to near mythic proportions. They had imaginations that tended to make "mountains out of mole hills" as the saying went. Farrell remembered one boy in particular. The boy was about the same age as this Alex Harrison and claimed to have seen a murder. This was back when Farrell first started patrolling Oceanview over fifteen years ago. After bringing the boy in for questioning and getting a sketch artist set up, they realized the murderer the boy had described was none other than Jason from the *Friday the 13th* movies. Apparently, the kid had been watching the movie the previous night and just assumed that since he saw a murder happen on TV that it was real. The only difference was that his Jason had knives for hands and could fly. Kids.

That's TV for you. It makes their reality so clouded they can't even tell what's real and what's not any more.

That was why he was more than a little apprehensive about calling on this boy for an account of what happened. Farrell checked the address and quickly reread their statements before closing the file and heading out to his patrol car. He needed to get some air first, something to clear his head, then he would go to the scene and see what he could dig up before he went calling on either of them. Plus, he needed time alone to think. If anyone had seen him drop Tony off on Route 9 yesterday, he might have to answer some questions of his own. It was not a hidden fact that he didn't like, or get along with, Anthony Hawthorne.

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“Hey, Jimmy?” a soft voice asked from behind him. It belonged to Maria, the dispatcher.

“What is it Maria?”

“Got a report just in, related to that hit-and-run death up on Route 9. Seems like a nurse by the name of Abigail Monroe saw a man come into the emergency room after the doctors had stabilized the victim. When he left the room, the victim was dead.”

“And?” he sighed, already guessing what was coming next.

“Well, when she called for security, the guy bolted into the parking lot and took off. No one else was able to get a good look at him, but she said she saw enough to describe him. You want me to send someone out there?”

“No. No, I’ll go later on after I talk to the others. Write her address down for me, will you? Tell her that I will probably be there around eight o’clock tonight. Have someone run a call over to the Harrison’s too.”

“You got it. Here you go.” She handed him a scrap of paper with Abigail Monroe’s address and phone number on the back. Abigail was an Oceanview resident, which made Farrell sigh with relief, at least he didn’t have to trek up to Portland.

“Thanks, Maria, you a life-saver.”

She smiled and waved at him as another call came in.

Farrell closed the car door loudly and started the engine. It whined loudly in protest, but finally turned over. He revved the engine to get it going and then pulled out into traffic heading towards the crime scene. On his radio Buffalo Springfield played softly.

“...something happening ’round here...what it is ain’t exactly clear...”

He reached down and turned it off, preferring to drive in silence, alone with his thoughts.

* * *

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Alex was running along the thin trail when he came to the fork where Washington had told him to go left, and he did. The further along he went, the thinner the trees became, until eventually tiny shards of sunlight began filtering their way between the sparse leaves and down onto him. It felt good to have the warmth of the sun upon him again after being in the milky gloom of the thick grove for so long. He hadn't realized just how devoid of light Washington's camp was until he had left it. In the back of his mind he was sure that was one of the reasons he kept a fire burning. The forest had been mostly quiet on his way back. An occasional bird called out here and there, but nothing he couldn't identify and handle. Suddenly off to his right he heard something move quickly in the heavy brush. He looked but saw nothing except the moving shrubs, which set his mind wandering.

The rats again. They're following you home. They want to see where you live so they can gnaw at you when you're asleep.

"No rats," Alex said softly to himself. "There are no rats or anything else up here that's following you." He wanted to believe it, but he didn't.

The sense of being followed had returned. Alex began sweating as he tried to focus his thoughts. Washington had said that fear was his biggest problem, but it was so hard not to be scared sometimes, especially up here. Above him, a bird screamed shrilly from a long, bony branch and then took to the air, flying hard as its wings beat at the air heavily. He fumbled for his medicine for the third time and swore under his breath when he remembered he didn't have it. He was losing it. He needed to focus.

It's not real. It's not real. It's only in my head. My fear is what is causing this, Washington said so himself. Think of something else, anything else.

Slowly, Alex forced his breathing to slow down and the sounds of the bird overhead vanished. He sighed heavily, wiping the sweat from

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his forehead. Did the path go on forever? His left arm was beginning to throb again when he finally broke free of the grove and found himself back on the dead, yellow grass of the marshland. The cove's waters had already begun to advance slightly, covering up parts of the muddy sea floor as it washed its way forward. He looked down at his watch, it showed almost one o'clock. Now he really needed to hurry if he wanted to avoid being caught. Still, a part of him yearned to turn around, to return to the grove. Alex felt as if the cove itself beckoned him to do so. He turned around and strained against the bright sunlight to catch one last fleeting glimpse of the house that sat so dignified and solitary upon the hilltop. He still was only able to see the chimney, but that was enough to satisfy his curious hunger and he continued on his way.

Alex was thankful earlier that the early morning fog had burned off, but now he wished it would return to blanket his return home with its velvety mists. The day had turned out to be slightly overcast, but the sun still managed to poke its face through on occasion to shine down brightly on the calm waters of the cove. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to run across the flat plain, taking long strides that made him feel like he might lose his balance if he stopped or slowed down. It was the only way he might beat Jennifer home.

It was in this manner he ran until something made him stop, breathless and sweating, at the base of the hill leading up to his house.

"The knife," he moaned to himself. "I forgot to take the knife with me."

Alex contemplated going back, but thought better of it. He could never possibly run back for the missing blade and return before Jennifer did, it was just too far. Also, that was assuming he could remember how to get back to Washington's camp to retrieve it, which he probably couldn't. The knife was gone and there was nothing he could really do about it, except rationalize its loss.

How often do we even use it? I bet they will think it got lost in the

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move. Yeah, that's all. Lost in the move. And if dad wants us to go fishing, I'll just have to say no.

Things always wound up missing after they moved. Things were constantly being misplaced or forgotten. Surely the old knife with the worn red handle wouldn't be missed, at least not for a while. Maybe later on he could go back and try to find it, but not now. Alex made up his mind he would do exactly that when he returned after school tomorrow. He reached the slope that lead up to the house and climbed up the hill's incline at a good pace, reaching the top just in time to hear Jennifer cutting the engine of the Jeep. She was home early.

Home early? What time is it?

In a panic, Alex ran to the back door, turning the knob and pushing with all his might, but the locked door refused to budge. If he were to get caught outside the repercussions probably wouldn't be too bad, but he didn't want to disappoint her. Jennifer always trusted him and to betray that trust by sneaking out, not only sneaking out, but stealing and losing the fishing knife, would be like letting her down. What would she think of him? She would think he was acting like a child, and that would be worse than any punishment she could ever hand out. As he continued to fumble with the door, he remembered the plastic rock next to the stairs. He bent down and quickly opened the false stone, stealing its treasure from within, and stuffed the key into the lock just as she walked out of the garage.

"Alex? Honey what are you doing outside? And why do you have daddy's gym bag?"

Alex pretended to be surprised, as if he didn't hear her coming at all and her presence here now was a shock to him.

"Jen? I didn't even hear you pull in. How was work?" he asked, trying to sound like an adult as sweat dripped off his forehead. He dragged his right arm across his face to wipe it away and started walking towards her. She had opened the back and was pulling out

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paper bags full of groceries, apparently she had taken a half day. Her eyes, however, were still focused squarely on him.

“Work was fine, sport, but you didn’t answer my question. Why do you have daddy’s gym bag? Were you planning on going somewhere?” she asked, an edge of concern in her voice.

“No. I mean, no. I was just playing and I thought I heard the mail truck come by so I was going to go outside and get it,” he lied.

“But why the bag then?”

Alex paused, but only for half a second as he tried to think up a good excuse. Thankfully he was saved by the phone ringing inside. She was still looking at him funny, but now she was doing so as she ran up the stairs and into the house. He was off the hook for now. He exhaled deeply and went over to the Jeep to grab some of the groceries.

She was in the middle of an animated conversation when he came into the kitchen, dragging two of the heavier bags behind him. She gave him a “How is your arm?” look as she took them from him. Whoever she was speaking with was talking loud, because he could hear snatches of the conversation even with her rattling around in the cabinets putting away some of the items she had bought.

“...at some point we will need...” the voice spoke loudly.

Then Jennifer interrupted, speaking angrily, “Today is not a good day for this. Look, can I call you back? Yes, I’ll call you in ten minutes. I just walked in the door for Christ’s sake. I have ice cream in the car. Okay, I’ll do that. Okay, I’ve got it,” she said as she tore a piece of paper from a note pad on the refrigerator and scrawled a phone number down on it.

“Yes...yes...I realize the importance of it. Look, I’ll call you back in ten minutes. Goodbye.”

She hung up the phone hard, slamming it back into its cradle. She then put her head in her hands and began massaging her temples, a sure sign that one of her migraines was only a few hours away.

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“Jen? You okay?” Alex asked timidly as he pulled a few cans of peas and corn out from one of the bags on the kitchen table.

“Fine, honey, I’m fine. I just have a headache that’s all. Be a dear and bring in the rest of the bags, not the heavy ones though. I don’t want you hurting yourself. I have to make a phone call.”

He jumped at the chance to help, since it meant she had momentarily forgotten about seeing him outside with the gym bag. He had to return the bag and its contents to the garage anyway, now he had a reason to be in there. He ran outside, grabbing the duffel bag off the stairs where he had dropped it when the phone rang, and went into the garage. After returning what he could, he closed up the open boxes and moved them back to where he thought they were earlier. Hopefully, no one wouldn’t press him for details about it.

As he returned to the house with another armful of groceries spilling over his hands, Alex shot a quick glance over at the cove. Thin lines of smoke drifted slowly up from just beyond the trees.

The house? Washington. He smiled to himself.

He walked back into the kitchen only to find Jennifer missing. She had walked up to her room and was talking loudly again to someone on the phone. Alex couldn’t hear as well this time, but he knew that whatever was happening was upsetting her terribly. The only time she raised her voice was because either Andy did or said something stupid, or because someone cut her off in traffic. She rarely swore, but if you happened to cut in front of her while she was driving, your reward would be a torrent of swears and curses that would make a priest cry. He was glad he had never been on the receiving end of any of those barrages, at least not yet.

Three trips later and the trunk was empty, even the heaviest bags he managed to drag inside with him. That way he could explain the sweating too, he thought. As he dropped the last bag onto the kitchen table for her to put away, she returned to the kitchen. Her face was

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constricted and filled with tension. Alex hated to think it, but for the first time since he had known her she actually looked old. She also was trying to say something to him, he could tell because she always pressed her lips together tightly and tilted her head back when she tried to tell him something important but couldn't find the words. It was like she was pondering the possibility of another dimension existing or solving a quantum physics equation instead of simply talking to a child, and one that was her stepson.

"Alex, we need to talk," Jennifer started, sitting down at the kitchen table and motioning for him to do the same.

"What's wrong? Is everything okay?" he replied, expecting to be punished for roaming around in the cove instead of staying in bed to rest his broken bone. She always found a way to the truth, no matter how well he tried to conceal it. She was a great mother, but right now he wished she wasn't so observant.

"Yesterday was...well, it was a bad day. A bad day for you and a bad day for another man too."

She exhaled deeply and drew in a deep breath before continuing.

"A man died yesterday, Alex. A homeless man named Anthony Hawthorne."

He tensed up at the mention of his name.

"He was the man we saw get hit while we were in the ambulance. No one knows what happened and now the police want to talk to us."

Alex nodded solemnly, pretending this was the first he had heard of it.

"They want to find out as much as they can about what you saw because they want to catch the person who hit him. The person driving the car broke the law when he left the accident scene. What they did to Mr. Hawthorne was a crime too, you know that right?"

Again he nodded to show his comprehension.

"Good. Now later this evening an officer is going to come over and

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ask you some questions about what happened. His name is James Farnel, or Farrell, something like that.”

Alex immediately froze, remembering what Washington had said about being careful around people, especially someone named Sheriff Farrell.

“Now he will only ask you about what you saw, nothing else. Your father and I will be in the room with you in case you need us. If you don’t know the answer to any of his questions, then tell him so. And if you don’t feel comfortable answering something he asks you, then you don’t have to. However, if you can answer some of his questions, then tell him so he can catch the person who did this. Do you understand what I’m saying, honey? Honey?”

Alex could hear her speaking, but he was looking out the kitchen window, watching the smoke from the woods spiral up higher and higher until it finally vanished from sight. He was getting scared again and wished he could just float away like the smoke.

“Alex? What are you looking at?”

Maybe tomorrow Washington would tell him what he really wanted to know. Maybe tomorrow he could see the house.

CHAPTER 12

Farrell pulled the car over to a stop on the side of the road where one black and white cruiser was already waiting, its fierce blue flashing lights pulsating and illuminating the dark asphalt. The afternoon was almost gone. He'd been driving for a long time, thinking, and now that it had grown late the sunlight was fading rapidly on him. He stepped out of the car and was greeted immediately by a uniformed officer who spoke with an aloof air of superiority to him.

"I'm sorry, sir, but this area has been sealed off and is for police officers only..."

He dug roughly into his front pocket and pulled out his badge, being sure to stuff it sufficiently in the young man's face so that he would remember who he was the next time he came. Sheepishly the officer apologized as he saw the name and rank on the badge and quickly admitted him beyond the yellow and black striped tape that surrounded the area.

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“I didn’t recognize you without your uniform on, sir. Sorry about that,” he said, realizing his error. “It will never...”

Farrell cut him off. “Again. I know it will never happen again. Don’t worry about it.”

He made it a point to go home and change before coming to the crime scene. If he was going to interrogate a kid after this, it was always better to be wearing civilian clothes or civvies as he called them. By doing that, he let the kid, and his family, get the impression he was just another guy. A regular Joe with a job that needed to get done. It usually worked well with kids anyway. There was something about wearing the uniform that put people immediately on the defensive.

As he perused the scene, being sure to put on a pair of tight fitting rubber gloves first, his eyes fell upon several different scraps of possible evidence that had been overlooked. In particular, a cheap plastic necklace that could have belonged to Tony, or possibly even the killer. Farrell found it right after brushing past the young officer and made it a point to show him what he had missed. Not because he wanted to be difficult, but because he felt bad about stuffing his badge in his face and wanted him to see that there was more to being a policeman than standing guard while others searched for clues.

“Get on your radio and tell the station we need a team out here to go through this area again. Tell them I found a necklace and that there might be more out here. And tell them to hurry, it’s getting dark.”

The young man readily complied and ran off to make the call to the dispatch.

While the officer was off calling in to the station, Farrell let his eyes wander along the ground as he continued to search the area. He didn’t know what he was looking for, but he knew there had to be something else there, somewhere. If he searched hard enough, he would find it. Sometimes in a crime scene there were hundreds of clues available, if

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you knew where to look for them. The problem was recognizing them when you saw them.

Straining his eyes, he scoured the rest of the taped off area and some of the areas just outside of the plastic yellow barrier, yet came up with nothing. He was just about to give up and start focusing on what he was going to ask the kid when the car containing the crew he had requested arrived. None of them looked all that happy about being called out to the same scene they had gone through with a fine toothed comb for nearly eight hours yesterday. Especially now that someone had found something in ten minutes that they had missed after looking around for hours. One by one they filed past him with their equipment, grumbling to themselves and snapping on their gloves as they passed.

Farrell smiled to himself; at least someone else would have to work late tonight. He started making his way back to the road when he briefly saw something reflect off a passing car's headlights just outside of the search area. He pulled out a small flashlight with a dense, high intensity beam, and walked over in that direction, shining the light across the ground where he had seen the reflection. After a few passes, he saw the reflection again and focused the beam directly on it. Whatever it was, it reflected light as if it were made of chrome. He quickly walked over and stood directly above it, gazing down at the piece of bent metal that sat half-covered by the ruddy roadside weeds. He wanted to reach down and grab it, but he knew better than that.

"Boys! Hey, guys, over here!" he called out to the crew.

Farrell stooped down and brushed back a few dead leaves and some other roadside debris to get a better look at it. What he saw was unmistakable in its design and he exhaled loudly. It was a hood ornament in the slowly curving shape of a shield, a Cadillac's hood ornament. A closer inspection revealed small rust-colored spots of dried blood on it.

"What do you got, boss?" one of the men spoke up while the rest

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slowly dragged themselves over.

"I need you to bag this and dust it for prints. I also need you to find out whose blood that is, if it is blood. Cross reference it with the blood taken from the victim. Can you do that for me?"

The man nodded as he looked down at the shining scrap of metal. He was older than Farrell was, maybe by ten years, but he had a youthful look about him, and a youthful enthusiasm. His thick black hair was combed forward to hide the receding hairline and his thin body was lithe and well muscled.

"What's your name?" Farrell asked.

"Eric Bradley, sir," he replied, pulling a card out of his pocket and scribbling a number on the back.

"Great. Here's my card, Eric. I'm Sheriff James Farrell. The second you hear anything about this, I want you to call me. My beeper number is on the back," he said, handing him his card of his own.

"Yeah, no problem. I'll get right on it tonight."

"Great."

"There's one more thing, Eric."

"What's that, sir?" he replied.

Farrell liked the way Bradley said "sir." It showed he had respect for his rank and the force itself. Moreover, it showed him he could trust Eric Bradley with getting the information he needed.

"I also found this when I first arrived. It could be nothing, but I'd be remiss if I didn't at least have it checked out," he said, handing the broken necklace over to him.

Eric took it in his plastic gloved hands and dropped it into another evidence bag with an angry look on his face.

"Sir?" he asked questioningly.

"What is it, officer?"

"I just wanted you to know I wasn't working this scene yesterday. In the twenty years I've been doing this, I've never let anything like

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this slip past me.”

Farrell nodded approvingly at the older man before him.

“I understand. I’ll make sure your name isn’t in the report.”

“Thank you, sir. I don’t have much left now but my reputation, and I’d like to keep that intact.”

Farrell nodded again but wanted desperately to get moving. He could see Eric Bradley had something else on his mind, but now wasn’t the time to discuss it, nor was he the person to discuss it with.

“No problem, I understand. I have to take care of something else right now and it looks like you guys might be here for a while.”

Immediately sensing his reluctance to speak further, Bradley snapped back to attention and smiled.

“You are right about that. I’ll make sure we get our men right on this for you. I’ll have an answer for you by the afternoon tomorrow.”

Farrell took one last look at the Cadillac emblem which he was sure was stained with Tony’s blood and started back to his car. *His* night was far from over. After seeing the kid, he also had to talk with Abigail Monroe about what she had seen at the hospital. By the time he was done filling out the reports, he’d be lucky if he was home before midnight. That didn’t bother him much, but it still would be nice just once in a while to sit in front of the television for a few hours and shut his mind off. Not tonight though.

Farrell pulled the latex gloves off and tossed them onto the passenger side floor. His hands were sweaty from the plastic and they slid on the steering wheel as he started the car and drove back toward the center of town. He was heading for the Harrison residence. Hopefully Alex Harrison could describe the car in a little more detail for him, maybe even give a description of the make. If Farrell could get an idea of the size and make of the car, then he could figure out if the Cadillac hood ornament figured into the investigation at all. The static of the police radio crackled loudly as he drove, but he barely heard it.

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All he could think about was what he was going to ask the kid.

CHAPTER 13

Alex was sitting at the dinner table with Jennifer, eating a cold plate of beans and a lukewarm hot dog. Andy was late tonight, and neither he nor Jennifer were pleased about it. They had waited for over an hour before finally starting to eat. Alex didn't dare speak to her because he could see the anger bubbling inside her just below the surface. Instead he sat at the small rectangular table, covered with a dark maroon tablecloth, and chewed his food slowly, thoughtfully, and reflected on the day's events.

Washington had warned him to be careful. Particularly around a man named Farrell, the same man who was now on his way over to their quiet house on Ridge Road. What was he supposed to say if Farrell asked about Darrell Washington? What if he asked about the key? Or the house? He probably wouldn't ask about either, but what if he did?

Then you do what you always do, you make something up. Not a lie,

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but create something else, a story. A story like the ones you have been reading since you were five.

“He knows that Sheriff Farrell is coming tonight,” Jennifer said up suddenly, pulling Alex out of his reverie. “I spoke to him at work and Andy assured me that he would be home, that he would be here for support. I hate it when his work takes priority over our family. I’ve counseled enough children from families where the parent’s work was more important than anything else,” she finished caustically, standing up from the table and dumping her uneaten meal into the trash. She stood in front of the sink, staring vacantly at her new ring, the same way his real mother used to when his father had to work late.

Alex watched her with great trepidation. She was a smart woman and his dad was a smart man, but the careers they had were in such different fields that often it made things difficult. Things like meeting for dinner for example, and this was primarily because of the odd hours his father had to sometimes keep. Alex wished his father could just be home at five o’clock like everyone else’s parents were, but he knew the only thing his father believed in more than God was hard work. Just then the doorbell rang and Alex watched Jennifer shuffle through the living room to the front door to answer it.

He overheard some mumbling and the sound of a man’s voice speaking, low and stern and full of authority. The same way his father spoke to him when he did something wrong. Alex hated that sound.

“Alex, this is Officer...”

“I’m Jim Farrell, Alex,” the gentleman interrupted, smiling broadly and extending his hand to him.

Alex gingerly accepted and shook it, his eyes focusing narrowly on the casually dressed man in front of him. He found it hard to believe this man was a police officer, but once the man started asking questions Alex knew there was no doubt. He sounded like all the cops on TV.

Could be another trick, don’t let him know about Washington or the

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cove...

"Looks like that arm of yours is a little banged up, huh? How did that happen?"

Alex looked nonchalantly at his plastered arm and replied quietly. "I was in a fight at school and they beat me up."

Farrell nodded, as if he understood what had happened. "Sometimes kids can most cruel to other kids, Alex. Try not to let it get to you."

He hated him already. How could he say that? Of course it would get to him. His arm was in a cast and if he wasn't careful, his legs might be next.

"Now, Alex," Farrell continued, pulling up a chair from the kitchen table and seating himself comfortably next to him like he lived there. "I need you to do something for me. Do you think you can remember what happened yesterday with the homeless man you saw? The one who was hit by the car?"

Alex nodded, anticipating the questions that were sure to be asked of him, but still feeling tense anyway. His armpits were beginning to perspire slightly and his throat was dry, a combination of the emotionally draining hike he had taken and the inevitability of the interrogation that was about to commence.

"Good. That's good. Now try *really hard* to remember when you first saw the homeless man on the road. Can you do that?"

Again Alex nodded and began recounting to the overbearing sheriff everything he could remember, stopping right before the accident, and being sure to skip over the part where he was laying on the floor of the cafeteria with a girl kicking him in the ribcage.

"Okay, that's really great, Alex. You're doing a great job. I wonder though, can you tell me what happened after you saw the man walking along the side of the road? Did you see what happened to him?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me?"

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“He got hit.”

“By a passing car?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, good. Can you remember what the car looked like?”

Alex closed his eyes and recalled the scene in his head, the screeching tires, the smoking rubber, and finally the shocked look on Tony Hawthorne’s face as the front end of the large car swung wildly yet purposefully into him.

“I remember that it was black.”

“Black, good. A black car hit him.” Farrell pulled out a small notebook and began scribbling notes into it. “Do you think you pick out what type of car it was if I showed you some pictures?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe, I guess,” Alex answered, looking around for Jennifer who was standing nervously in the doorway listening intently to them. Her eyes were on him and she looked scared. She wasn’t sure what to do or say so she unconsciously wrung her hands. Jennifer also kept checking the kitchen clock and driveway. His father was late, he usually was at night, but if it was something important then he always found a way to get home. That might have been why she was worried. Subconsciously Alex wondered if his being tardy was in any way connected with everything that he had seen thus far, but he quickly dismissed that thought as being mere fantasy, a delusion brought on by his exhaustion and lack of medication, which he *still* hadn’t taken.

“Well, let’s see if you can try, okay? Alex?”

Alex was thinking of the cove, of the house, of Washington. He didn’t want to betray any of them.

“Alex?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Good. I want you to take a look at these cars for me.”

Farrell reached into his back pocket and pulled out a rolled up glossy magazine called *American Auto* with a large picture of a 1950’s

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Hot Rod on the cover. He opened it up to a book- marked section and placed in front of Alex.

“Here we are. Now did the car look like any one of these?” he asked, flipping to a section on sports cars.

Alex thought for a moment, but shook his head. These cars weren’t nearly as large as the one he had seen strike Tony.

“No, it was bigger than these. These are sports cars. This one was a big car, longer, like a limousine.”

“Bigger? Okay, okay,” Farrell said excitedly, flipping ahead a few pages until he found what he was looking for. “What about these? Do any of these look more like the car you saw?”

Alex surveyed the cars in the magazine and shook his head again before pulling the magazine over onto his lap and turning the pages himself, being sure to scan each one carefully. His fingers ran across the glossy images of models sitting atop priceless cars until he finally saw one that stuck out. He stopped and looked closer at one particular car before speaking.

It was a different color in the magazine, a shiny cherry red, and probably older than the one he saw, but it was unmistakably the same type of car. It was a large, heavy car, very low to the ground with the rear tires covered up partway by the frame of the car itself, its whitewalls gleaming in the sun. A swimsuit model in a yellow bathing suit was sitting on the hood, smiling about something, but he was sure that he had no idea what about.

“This one. It looked a lot like this one, but black. And it didn’t have shiny white tires either. They were black.”

Farrell looked at the car that Alex was pointing to and nodded.

“Cadillac, just as I thought.”

“Mr. Farrell, are you almost done here? Alex has school tomorrow and I wanted to see how his arm was doing,” Jennifer suddenly asked.

“I’m all set here, Mrs. Harrison. Alex has been extremely helpful,”

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he replied, standing up from the chair and walking over to her.

"I hate to be even more trouble than I'm sure I have been already, but I need a quick word with you before I go." Farrell looked back at Alex. "In private."

"Of course," she replied. "Let me just talk to him first. I'll meet you in the living room."

Jennifer smiled and walked over to Alex, gingerly giving him a quick hug and soft kiss on the cheek. It was weird, but he loved the way that she always smelled like watermelon.

"I'll be right back, sport. Just stay put for a minute while I show Mr. Farrell out."

Alex watched them walk out of the kitchen and begin talking to each other in low voices in the front doorway. He knew they were discussing what he had just told Farrell, but since he couldn't hear what they were saying there was no way he could tell if they were talking about Washington. His thoughts were interrupted suddenly when he heard something rattling around outside by the garage. His mind immediately jumped to the most outrageous conclusion.

The rats! They tracked me down. I should have been more careful!

Alex sprang up from his chair and scampered carefully over to the back door where he could look out at the garage. In the darkness he could see a large, sinewy shape looming by the door. It was leaving the garage and heading across the backyard, crouched low and moving fast through the night.

One of the rats? No, too big. Maybe it's Washington making sure I don't mention his name to the police. But why would he be so concerned? Maybe he's involved in the murder. The motion light installed in the backyard suddenly flashed on brightly. It blinded him momentarily, but gave him enough time to see Washington's awkward figure disappearing over the edge of the tiny slope in the backyard, heading down into the cove below.

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Suddenly another beam of light cut through the darkness, along with the voices of Jennifer and Sheriff Farrell. Farrell was speaking loudly in his powerful, authoritative voice.

“This is the police, show yourself! I heard you back there, so you might as well come out.”

Jennifer raced back into the house and was searching the kitchen, calling for Alex.

“Alex? Alex! Come here, get away from the window,” she said while picking the phone up off of the receiver and dialing 9-1-1.

Alex obeyed her and ran back into the kitchen, sitting down at the table while she spoke to the operator.

Alex knew that it was only Washington out there, but now he doubted the man’s intentions. Did he really come back to keep him quiet or did he come back for something else? And if that was the case, why hadn’t he simply killed him while he was up there with him in the grove to begin with? No, there was something else going on that Alex was unaware of, something that he desperately wanted to know more about.

He looked out at the cove. Even from the kitchen table he could see the faint light coming from on top of the small rise behind their house. On top of the hill where the stone cottage was. Washington had promised to show him more, to teach him more about the isolated structure that seemed to be so ominous yet so inviting at the same time. Alex desperately wanted to see what was up there. He was lost in thought when Jennifer’s voice broke the tense silence that had fallen over the kitchen.

“Yes, police? This is Jennifer Harrison out on Ridge Road. Sheriff James Farrell told me call you. There is someone outside poking around in our garage. Mr. Farrell thinks it might be because of what my son saw the other day. He said to send backup and bring an officer to stay with us. Yes, that’s right 1104 Ridge Road. Okay, thank you.”

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Her son. Alex was *her* son.

Even though it wasn't entirely true, it felt good to hear her say it. It sounded almost natural, but she still wasn't his real mother. Not yet, maybe not ever. Alex was staring at her, and she knew that she had to explain what was happening, but not right now. Right now, her main concern was keeping him out of harm's way.

"Come on, Alex, we're going upstairs until the police arrive," she said, grabbing him by his good hand and dragging him out of his chair.

Alex struggled to keep up with her as they ran up the flight of stairs to his bedroom. Once there, she closed all the blinds and sat on his bed with him, still holding his hand tightly. Just before she finished closing the blinds, he saw that the faint light from the stone cottage had grown brighter. Something was happening up there. Looking closer, Alex noticed how the cloud cover had increased dramatically, as did a thick fog that seemed to have come out of nowhere.

Outside they could hear Farrell rustling around in the garage looking for the intruder. He couldn't say why, but there was something about Farrell that Alex didn't trust. It might have been because of what Washington had said, but even if he hadn't told him about the abrasive sheriff, Alex was pretty sure he would feel the same way. From down the street the whining sounds of approaching sirens were closing fast and within a few seconds two more police cars had arrived at their house. The officers appeared outside and were talking with Farrell, his low voice sounding a little defeated, indicating he didn't get his man. The group circled around the house twice just to make sure no one was there, but found nothing. Farrell scratched his head in frustration and looked down at the cove. There was a faint light there, but it disappeared just as he was about to say something.

"There's nothing out here." Farrell sighed. "Come on, let's go inside and tell them."

The doorbell rang and Farrell shouted up to them to be let in.

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Jennifer immediately stood up from his bed and dragged him back downstairs with her where she unlocked the front door and swung it open wide for them. Farrell pushed the door open and brushed past her rudely along with three other men, all of whom were dressed in uniform. The last one inside shut and locked the door behind him, being sure to check it before leading them back into the kitchen. Farrell was waiting for them with a small curved object inside a plastic bag marked "Evidence" in his hands.

"Do you recognize this, Mrs. Harrison? Does this belong to you?" Farrell asked, holding a dull fishing knife with a crimson red handle up for her to see.

"Yes. Yes, I do recognize that. It's ours. It belonged to my husband's father, Alex's grand-dad, and we took it with us here to Oceanview when we moved. Alex and his father use it when they go fishing."

Alex smiled.

He returned it! That's why he came back. He wanted to make sure I didn't get caught. But why risk being captured only to return a rusty fishing knife that likely wouldn't have been missed anyway?

Then Alex remembered how the blade seemed to curve and bend before his eyes when Washington held it. He had said that the cove was shunned for many reasons, chief among them was a fear of what might lurk there. He spoke briefly of a force that had dwelled up there. "Magic that the cove had left behind," Washington had said. Perhaps he was trying to remind Alex of what he had seen today.

"I see. It doesn't seem like something you would have laying around the garage for anyone to find. Had you unpacked it yet?" Farrell continued solemnly.

Jennifer shook her head in the negative.

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure what my husband has opened yet. He might have been planning on taking Alex out this weekend."

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Farrell ignored the last part of her statement.

"The only reason I ask is because there are an awful lot of unopened boxes in your garage and this was lying in the middle of the floor next to this," he said, holding up the blue duffel bag Alex had used earlier. In his haste to return everything he must have forgotten to put it away.

Alex knew Washington had brought the knife back for him, but if Farrell found out it was Washington out there, then it was doubtful he would view it the same way Alex did. Odds were Farrell would see a homeless man breaking into a garage and then dropping what he intended to steal because of Farrell's sudden shouting and the motion light that went off. Alex had to make sure he didn't mention Washington's name to anyone, especially to him.

"No, I don't think we had unpacked anything in the garage yet. I'm pretty certain of that."

"That's what I thought," Farrell sighed looking at his watch. "What time is your husband due home, Mrs. Harrison?"

She immediately grew angry thinking about Andy and his tardiness.

"I don't know when he'll be home, maybe later on. He said he would be here by now but..." She left the end of the sentence to hang in the air.

"I see. We have a few options at this point, but I want to do this by the book. This is what I propose we do and I strongly suggest you go along with it. First of all, I'm leaving two men here just in case whoever was out there comes back. Secondly, I'm taking this back to the department to be dusted for prints, along with the bag."

Alex immediately tensed up. *His* fingerprints were on both of those items. Was there a chance they would find out that he had been using them? What would he say?

Jennifer nodded. "Whatever you think is best, Mr. Farrell. Do you think they came to steal something or..." She looked over at Alex nervously.

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“That’s one possibility, but another scenario is that they followed me to see what the police knew about the hit and run yesterday. I believe they wanted to find out who the witnesses were and I unwittingly showed them. I take full responsibility for this and will catch whoever is out there,” he finished, hanging his head slightly in disgust.

“I have a team on their way over here to check out the area, maybe see if he’s wandered out into the cove behind your house,” Farrell continued. Something about the way he said “cove” indicated that not only did he not want to go there, but didn’t want any of his men doing so either. He stared out the kitchen window, directly at the spot where the stone house would be visible if the newly arriving fog hadn’t hidden it so expertly. Alex had a feeling that Farrell knew more about the cove than he lead on, but didn’t want to discuss it. Instead, he coughed loudly and continued, “We’ll find the perpetrator though, don’t worry about that.”

Jennifer looked at him and wanted to believe what Farrell had said, but she wasn’t stupid and knew that whoever had been sneaking around in their garage was long gone by now. And where was Andy?

Alex was still in shock from what Farrell had said about searching the cove. If they did go back there, they would definitely see Washington loping across the plain like a wounded animal, heading back to his ramshackle wooden dwelling in the lush grove beyond the marshland. All he had done was return the knife Alex had foolishly dropped while running. He was only trying to keep Alex out of trouble and now he might be arrested for it.

Think. What would Sergeant Hawthorne do to help his friend? A distraction. Of course. A distraction will give him time to escape.

Alex knew that in order for Washington to get away he had to delay the search for at least five more minutes. That would give him barely enough time to get back to the safety of the trees, but it would have to

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do.

Think. Think hard. A distraction.

Then it came to him and Alex pinched his left arm until the pain was unbearable and tears began welling up in his eyes.

“Jenny? I’m scared. What’s going on? Who was that man? Where’s Daddy?” he sobbed, pretending to be terrified of what had just happened. He pinched his arm harder and worked up a few more false tears, letting them pour down his face to complete the act.

Everyone stopped talking and looked at him. Jennifer reacted first.

“Oh, honey, no. Don’t cry, sport. Come on, it’s going to be okay. That man won’t be coming back here again, not with all these policemen around,” she said as she cradled him in her arms and smoothed his hair back from his head.

“She’s right, Alex. No one would be stupid enough to come back here now, not with all of us here,” Farrell added sweeping his arm across the room to indicate the other officers present. “And if he did, we would nab him right away.”

It’s working. You’ve distracted them. Keep it up. Give him a little more time.

“But still, I’m scared, even with everyone here. Where’s Daddy?” Alex moaned, burying his face into her blouse.

Jennifer sighed and looked over at the men standing in their starched uniforms. They were also wondering where her husband was at this hour, especially after the day his son had recently had. If they knew she had been at work all day too, they would probably be even more shocked.

“I don’t know where he is, honey. He said...” she started, clearing her throat first, but was cut off by the sound of another voice, Andy’s.

“What the hell is going on here? I get home from work to find three cop cars parked in my driveway with their lights flashing like it’s Christmas. Not to mention that all the doors are locked on me. What’s

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wrong with Alex? And why are they here?” Andy asked, pointing an accusing finger at the officers with a blind fury in his eyes. It was something that neither Alex nor Jennifer had expected.

“Mr. Harrison, please, maybe you should listen to us before you start making assumptions or jumping to conclusions,” Farrell began only to be cut off by Jennifer.

“Andy, we just saw someone milling around behind the garage and when Sheriff Farrell asked him to identify himself, he dropped a knife and fled. A *knife*, Andy. They think it might be related to the accident yesterday.”

Jennifer paused and looked Andy directly in the eye, noticing that his eyes were actually focused on Farrell and not her. He hadn’t even looked at her or his son yet. The tension in the room was growing thick.

“Andy? Are you even listening to me?”

Andy turned his head and looked at her, rolling his eyes at the same time.

“God damn it, Andy! Someone tried to break into our garage a few minutes ago while Sheriff Farrell was asking Alex some questions about the hit and run he saw yesterday. Maybe if you would actually pay attention to what went on outside of the office for a change, you would have known that,” she spat in his face angrily, immediately wishing she could take the words back.

Andy stood there in his new black suit, his tie pulled slightly off center, making him look disheveled and tired. He gave her a look that could have burned through steel, but Jennifer stood her ground and kept her gaze fixed directly on him. After what seemed like an eternity of silence, Farrell broke in.

“Look, you two are going to have to put whatever problems you’re having aside for the time being. We need to find out who this person is who attempted the break in and what they were looking for. I highly doubt they were simply looking to rip off a few boxes of old junk from

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your garage, so we need to assume the worst and then go forward from there. If it is related in any way to what happened yesterday, then we are going to have to assume this person is extremely dangerous, and a threat to your son.”

“We’re not having any problems,” Andy barked back at him.

“Excuse me?”

“I said that we aren’t having any problems, Sheriff Farrell. So if you could just take your men and be on your way, I’d appreciate it.”

“Andy!” Jennifer cried out in surprise. “What are you doing? Someone came after Alex tonight! Try to be reasonable for a moment and see that there is a possibility this wasn’t merely a botched burglary.”

“Mr. Harrison, I must strongly insist that you let my men stay here, at least for tonight, if not until we find out more about who that was lurking around outside your house.”

“All that aside, Sheriff, I would still prefer that you left and took your men with you. I believe we can manage just fine,” Andy finished, locking eyes with Farrell for several long, tense moments before turning them back to Jennifer and Alex.

Alex was terrified by his father’s reaction, more so than he feared anyone coming after him. He knew Washington had no intentions on returning tonight, and even if he did, Washington wasn’t going to hurt anyone. If anything he had been trying to help him! Help him to understand what was happening perhaps, but more importantly, help him understand the enigmatic cove that seemed to be growing epicenter of a storm.

Surely he has made it back to his camp by now. He should be safely sitting on one of his logs smoking a cigarette. But why go to all this risk unless he thought he was protecting something more important than simply preventing me from getting grounded for sneaking out?

It just didn’t make sense.

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“Andy, please, your son is in danger. Do the right thing, let them stay,” Jennifer pleaded, laying her petite hand on his thick forearm, hoping to soothe his anger with her touch. He pulled his arm away.

“Out of the question. I deal with enough problems during the day, and I don’t want to start dealing with them at home too. So, if you don’t mind, Mr. Farrell,” Andy finished by leading them back to the front door where he opened it for them and stood there with a scowl on his face watching them file out.

“Mr. Harrison, I can’t legally force my men to stay here and protect you or your wife...”

“Yes, I know that. So if you will just leave, we can have our dinner...”

“Your son, however,” Farrell’s voice rose, overpowering Andy’s and forcing him to remain quiet. “Your son is a witness to a crime, Mr. Harrison. And with or without your permission, I do have the authority to take him into custody for protection purposes until such a time as I see fit to release him. You and your wife are welcome to join him, in fact I encourage you to do so, but let me be extremely clear on this matter with you,” he said, moving directly into Andy’s face. “Regardless of what you choose, Alex is going to be under our protection until such a time when we decide it is safe for him to be otherwise, and that’s a reality. The choice is yours.”

They stood eye to eye, glaring at each other. If Alex thought his father had been acting strange at breakfast this morning, then now he was at a loss. The two men looked like they should be friends, both were rugged and athletic and both took their jobs seriously, but also seemed miles apart.

One of the other officers leaned over and gently nudged Alex, leading him upstairs.

“You should probably pack up some clothes, son. It could be a while.”

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“Wait, no! Alex? Andy, do something!” Jennifer panicked, her nervous eyes darting back and forth among him, her husband, and the sheriff.

Andy stood there with his teeth clenched, his eyes locked on Farrell, who wasn’t backing down one inch. Farrell had seen enough hot heads in his years to know that you didn’t break eye contact with them. It was better to stand your ground and let them know that you had absolutely no fear of them. His look went from that of an angry man to that of someone ready to knock Andy Harrison out cold. Andy wisely recognized it, slowly backing down and walking over to Jennifer’s side, his eyes still locked on Farrell’s.

“Mrs. Harrison, I think that maybe you should speak with your husband, once he calms down of course. Fill him in on what’s happened to his son in the past day, because I don’t think he sees the big picture yet. I think he might be a little bit more reasonable once he does see it. After that, you two should come down to the station so we can discuss a safe place for Alex to remain for a few days.”

“You can’t just come in here and take my...” Andy started again.

“Yes, I can, Mr. Harrison. *Yes, I can.* Like it or not, the safety of the community and your son, comes ahead of what your personal desires might be. Now as I was saying, you two can follow us to the station or come later on, but we will need to speak with both of you together, so try to be there sooner rather than later.”

Alex came bounding down the stairs with a large backpack stuffed with some of his clothes and toys inside. Behind him, the police officer tried to keep up.

“He moves pretty quick for someone with a broken wrist. I remember one time when I broke my arm...”

Farrell glared at him, causing the officer to shut his mouth.

“Les, we’re taking Alex to the station with us. I want him to ride with you, okay?”

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“No problem, Jimmy.”

Then Farrell turned and spoke one last time to Jennifer and Andy before leaving.

“For you son’s sake, Mr. Harrison, try and understand that what he saw yesterday, along with tonight’s events, is traumatic enough without you busting in and making a scene like this as well. I hope to see you both downtown in a little while. Here is my card with my phone number.”

He closed the door behind him, after suggesting that they lock it tonight regardless of whether they chose to follow them to the station now or not.

Alex looked up at his parents as he slipped through the front door, escorted by two burly officers, and reached his good hand out to them.

Where are they taking me? I can’t tell them about Washington. I promised I wouldn’t say anything.

“Dad? Mom?”

The door slammed closed behind him, leaving him alone with the policemen. From inside he could hear Jennifer yelling at his father.

* * *

“Andy, how could you do that? He’s your son! Your only son, damn you! What’s wrong with you?”

Andy looked at her through red-rimmed eyes, anger filled eyes, and did something that he promised himself he would never do, something his father had made a habit of doing to his mother when he was drinking, which was often enough. He slapped Jennifer across the face, sending her sprawling onto the floor. She looked up at him shocked beyond belief and wiped a trickle of blood away from her split lip as tears began running down her face.

“You’re an asshole,” she spat at him, blood falling off of her lower lip and onto the linoleum floor. “He’s your son, Andy. *Our* son. If you ever cared at all about either of us, then you should listen to the police

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and we should go with them.”

He approached her slowly, his face frozen into a blank expression, his eyes lifeless and hollow. He reached into his suit pocket and she cringed, expecting another blow, when he pulled out a cigarette. Andy wasn’t allowed to smoke in the kitchen, in fact, she thought he had quit.

He carefully lit the cigarette with trembling hands, sucking hard and coughing out a cloud of smoke. He hadn’t had one in so long that his lungs weren’t ready for the initial blast of heat that seared through his body.

“Andy, what are you doing? Why are you smoking again? We both quit remember?” Jennifer asked.

He put his hands up to his face and started sobbing.

“I’m sorry, Jenny. I’m so sorry.”

She sat on the cold kitchen floor confused and crying. He slumped down next to her, his chest heaving with sorrow. She leaned over and embraced him. In all the time she had known him he had never been violent, nor unpredictable, which was one thing she loved about him.

“It’s going to be okay, honey. I know you’re sorry about hitting me. I know you didn’t mean it.”

He shook his head and took another drag off of the cigarette, mumbling something incoherently about a virus.

“It’s not that. I mean, I am sorry I hit you. It’s just that, I’m sorry.”

She took the cigarette from his trembling fingers and took a drag of her own, feeling the nicotine enter her bloodstream, causing her head to swim briefly.

“Sorry about what, Andy? I don’t understand. Is it about work? I know you are under pressure from work, but it’s okay. This is stressful on all of us. Between the constant moving and new jobs and now Alex, I mean, it’s okay. I feel the strain too.”

“No. No, it’s not that. I ran into some people today.”

Her eyes narrowed.

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“Who? What people?”

Andy sighed and put his free hand into his pants pocket and pulled out a pack of Marlboro's, fished one out, and used the lit end of hers to light his own. He exhaled a plume of smoke and looked at her.

“Remember when I told you I did some work for the government back in Vietnam?”

She immediately didn't like the direction the conversation was going in. Andy had told her when they first started dating that he had seen some action in Vietnam, but he was really just a biochemist. He had never really shot anyone, or so he had said. His duties consisted of thinking up new weapons which the U.S. Department of Defense, or DOD, could use. Things like pesticides that could be sprayed on the enemy's food supply which would kill their crops, but that was all. Nothing more, no shooting, no actual face to face killing. His biggest project had been assigned to him just as the conflict was drawing to a close. They wanted him to develop a virus of some sort that could be sprayed into areas where the resistance was strongest, areas where the ground troops couldn't get to. The virus was going to be able to filter its way to into hidden enemy camps and kill whatever it infected within minutes. A completely organic virus that, once inhaled, killed its victim almost instantly by closing off the air supply from the lungs to the brain, causing massive seizures. The only problem was that no one, not even a man as brilliant as her husband was, could create it. It was a very unstable specimen and he was never able to fully complete his work on it. Or so he said.

“What men?” she asked again.

“I ran into some colleagues that worked with me on that virus I told you about. You remember it, don't you?”

She nodded.

“Anyway, there was something I never told you about it. Something stupid that I did. I just didn't think that it would matter, and I never

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thought they would be able to find me. Not after all this time. God, how could I have been so foolish. Of course they would come for me.”

“What are you talking about, Andy? Who? Who are these people you ran into?”

He sighed and took another long drag.

“I can’t tell you. It’s better if you don’t know anyway. It would only make you a target, like me.”

“A target? Andy, you need to relax. Talk to me, honey. Talk to me. What is going on? What happened to you today?”

“I can’t sit,” he said, taking another drag on the cigarette and standing up to pace the floor. “Jen, I was only looking out for my future at the time. The war seemed like it might go on forever. If it did, I knew that when it finally was over I would need money. So I did something to ensure I would never have to worry about money again.”

Jennifer looked at him with a puzzled face.

“What did you do, Andy?”

He grinned impishly and stared out the kitchen window.

“I finished the virus, Jen. Two weeks before we officially pulled out of Vietnam, I finished stabilizing one of the specimens. And it worked.”

She gasped in horror, reflecting on the painful ways in which the victims of this virus would die. Choking to death on their own blood as their air-deprived lungs burned to ash. Organs liquefying within minutes of exposure, hearts bursting as clogged arteries pumped poison through its chambers. It killed and left no trace of having been there. It was a perfect weapon, but one that should never be used. She looked at the cigarette dangling loosely between her fingers and forced herself to take another drag.

“Wh-where is it, Andy? You didn’t bring it back here, with us? Not here with Alex and me around?”

He shook his head.

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“No, nothing like that. Give me some credit. I may have created a monster, but I’m not one myself.”

She wanted to believe him, but was finding it hard to. She started to say something, but stopped as Andy continued, his confession now pouring out of him.

“After I had stabilized the solution as best I could, I sent it here, to Oceanview, to a contact I made while in Vietnam. It was shipped over here with the explicit instructions that should something happen to me, he should destroy the virus by burning it.”

“And did this mysterious contact of yours do that? Did he destroy the virus you created?”

Andy shook his head.

“I don’t know for sure what he did with it because we haven’t made contact since, and now we never will. It was my idea. I figured that if we didn’t know where the other one was then we would both be safe in case people started asking questions.”

“But people did start asking questions, didn’t they?”

Andy nodded.

“Who wants this virus, Andy? Who wants it bad enough to track you down after all these years? To put your son in danger, to come into our house after him?”

He sighed and ran his hands through his thick, dark hair, leaving one hand resting on top of his head while he thought. He ignored her questions and continued.

“I managed to strike up a deal with a lesser known agency within the U.S. government. Again, I’m not going to tell you for your own protection, but after they paid me, and they paid me very well, I realized what their true intentions were for the virus.”

He shook his head sadly, as if he was almost glad to be relieved of this burden, but at the same time wishing he didn’t have to endanger the people he loved in order to do so.

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“What were they planning, Andy? This...agency you worked for?”

“I never worked for them directly, I was only following orders. They were planning on testing it within the United States. Jennifer, they were going to use our own people as guinea pigs for my virus.”

She reached down and pulled another cigarette out of his rapidly diminishing pack and lit it, a small wreath of smoke encircled her head while she thought of how to respond to what he had said. After a short time she spoke.

“Andy, this is too much to believe. How did you manage to get the virus out of Vietnam? You couldn’t just mail it here. Did you have someone smuggle it out for you?”

He put a finger to his lips and walked over to the kitchen window, drawing the curtains tightly before slinking back down to the floor and urging her to do the same.

“Quiet. Be quiet. They may be outside.”

“Who?”

“The men I was dealing with over there. You really think someone who was involved in a hit and run would take the time to come back and track down a ten year old kid? It would be a waste of time. Any normal person would be halfway across the country by now. The only people who would have the time and resources to do that would be the people I used to work for. They probably had someone at the hospital watching him the whole time. Finding out his name, address, age, everything. No average citizen would have the time, skill, or the patience to do that. It’s *them* who were out there tonight looking for Alex. Not some drunk who accidentally ran a homeless man off the road. And definitely not this guy.”

Jennifer looked over at him. They were both now seated on the tiled kitchen floor puffing away on their cigarettes like tiny dragons. She was beginning to get scared.

“You knew that guy didn’t you? The guy Alex saw get hit. You

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knew him.”

He nodded.

“I did know him, a long time ago. His name was Anthony Hawthorne, he was my contact here, but let me finish first. Once I found out that they were planning on testing the virus back here in the states, and let me stress to you that direct exposure to it was lethal within minutes, I pulled out. I couldn’t sit back and watch our men fighting and dying over in a swamp half-way around the world only to come back and see them die at the hands of something I created, something their own government asked me to create. So I did what I thought was the next best thing, I hid it from them.”

“Why didn’t you just destroy it, Andy? If it’s as deadly as you say it is, then why not destroy it when you had the chance?”

“Two reasons. First, with the virus gone there would be no need to keep me alive. If they received word that I had simply incinerated it, there would be nothing standing in their way from killing me. The formulas were on microfilm as well as in my head, but if there was no sample to test it with, then I was as good as dead. As long as they knew it still might exist somewhere, that it definitely had not been destroyed, then I could try to escape back here. You see, their scientists couldn’t create it. They couldn’t get it to stabilize, so they needed my sample as a starting point.”

She shook her head in disbelief. She had known her husband was smart, but what Andy was talking about was beyond even her.

“The other reason I kept it you may not agree with, nor would I expect you to. I’m not even sure I do anymore. My second reason for not entirely ridding myself of this virus was because of the work Jen. The work itself forced my hand.”

He watched as her mouth dropped open but remained silent. Andy wanted, almost expected her to scream, to yell, to say something, but instead she took it all in and waited. Just like a good psychiatrist, she

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wanted to hear all the facts before rendering a decision.

"I spent so many years of my life working on it that when I was finally able to make it live and breathe, I couldn't just throw it into the fires to be consumed like trash. It wasn't trash, Jen. It was alive. I made something from nothing, a life from nothingness."

Jennifer stared at him quietly.

"You have to understand this is the most perfect killing machine that has ever been created. It is a living entity that I created and it is alive only because I made it so."

She peered up at him, looking at his eyes. They had suddenly become wild, flashing with madness. Had he actually done all this or was he losing his mind? She had to assume he was telling the truth otherwise he wouldn't be so paranoid. Plus, her instincts told her that his fear, and genius, were genuine.

He tossed his cigarette into the kitchen sink and ran cold water over it while lighting another.

"The virus is here in Oceanview. Not in this house, maybe not even in the original form I made it into. It was designed to adapt so it probably changed, mutated, as the years passed. They know it's here too, but they need me in order to find it. Christ, why did I accept their deal? I should have known better, but they threw money at me, money I needed, we needed," he finished, reflecting on his dead wife.

Jennifer stood up and walked over to the window before turning around and pacing slowly back and forth in front of him. Her mind was heavy with thought. Andy stood up next to her and looked questioningly into her eyes. Did she even believe him?

After a long pause, he finally spoke again.

"Well? Aren't you going to say anything? You don't believe me, do you? You think I'm making all this up. You probably are saying in your mind..."

"Will you shut up for a second, Andy? For someone who just told

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me they invented the next Black Plague, you should at least understand that the gravity of the moment might be a little much for me. What about the last part you said? About it not being in the same form anymore? What did you mean by that?"

"I meant just that," Andy replied. "It could have decomposed or have been exposed to the air, or mutated or any other number of things could have happened. Like I said, it was the first sample I was able to stabilize so I don't know what else it is capable of."

"What does it do?"

"It kills Jennifer. It turns your organs into mush."

"I know, I know. Are there any symptoms or side effects that would indicate if someone has been exposed to it? You must have run tests right?"

"Yeah, I ran hundreds of tests—o-on rats." He cringed. "The most frequent symptom prior to death was paranoia. Most of the poor bastards almost looked like they were seeing and hearing things right before their insides...well, I told what happens. Why do you ask?"

Jennifer stopped pacing for a minute and wrinkled her brow, casting herself ever deeper into thought.

"No reason. I just was thinking about something I heard about this area. It's nothing."

"You mean the cove back there?"

"Yeah, just folk stories I read or overheard somewhere. I just can't remember where."

"It is a weird area. I'll give it that. The realtor told me locals think it's haunted or something. Mmmm...so what are we going to do?" she asked, her mind finally coming around to Alex.

"There is no we on this one, Jen. This is my problem and I can't drag you and Alex into it. It's far too dangerous. I just need to think for a minute, if only I knew..."

"Where is the virus, Andy? You must have some idea. If it's that

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important, then just give it to them and let's get back to our lives."

"I can't. I don't know the exact location of it. That's what makes this even harder. I sent it back along with some military supplies that were supposed to be sent to an installation here in Oceanview. But there isn't a military base or camp anywhere around here. I have no idea where it could be," Andy finished, and started crying again.

Jennifer felt terrible, like she had just been punched in the stomach, knocking all the air out of her. She walked over to him, not knowing whether she should hate him for doing this to their family or cry with him because of their shared danger. Even though he could be a career-oriented man, he was still the best man she had ever known, and she loved him and Alex deeply.

"Andy? Come on, we'll figure something out. We should go to the police, maybe that Sheriff Farrell can help."

"I doubt it," he mumbled miserably under his breath. "But I guess I have no choice now."

"We," she corrected. "We have no other choice."

She wiped the tears from his eyes, and Andy smiled at her and kissed her softly on the lips.

He began to say something to her when a sharp tinkle of broken glass from the kitchen window startled him. He immediately covered his head.

"Jen? Jennifer did you hear that?"

She didn't respond. Instead her body went limp in his arms as she mouthed a scream.

"Jenny! Jen?"

She slid out of his arms, a confused smile on her face, as she fell to the floor at his feet.

God, not again! You can't take another one from me!

Andy looked up at the window and saw the tiny hole where the bullet had come in. Then he saw his wife at his feet, a small streak on

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the side of her face pouring warm blood out onto the white kitchen floor. It didn't appear fatal, but it was causing enough blood to flow to cause him to panic. Before he could even move, three more shots came crashing through the window, shattering the glass. Andy dropped to his knees as the bullets buried themselves into the wall behind him, splintering the wall clock that hung there.

At least he was right about one thing. They were in town looking for him. However, it didn't seem to matter whether he was taken dead or alive and that changed things dramatically.

* * *

From behind the garage, Washington watched the four flashes of light, recognizing them immediately as gunfire, and shook his head sadly as he realized he was too late to help. He only hoped Alex wasn't still inside. He saw the police arrive after he was initially spotted by Sheriff Farrell and hid down in the cove. Washington knew that the since the entire force was constructed of local men, superstition and folklore would likely keep them from searching for him down there at night. Not even the bravest of them would risk venturing down into the strange void the cove was.

He could see movement among the trees along the sides of the house and knew the people who were after the Harrisons had their prey surrounded. They were using a classic guerrilla warfare tactic. It was one he had seen numerous times in Vietnam—a maneuver where you would hit one side of the enemy with a volley of bullets while the rest of the team waited on the other side to flank them. Basic tactics, but being executed very expertly, which lead him to believe that perhaps the men involved were professionals, or at least combat savvy. Washington sighed heavily and pondered going into the house to see for himself what had actually happened, but thought better of it once he saw a small team of men moving in from the opposite end of the house. Before making his way down the hillside and back across the cove, he

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thought one last time about Alex and the key he held in his possession. If Tony had found a way to make sure that it wound up in his hands, then it was Washington's responsibility to look after him. As he loped off along the ravine floor heading towards the lower half of Ridge Road, he really hoped Alex wasn't in that house.

CHAPTER 14

Andy was completely numb. If there was a part of him that was trying to feel, he made sure he pushed it far down deep inside and covered it up with layers upon layers of guilt. His wife had just been shot for something he had done years ago, before he even knew her. She couldn't have been more than a child when he had made that deal. God, she was beautiful laying there. Like a fallen angel who had become lost on her way back to Heaven. Jennifer lay prone before him with her smooth, perfect white skin stained with dark blood. He reached into his pocket and pulled out another cigarette, it was at least his tenth or maybe eleventh of the day. He couldn't think straight, and it took him three tries before he finally was able to light it. He couldn't think of anything else besides Jennifer. Even when he heard the men rustling about outside, closing their loose net around him, he could only sit there with her head in his hands, his eyes locked on her beautiful countenance with the cigarette sitting between his tightly pursed lips.

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Andy knew the people who had done this hadn't left yet. He could feel them outside almost as well as he could hear them, but they most likely weren't ready to enter the house yet. If they were still being trained and lead by the same man he had met all those years ago, then they wouldn't even breathe without him giving them permission first. That would at least give Andy some time.

The first thing he needed to do was get help, and fast. Andy saw her wound wasn't deep enough to kill her—she'd just been grazed—but since it was so close to her temple, he didn't want to take any chances. The blood continued to flow out of her head like water from a faucet. Using a dishrag as a makeshift compress, he wrapped Jennifer's head up tightly in hopes of slowing the bleeding down. He had already lost one woman he loved to a disease he couldn't stop, he wasn't about to lose another one when he knew what needed to be done. He just had to remember his training.

Think back to the Army, back to your training. Think hard or she's going to die.

Andy struggled with his emotions and his instincts as he puffed away on the cigarette. An inch of gray ash dangled dangerously from its end. Instinct told him to pick her up and run out the door, but he knew he would be gunned down immediately if he did that. His best bet was to stay put, stay inside and low, away from the windows and away from the lights.

He looked at the cigarette in his left hand and studied it carefully. His fingers ran over the tan filter's smooth paper surface. Memories came flooding back to him. Memories of another time, when he was another man. A time when he wasn't Andrew Harrison.

Andy had been a military man his whole life, and Jenny knew that. However, prior to tonight she only thought he worked on benign viruses and bacteria, not the deadly kind he had to painfully explain to her the government really wanted him to generate. He never really told

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her about the war itself either, or the three clouded months he spent in a hospital in Hanoi. Those were stories that only those who survived it could talk about, and only those who were with him could remember, if they even wanted to.

He popped his head up briefly and peered out the shattered kitchen window, seeing the car he had purchased with the blood money he had taken from the government. It was a black Jeep, one that matched Jennifer's red one. He could be corny like that sometimes, and she generally let him. He dropped his cigarette into the sink and ran cold water over it, listening to it hiss as it went out. He looked down at her and started crying again. He had a million things he wanted to do, but he knew the first thing he had to do was to make a phone call to James Farrell. Andy would apologize for his behavior and then calmly try to explain to him what had happened. After that, he needed to ascertain exactly where his son was and what he actually knew about the accident yesterday.

When he was at the hospital and saw that Tony Hawthorne had been killed, the same man he had sent the virus to over twenty years ago, Andy knew his own life was now in danger. Tony was probably the only one who knew where the virus now rested. He had been entrusted by Andy to hide it when it arrived in Oceanview. Andy had never asked where it was hidden because he really didn't want to know, nor did he care, until now. He had assumed the virus, and what he had done back in Vietnam, was a chapter of his life that was forever closed. Now with Tony dead, Andy had no idea where to look for the one thing that might be able to save his life, as well as his family's. He racked his brain, but all Andy knew for certain was that he instructed Tony to bury it in a military compound or another type of installation. Somewhere that the public would have limited access to. But he couldn't think of anyplace in Oceanview that fit that description.

Or was there?

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He didn't know.

Jennifer's blood was beginning to seep through the dishrag, covering the floor and turning the light colored tile a bright red. He felt sick. He needed air. He needed help. He needed her. There was a first aid kit in the garage, it was still packed up in one of the boxes, but right now it might be the only thing that he could use. He had to get to it.

Andy kissed her eyelashes and they fluttered briefly as she tried to respond.

"I'll be right back, honey. Don't worry. I'm coming back. Just hang on." He ran his hands through his hair.

Jennifer mumbled something like she was in a dream, and he bit back hard against the tears that wanted to come and kissed her again. Before leaving, he rechecked the now blood-soaked towel and reluctantly moved toward the back door.

He hoped that whoever had shot at them had gone. Since he wasn't sure, Andy carefully made his way outside and into the garage. He flipped the light switch off before he went and was sure to stay low to the ground, just in case. Once inside the garage, he frantically searched through the dusty boxes until he found what he was looking for. Inside one of them, stuffed way down at the bottom, was the first-aid kit. It was a bulky and cumbersome metal suitcase, but it had enough thick gauze and peroxide to sufficiently clean and wrap her wound. He also saw something else next to the kit, a small black box that contained a small handgun he had purchased just after returning from the war. He also remembered buying bullets from someone, but it was too hazy to recall. It wasn't much firepower since it was relatively out of date, and if Jennifer had known he still had it she would have fought him tooth and nail, but right now it was the only defense they had.

Andy opened the box carefully and curled his fingers around the butt end of the gun, feeling the cold steel against his hand for the first time since Vietnam.

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Or was there another time? A break-in?

He couldn't remember. But he thought he had used the gun once before...

He checked the clip to see if it was still loaded; it was. With gun in hand, Andy left the garage and cautiously slunk back into the house to make the phone call to Sheriff Farrell. He only hoped that they hadn't already cut the phone lines on him. He moved back inside and slowly closed the door with a quiet click before hurrying again to be at her side. The towel had fallen off her head and there was blood everywhere. He didn't panic, but took a deep breath and reapplied the towel, placing the bulky first aid kit down next to her.

Call the police. Call them now! You can't do anything else for her. The more time you waste, the more blood she loses. You're killing her! Andy finally complied and did what he should have done immediately, he reached for the phone. He needed to do what he always told Alex to do, he needed to be brave, he needed to face his fears.

Face my fears. My real fears.

There were many things he was afraid of, but there was only one thing he had never truly faced, one that only Alex knew about. Andy had inadvertently told his son one night after a bad nightmare. It had been right after Marcie died and Alex was confused and scared about her death. So, in order to show Alex that everyone was frightened at one point or another, Andy had told him about his greatest fear. He was afraid of rats. No, he was *terrified* of rats.

Andy remembered the night like it was only yesterday. Alex had woke up screaming and crying in the middle of the night, having just had a terrible nightmare. One that involved falling down into a dark hole if he remembered correctly. As he was trying to console him, Alex asked him a question that no one else ever had before. Alex asked if he was afraid of anything. Andy was surprised, to say the least, that his little boy should be so inquisitive about his fears. He had never told

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anyone about them, not Marcie, not even Jennifer now. On this particular night, however, in order to make his son sleep easier, he told Alex why he was afraid of rats.

* * *

Andy worked in a laboratory for a few years after the war as a simple lab technician, a long time before he took his current position. His job was to work with test subjects on different viruses the company had developed. They were mostly basic cold and flu remedies, not anything like the technology he'd worked with during the war, but it was still interesting work. Except for the rats.

Andy never liked using rodents to begin with, but the test subjects in one particular batch were downright nasty. In order to run the test properly, he had to inject them nightly with a genetically engineered form of adrenalin that would test their ability to heal themselves. It was also his job to cut them with a surgical knife before injecting them. The theory was that if a body felt threatened and was injected with the proper dosage of adrenalin, then it would be able to heal itself faster by causing the white blood cells to multiply exponentially, using the additional adrenalin as a catalyst. Naturally, it never worked out and the company went bankrupt soon after he left, but the thinking was different then, everything was.

Every night for three months Andy cut and injected the animals with no visible results. That was until one night when he approached the rat cage only to find it empty. The metal bars had been gnawed through, saliva from the rats mouths was still dripping from the broken bars. No one else he worked with knew of his fear of rats, so it couldn't have been a joke someone was playing on him. Then he thought it might have been a test to see how he would react under pressure.

Suddenly he heard a low growl. As he turned to see what had made the sound, the lights went out. Above him, Andy could hear the scurrying sounds of the rats as they crawled across the ceiling tiles,

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their tiny claws scratching on the metal beams separating the tiling like tiny nails being driven into his brain. He froze, first listening to the rats moving nimbly through the ceiling and walls around him, then he panicked and stumbled backwards towards the door, tripping over one of the laboratory tables and falling to the ground. His breath came in quick gasps as all around him the rats closed in. They were waiting for him. Did they purposely move the table over to block the doorway to prevent his escape? They chattered loudly back and forth around him, a tail or whisker occasionally brushing against his arm, making him squirm. A thick bead of sweat crawled down his face.

There was only one answer, the shots he had been giving them had made them stronger. But not just their white blood cells, their muscles and intellect had been improved as well. There was a small chance that it might happen, and it did. Andy could hear them coming and stopped breathing. It didn't seem real until they crawled up over him. He sat frozen in terror, claws and whiskers crawling across him. He screamed once and they whined in unison, mocking his fear. They had come to pay him back for what he had been doing to them for the past few months. Only they weren't going to just cut him, they were going to kill him. Andy screamed again, and they screamed with him. He cried softly and closed his eyes, praying for a quick death. Tiny teeth bit into him, leaving tiny marks in his skin. He moaned as they bit into him, one by one, sucking at his blood. He tried to scream again, but found his voice gone, his head dizzy. He lost consciousness.

The next day they found him curled up in a ball next to the cage. All the rats were somehow back inside, but twisted and bent into different positions of death. Many had large, quarter-sized holes in their chests where their hearts had ruptured. The entire room was in disarray. It was later discovered, during the autopsies, that they each had had massive brain aneurysms which were ruled as the primary causes of death. The injections had supercharged their systems, but their

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circulatory systems weren't able to handle it.

An investigation revealed the rats had been treated poorly. This was a fact that should have surprised no one as Andy's job had been to slice them open every evening before injecting them, but when the animal rights activists heard about the experiments, all hell broke loose. Andy explained what happened to everyone at work, to the police investigating the incident and anyone else who would listen. In the end, no one believed his story, and a few months later he was quietly asked to resign. To this day though, he still believed the rats had set a trap for him, waited for him to arrive at work, and then sprung it on him. He couldn't have imagined that, he just couldn't have. A tale like that was something a child like Alex might think up, but not him, not a grown man. In any case, Andy had never thought about the incident again until the night Alex had asked him. And hadn't thought of it since, until tonight.

From the broken kitchen window Andy could smell the tide as it patiently rolled in. The brackish water had a pungent smell to it, but there was something else there as well, a scent he couldn't quite identify, yet was vaguely familiar.

The phone rang, snapping him out of his daze and back to reality. He hoped it was the police checking in on him as he still hadn't made the 9-1-1 call himself. He reached over and took the cordless phone out of its cradle on the wall, pressing the "Talk" button as he did so. From outside he could hear the waves beginning to wash ashore loudly. The tide was coming in fast. In about an hour, when it peaked, the waters would be almost up to the grove of trees, making it impossible to travel there except by boat. A tree branch scratched up against a window in the living room and he flinched. In his mind, Andy could still hear the rat's claws scraping along the floor and feel their whiskers brushing against his arms. They were waiting for him out there. Waiting to come back out of his nightmares and into reality.

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“Hello?” he said softly.

A dark voice spoke into the phone, a voice that sounded hollow and strained, but familiar, all too familiar.

“Now you know we are serious. It took us a long time to find you, a very long time, but now that we are here, we wanted to show you how much we have missed you. Sorry about Jennifer, she seemed like a nice woman. Good child psychiatrist too, from what I understand. How you ever managed to land her is a mystery to me.”

Andy felt his anger rising and tried to bite it back.

“Listen to me, I don’t know who...”

“Save it, Harrison,” the voice cut in. “You know exactly who this is and why I’m calling you. We want that virus and we want it now. You saw what we did to your friend, Tony, didn’t you? You know that we did that, right? It wasn’t some stupid motorist you know.”

“I know.”

“Of course you do. You have one hour to deliver it or we will kill your son.”

“You leave Alex out of this! He has nothing to do with this situation.”

“He does now,” the voice finished before hanging up.

An empty dial tone sounded in his ear. They didn’t know that Tony was the only one who knew where the virus was. That made things much worse, because with Tony dead Andy had no way of finding the virus himself.

A military base or installation. There had to be one somewhere in Oceanview, there had to be.

But then what? It could be anywhere on it or in it or under it. The time had come to call the police.

Andy picked up the phone and dialed the station number. A woman answered, explained that the call was being recorded, and then asked him for his name. After explaining who he was and why he needed to

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Speak directly with James Farrell, she placed him on hold while she paged the sheriff. Andy waited patiently on the line, listening to the Muzak version of “Yesterday” and watched the seconds ticked by on the shattered wall clock hanging above the kitchen table. There was one bullet in the clock-face and two others buried in the wall next to it. He coughed nervously as the precious seconds passed. When she came back on the line, her voice sounded a little strained, as if she were trying, and failing, to keep her composure.

“Mr. Harrison, um, well, sir there’s been an accident involving your son and the officer who was transporting him here.”

“An accident?” Andy’s mind flashed back to what the dark voice had just said. “What are you talking about? I just watched Sheriff Farrell leave ten minutes ago. Where is my son?” he shouted, not hiding his fear and concern at all.

“Well, we don’t know all the details yet, but maybe you should come down here just to be safe.”

“To be safe? Haven’t you even listened to what I just told you? Put Farrell on the phone right now and send an ambulance for my wife!”

“Sir, you will be safe here, you have to trust us. Now calm down and explain to me again what happened while I have someone find Sheriff Farrell for you.”

Andy looked at the receiver in his hands. Was she serious?

“Safe? I think my family needs to be safe from you people. Ever since your sheriff and his men started nosing around in my business we’ve had a break-in attempt and a shooting. My wife is laying here bleeding to death at my feet and now you tell me you’ve lost my son? If anything, I’d say we’re safer the further we are from you!”

“He’s not lost, Mr. Harrison. It does look like he is going to be involved in another hit-and-run accident though,” the voice continued.

Andy stopped talking for a moment and listened to the voice.

“What’s your name?” he asked breathlessly.

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The woman on the line started laughing at him. “Just give us the virus, Andy, and we’ll give you back your son!”

They had already tapped into his phone line. He slammed the phone down hard, shattering it, and tried to clear his head.

“Think, dammit. Think. How can they be shooting at you and also be tapped into your telephone?” Andy stopped, suddenly realizing the answer.

There was more than one group out there. If there was one team here, watching him, then they would have seen the police take Alex away with them. And if they had *two* teams, that might mean the second group was waiting for his son down the road...

He shuddered as he thought back to the type of people he had encountered in different segments of the military. There were many different branches of men that were involved in several different areas of intelligence. The one thing that tied them all together though, the one thing that each and every man, right down to the last one, had in common, was that they were deadly in a way that could never be trained. Cruel in a way that could never be understood, and relentless to a point beyond that of obsession. These were the men they sent into foreign countries first, to assess the enemy’s strengths and expose their weaknesses. Their goal was usually to kill who they found and gather information as they came across it, in that order. Death was a part of their job and something that they neither feared nor accepted. To a man, they would follow their orders, no matter how suicidal. Even if it meant their own death they would carry on, until the mission was complete. These were the type of men who would be brought in if the government needed something they lost, found. Or someone they didn’t want talking, eliminated. Someone like himself.

If that was the case, if a clean-up crew had been brought in to finish off him off, then that would mean that whoever had killed Tony was also working for the government. And if that were true, then after they

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found Alex, because they would find him if they hadn't already, then they would come searching for him. They would come after him until the virus was found, or he was dead.

Andy fumbled around in his suit pocket for a moment until he found his cell phone, hopefully they didn't know he had one. He popped it open and dialed the police station again, another woman's voice answered.

"Oceanview Police."

"Who is this?" he asked, still paranoid from the last call he had made.

"This is the Oceanview Police Department. Who's this?"

"Andrew Harrison," he replied as the phone cut out for a moment.

"Mr. Harrison? Mr. Harrison, are you there?" the operator's voice whined in his ear.

"Yeah, I'm here. I need help..."

"Sheriff Farrell already spoke with us. We have a car on its way over."

Andy quickly explained what had happened to his wife and the woman on the other end expressed genuine shock.

Maybe she really did work at the police station.

When he had finished, she began speaking again.

"Don't touch your wife's head other than to apply slight pressure to the wound. I have called an ambulance and it's on its way as well. Try to remain calm. I'm going to stay on the line with you."

"Yes," he responded without thinking. A dark blur darted across his field of vision as he peered out the back window. "Yes, send one right away. A car, send a car. Maybe two."

"What? I didn't hear that. Are you there? Mr. Harrison, stay on the line. Mr. Harrison?"

He hung up the phone as he saw more movement outside and started thinking about the men he had struck a deal with. He had seen

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them in action and had even worked with them once, thankfully just once, in Vietnam. If they were ordered to kill him, then that is exactly what they would do. No matter what it took and no matter how many of Oceanview's finest were on their way. Their orders were their Bibles.

* * *

Alex looked out the back window as the police car pulled away from the house. Jennifer was standing in the doorway watching him go. Her eyes were beginning to swell up, and he knew she would be crying soon. He wanted to tell her that it was okay, that he would be safer with the police than he would be with them. The problem was he didn't believe that was true. In fact, he had an uneasy feeling about the way his father had just let Farrell's men take him. There seemed to be a certain uneasy tension between the two men, almost as if they knew each other. Had his father met James Farrell somewhere before?

Impossible. Just focus on what's happening now. Focus on Washington. Focus on the key.

The key still sat in his pocket and he could feel it through his pants as he sat in the back of the cruiser.

What is the significance? Washington must know, he has to.

These were the thoughts racing through his mind when out of the corner of his eye he saw a long black car dart out of the darkness suddenly, slamming into the side of the police car and sending the vehicle spinning violently out of control. Alex heard the officer Farrell had called Les—the same man he had been questioned by yesterday—yell in surprise as they spun across the yellow line dividing the lanes. They flew off the road and into the shallow forest on their left side, heading for a copse of large trees. A loud cracking sound followed by a series of dazzling lights was all he saw as the car slammed head-on into an oak tree. Everything slowed down just before impact, and he immediately thought of television. He thought of how this would be exactly how a TV show or movie would portray the accident. His

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thoughts vanished a second later as the world around him went white, and then black, closing in on him and sucking him down into its bowels. Before consciousness escaped him entirely, he managed to make a startling connection. This car was the similar to the one that hit Tony, but slightly different somehow. It looked newer, shinier. The sound of a car horn screamed loudly in his ears, a constant blur of noise that slowly faded as he lost consciousness. A steady stream of blood was already starting to flow from his head.

Washington, help.

* * *

Moving like lightning, he ran out from where he was hiding behind a rock across the road and scooped Alex's broken form out of the back seat of the wrecked police car. He took note of the spidered windshield, which had been caused by the driver's head. The officer now lay slumped over in the front seat, his face a bloody mush. There was little chance he was still alive and no time to check. He had come to save Alex, and that was exactly what he intended to do.

"Come on, kid. It's me, Washington. You there?"

As Washington tried to wake Alex up, he heard the black Cadillac stop about a quarter of a mile down the road and turn around to inspect the damage it had caused. He didn't have much time, and he knew it. These men were professionals, and this was a professional hit. An accident caused on purpose. They would be certain to erase all signs of their presence, as well as his own, if they found him here. He threw Alex over his shoulder and swiveled him around so that he could run unencumbered.

Alex was light for a boy his age which made the journey ahead less formidable. The three-inch gash across his forehead, however, was bleeding enough to make even someone as battle-hardened as Washington cringe.

"Black car...different one..." Alex moaned.

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"I know, buddy. Hang in there. I'll take care of you."

"Black car...black car...black fog...two cars...the key...Tony...the cove...the cove...the cove..."

Washington raced across the road, through a small clearing that lead back to the Harrison's house, and then carefully down the small hillside that led back the cove. He was careful to stay away from well lit areas and moved as quietly as a serpent through fresh grass. By moving quickly and using his head, they were soon making their way around the oncoming ocean waters that were starting to break heavily with the rising tide. He noticed with more than a little unease that a dangerous looking fog was crawling in across the ocean, heading directly towards them.

"...black fog..." Alex moaned.

"I know. I see it too."

Five minutes more of hard running and he was within the safety of the forest that he called home. His movement had not gone completely unnoticed.

* * *

"Washington? Darrell Washington?" Andy said out loud, recognizing the black man immediately, even in the brief second that his face flashed in the motion light on the garage.

Darrell Washington? It can't be. He died in that jungle with the rest of them. He can't be alive. And what is he doing with Alex?

Andy went to the window and watched him run across the bent sea grass for as long as he could before his figure disappeared into the thick trees beyond the cove. His son lay limply in his arms the whole time. He didn't know whether to be scared because Washington had Alex or happy that no one else did. Unless he was working for them, which didn't seem likely judging by his dress. Jennifer moaned and moved her head slightly, just enough to loosen the bandages he had applied. As he looked down on her, his mind started screaming out at him again.

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Get out of here. Get Jennifer and get out of Oceanview. You'll all die if you stay.

He did have to get out of Oceanview, but not without everyone.

Andy stood up and ran over to the back door, tripping over Jennifer's body and falling face-first onto the floor. He cursed, checked her bandages again, and stood up just as a car pulled into the driveway. He strained his eyes, hoping it was the police cars and ambulance that were supposed to be on their way.

It wasn't.

What did arrive though, was a long black Cadillac with a missing hood ornament and a badly damaged front end. Andy watched in terror as the front doors opened in unison and two men dressed in black business suits stepped out carrying black leather briefcases. Their featureless eyes told him everything he needed to know, and he fumbled for his gun. They had been sent to settle old debts.

CHAPTER 15

Farrell was driving ahead of the car that contained Alex Harrison. Normally he would have taken the boy himself, but he had Les driving and trusted him. Twenty minutes after he arrived at the police station though, he was still waiting for them. Thirty minutes later and he was talking with Maria to check on their location, a sinking feeling in his stomach already beginning to make him regret not taking the boy himself. His suspicions rose even more when she told him about the call placed by Andy Harrison requesting a car and ambulance. He knew, judging by the way he had acted earlier, there was only one reason he was calling, fear. The question though, was fear of what? Was it because he was concerned about his wife or was there something else he was scared of? It was hard to say.

He leaned over to ask Maria another question when another call came in.

“Car 17 to base. Car 17 to base. Maria, are you there?” a weak

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voice crackled through the police radio.

She instantly picked it up and identified herself.

"Base to Car 17, this is Maria. Les, where are you? Where's Alex Harrison?"

Les coughed into the receiver.

"Gone. He's gone, Maria. Someone blind-sided me. Looked like a black Cadillac. I don't know where he is. I'm bleeding, but tell Jimmy that I'm going to..." He stopped speaking for a second.

"Les? Les? Les are you still there? Are you hurt? Speak to me," Maria cried nervously.

The radio was still on because they could hear Lester's rapid breathing and the sounds of a car's tires screeching in the distance.

"Les? Pick up, dammit. Pick up!" Farrell yelled, grabbing the microphone from Maria's trembling hands.

"They're coming back, Jimmy. Oh, God, they're coming back for me!"

"Who? Who's coming back, Les? Where are you?"

"Holy shit, Jimmy, they're coming back!"

In the background Farrell could hear a car door slam, followed by the rough sound of heavy feet falling on asphalt. The next noise he heard was the unmistakable report of a revolver being fired. One shot, that was all, but he knew that the one shot was all that was needed as Lester Worthly would never speak again.

"Les? Les! Pick up, lieutenant. Les?"

"Oh my God! They killed him. Jimmy, they killed him!" Maria wailed and began crying. In such a small department everyone knew each other very well. They were like a small family, and one of their members had just been killed.

Farrell was utterly stunned by the series of events that were transpiring, but couldn't show it, not in front of his men. He needed to remain cool. He started to say something when suddenly the radio came

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to life again and a voice, not Lester's, spoke clearly and seriously to him.

"We don't want to hurt any more of your men, but we need the Harrisons, Jimmy. As Sheriff of Oceanview I would think that you would want to keep your men safe."

"Who is this? Identify yourself, dammit!" he shouted.

"Stay away from the Harrisons, sheriff. They're our problem now."

The radio went dead. Farrell took a full minute to regain his composure before speaking again. Maria was still sobbing, but her crying had slowed down once she heard the voice on the radio identify him by name. He ran his hands through his hair and tried to match up a face with the voice he had just heard, slapping his fist into his hand when he couldn't. The rest of the department had now all gathered around him, some out of concern for Maria, but most of them because of Lester. They were anxious and ready to track down whoever shot him.

"We're going after him right, boss?" one man asked. "We are going to chase him right?"

"Give me a minute to think," he replied.

The group began to mutter amongst themselves, many swearing revenge, others peering curiously at him to see what he would do next. Farrell knew he needed to make a decision quickly. He needed to lead them.

"Okay. Okay, relax!" he yelled, and the group immediately became silent. "This is what we are going to do. I want everyone on full alert right now. Maria, I need you right now, all right? You have to stay with me, okay? There will be plenty of time for grieving later, but right now we need you to be focused."

Maria nodded and wiped at a few tears that had gathered at the corners of her eyes.

"Good. That's good. First things first, we need more people. Wake

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them up if you have to, but get them in here. I'm taking some men with me back to the Harrison house to get Andy. Maybe Lester's car is somewhere along the way. But assuming it isn't, I want our people scouring this town looking for Alex Harrison and Lester Worthy. I don't know who that was on the radio just now, but we could be in a lot of trouble here. I don't want anyone using force unless it is absolutely necessary. The last thing I want is to find that asshole and then let him get off in court because one of us busted his teeth in arresting him. Everyone clear on that?"

They nodded in unison.

"And find out the status on that ambulance for Jennifer Harrison as well as where the unit we sent over is."

"Should I alert the state police?" Maria asked, wiping her eyes with her sleeve again and trying to appear composed.

Farrell locked his gaze on her large, wet eyes. "No. This is our problem and we'll handle it ourselves. In house."

Farrell walked over behind the desks that littered the office and unlocked the gun cabinet that contained some of their heavier firepower. He pulled out a shotgun and some shells, stuffing them into the open barrels as his men watched. He didn't know if he would need them or not, but he was beginning to get a feeling. A bad feeling. The same feeling that he used to get right before the platoon went into battle. He didn't like it and he could sense that his men knew he was a little unnerved by the shooting. He needed to sound strong.

"Evans, you'll ride with me. Take a shotgun and some shells for yourself."

The young officer eagerly broke away from the crowd and ran over to the open cabinet. Farrell looked down and noticed that his hands were shaking and stuffed them into his pocket before anyone saw. He looked over his men, especially Evans. Even with the uniform and loaded shotgun in his hand, he still looked like a child playing cops and

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robbers. He didn't have the time right now to think about it. He only wanted to find Alex Harrison before whoever killed Lester did.

"You drive," he said, flipping the keys to Evans who grabbed them out of the air. They both jumped into the car. Evans started the ignition in one quick, fluid motion.

They turned on the flashing lights and siren and raced back towards 1104 Ridge Road in silence, both men knowing that what lay ahead of them was going to be dangerous. Evans kept one hand on the wheel and the other on his sidearm. He was doing it unconsciously, Farrell thought, but it was still a sign of tension.

"You all right?" Farrell asked.

"Yeah, a little nervous though."

"Try not to think about it. Focus on your training instead. And do exactly what I do. Okay?"

"Yeah, no sweat."

Farrell leaned over.

"Look, son, this isn't a joke. Whoever killed Lester sure isn't going to hesitate to kill either one of us if we get in the way. So you do *exactly* what I do and we should be fine, you got me?"

"Yes, sir," Evans snapped back, his eyes still focused on the road.

Just ahead of them on the right side of the road was Car 17, Lester Worthy's car. Lying outside on the ground next to the open driver's side door was Les himself. His crumpled body was laying face-up, vacant eyes staring blankly at the night sky as if he were looking for a particular constellation that hadn't appeared yet. Farrell could feel his anger rising within, but fought hard to give in to the urge to shout. He had to remain in control of the situation. Not just for his sake, but for Alex's and Evans's as well.

"Pull over here. Do it slowly, and then call it in. Tell them to send another car and tell Maria I want every man who leaves that station tonight carrying a shotgun along with their sidearm. And body armor, if

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there's enough to go around."

"Yes, sir," Evans responded as he got on the radio to request backup. Maria's voice was still shaky, but she seemed to be getting control of it.

"Done," Evans said after he finished. "What next?"

"Now we go see what happened," he responded, removing his gun from its holster and opening the door. Evans reluctantly followed his lead.

The ocean surf pounded against the shoreline off to their left, drowning out the mellow sounds of the cicadas as they sang back and forth to each other in the trees. The night had fallen and a half moon hung in the sky, providing a beauty that seemed out of place given the circumstances. As Farrell looked up at the sky, all he could see were the tangled vines of a jungle in Southeast Asia. He hadn't been in a situation like this, where people may be watching them as they approached, since Vietnam, and he quickly remembered that it wasn't a pleasant feeling.

He felt like he was reliving a nightmare. One that he had lived along with eight other men back in that hot jungle which seemed so far away from the rest of the world. Time over there didn't exist. The same way that time seemed to lose meaning when you put your life on the line. Some people thought that when you were in a life and death situation you reflected on how short life really was, but not him. He was always reminded of how everything stopped before an attack, and the quieter it was, the more imminent the attack would be. And it was very quiet right now.

Farrell could feel it in the air. Even the cicadas sensed something was amiss as they stopped singing and opted to go elsewhere to continue their night song. Someone was out there watching them, he was certain of it. He just needed to find them before they found him.

Together they crouched low and made their way over to Lester's

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body. He leaned over and checked his pulse just for the sake of doing it, knowing there would be none. His fingers came back sticky, covered in blood. Farrell leaned down and rolled the head off to one side, revealing the one fatal wound that had been inflicted—a gunshot at close range through the back of the head. There was an exit wound on his forehead that disfigured his face so that an open casket funeral would be impossible. It was a professional hit, one he had seen many of before, in Vietnam. Hits of this nature were either done by the mob or by the government. Since there was no organized crime in Oceanview, he had to assume his worst fear, a government hit, was coming true. He remembered a group of men from the war who worked at an even higher level than the Black Operations Unit he worked in with Tony. They were bad men. Very bad and very thorough. He prayed these weren't the people who had killed Lester.

Those men had no names and no faces. All they did was follow orders, no matter where it took them. That had always scared him. The ability to decide for yourself which orders were right and which were wrong wasn't something that people in the armed services needed. Their orders were their orders and that was that. However, these men didn't care where those orders took them. They didn't care about their own lives. They didn't care about anything. What scared him the most was something he had heard from one of the soldiers while he was in a hospital after the ambush. Someone—he used to remember his name, but time now left him only as a face—had told him a story that had been circulating around the camps about a group of specialists that had just flown in. They had been called in to secure vital areas along some of the major supply routes. They had many nicknames, but the term “cleaning crew” or “clean-up crew” was the name most often associated with them. They were rumored to literally wipe the areas assigned to them clean of all human life before moving on. Much like human locusts, they devoured their prey. Only instead of destroying

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crops as an insect might, these men destroyed other men.

They would arrive under the cover of night and move with the practiced patience of a reptile through the thick jungle towards their target. They were always silent, never speaking unless ordered to do so, and were completely impervious to heat and cold and pain. With an uncanny ability to seek out and destroy the enemy no matter what the situation was, these men excelled in taking back the different trails occupied by the Vietcong, a most unenviable job.

The story that he was thinking of in particular, the one that was now haunting him, was about a man who had become separated from the rest of the platoon. This was unusual as these men were tighter than brothers, more like a pack of wild dogs than men. This soldier, however, was separated from the rest of them during a fire fight and wound up stuck far behind enemy lines without any rations and without any means of communication. Most companies, including his own, would have left him for dead or assumed he had been captured, but not these men. They disobeyed direct orders from a general, the first time they had ever done so, and went in after their missing comrade.

For over a month no one heard anything from them. It was assumed they were dead or lost in the jungle until one day when they showed up back at the base, all of them. The man who was missing had lost part of an arm but was otherwise intact, as was the rest of the platoon. No one ever asked any questions and they never volunteered any information as to their whereabouts during that time. However, from the other side, stories began to filter in from captured members of the Vietcong. They claimed that men who moved like the devil would sneak into their camps at night searching for an American soldier. They would interrogate each man they encountered and then kill him, regardless of what he said, before moving on to the next one. They burned whole villages across the countryside and killed women and children until they finally discovered their missing member's whereabouts. They

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tracked him down and found him in a rice paddy some twenty miles from the scene of the original battle. It was almost like the unit itself was really a body and if one of its members was missing it was like a body part missing. That was how tight they were.

It was this relentless tenacity and utter cruelty that shocked and scared him at the time. It also left him with an indelible mark of fear of these men. He couldn't explain how he knew it, but somewhere in the darkness of the trees in front of him, they, or people similar to them, were watching him.

Evans turned his head to whisper something to him, but he stood up from his crouch a little to adjust his position. A soft sound, almost like a whisper, resounded suddenly, making him recoil in surprise. Evans froze next to him and then dropped to his knees and then to his stomach. He turned toward him as he fell, a gaping hole in the side of his head, the result of the silent bullet that struck him down.

"Shit," Farrell heard himself saying as the body dropped to the ground and lay there completely still.

From somewhere in the trees he saw a quick movement, followed by the shapes of two men disappearing into the trees. He was unnerved by the speed with which they moved and by the silence that seemed to engulf them as they went. He squeezed off two shots, but knew he hit air. Once again it seemed his instincts were right. This time, though, two of his men were dead and nothing could bring them back. Farrell thought of Tony and began to realize why he had never fully recovered from what happened to his men. He was slowly starting to comprehend the guilt associated with responsibility and wished he had gone easier on his old platoon leader when he had the chance.

CHAPTER 16

Andy knew his time had come. He had always tried to live a clean life. No drugs or alcohol problems, no speeding tickets, not even an overdue credit card bill. In fact, the only thing he had ever done that kept him up nights was probably the worst thing *anyone* had ever done. He had created that damn virus. He had always been on the winning side of life, rarely on the losing one. Through his job he had the chance to make plenty of enemies, but never in his worst nightmares did he ever imagine that what he did at work so long ago would ever manifest itself into this. They really only wanted the virus, but that meant first getting to Jennifer, then to Alex, and finally to him, in order to do so. They needed to tie up all their loose ends before the mission would be complete. Unfortunately for him, he was now a loose end.

He knew most of what Alex knew about the accident. Jennifer had been sure to leave a detailed message about it on his voice mail at work. She didn't know, couldn't possibly know, his line was as

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accessible to them as it was to him, probably even more so. Once they found out who had witnessed the hit, it was only a matter of time before they would come knocking on his door. That was why he had stayed late tonight, wanting desperately to avoid being home when it happened, but knowing that it was a coward's way out. He wanted it to be over with, for them to do what they had to do and let him get on with his life, or death. The last thing he wanted was to arrive home and have the police there because that meant that they were following up with Alex. Probably trying to jog his memory somehow, maybe even showing him some pictures of what they thought the car looked like. In any case, once they saw the police there questioning his son, it would be too late for all of them. These men didn't like loose ends.

Loose ends didn't tie themselves up.

Outside, Andy watched as the men approached the back door brazenly with their hands at their sides, briefcases dangling. He was sure that inside those cases there wasn't any paperwork or files that they needed to look over. Neither looked like a killer, in fact, they looked just like any other businessman would look after a long day at the office. That was part of their training, to blend in. If you saw them in a crowd, or even in a group of other, similarly dressed men, it was doubtful you would be able to point them out in a line up. They were thorough. Trained thoroughly and deadly serious when it came to their work.

One of them reached out and knocked loudly on the door. They knew he was home, but went through with the act of being businessmen on a late night call just in case a car happened to pass by. When he didn't answer, the other man reached into his pocket and pulled out a small metal object which he jammed into the lock and quickly turned. The door popped open easily and they entered the back hall, being sure to close and relock the door behind them. He could hear them walking toward the kitchen, their designer shoes clicking on the tiled floor when

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one of them spoke.

“Mr. Harrison... We know you’re still here and you know why we’re here, so why not make this easy on yourself?” one of them said while the other switched off the hall light, leaving the house in total darkness except for a slight flare of light coming through the kitchen window from the moon outside. Andy took a silent step back out of the kitchen.

He could hear them placing their briefcases on the floor and taking their guns out from underneath their coats. The metallic clicking sound of a well-oiled sidearm made him aware of how futile his situation really was. They were acquainting themselves with the hallway, exploring every inch in the darkness.

“Looks like Jennifer is having a bad hair day, huh? What’s the matter, Andy, did she burn the meatloaf on you?” one said with a laugh.

Jennifer! He had left her lying on the kitchen floor!

“You got any plastic bags in here? That would at least save us some time getting rid of her,” the other one chimed in.

Andy wanted to kill them. He wanted to rush out into the darkness and start firing blindly at them, but he also knew that was exactly what they wanted him to do. He had to use his head, for his sake, for Jen’s sake, and for Alex’s as well. He backed slowly out of the kitchen, being sure to remain as silent as a door mouse, and made his way into the adjoining living room. He hoped there were only the two of them so he could make a break for it out the front door if the opportunity presented itself. He held his gun up, pointing it into blank, dark space as he moved. He could feel them in the kitchen now, reaching out with their overactive senses for any sign of movement, any heavy sigh, any squeak. They were standing over her body now, perhaps checking to see if she was dead.

What will they do if they discover she is still alive?

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He had to focus. Survival was the key, and right now his survival was the only one that he could control.

He made his way through the living room and crouched down behind their couch, a plush tan pullout they had picked up at a strip mall in Sarasota, or maybe it was Union. It still smelled musty from the move.

A soft creak on the carpet told him they were now in the room with him somewhere. Silent as predators moving in for the kill, they waited for their prey to give away its position with a panic-driven jump or dash for the door. He knew they had to be well informed of the house's set-up. They would know where the entrances and exits were and how to get to them probably better than he did. They most likely had the blueprints of the structure and had studied them long before even arriving in Oceanview. If there was a fire, they could find their way in the dark to the front door before Andy could even get out of bed.

From behind him, he could hear the front door locking, the bolt slowly sliding into place. One of them had slipped past him in the darkness and blocked off his one escape route.

Checkmate.

His finger tensed on the trigger of the gun and he was prepared to spring, to make his final stand, when suddenly from outside he heard the most glorious sound he had ever heard. Sirens.

Police sirens.

And they were getting closer by the second. Andy held his breath and hoped they would leave now that the police were closing in. The house was as still and silent as a crypt. At the same time a tension seemed to be hanging in the air, maybe they didn't know he had called the police after all. He wasn't sure if they were still in the room with him and he didn't dare move, or breathe, until he was. A few seconds passed without any sound other than that of the sirens wailing, and he knew they had left. They were still in the house somewhere, they had to

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be, but he was positive they had left the living room because he couldn't feel them anymore.

There was a loud rap on the front door, followed by the frantic shouting of an officer.

"Andrew Harrison, this is the police. We're coming in! Stand back from the door!"

An instant later, the door flew back, the busted lock flying across the room. Moonlight poured into the room, along with the blinding beams of flashlights, causing his eyes to blur and forcing them to adjust. Within seconds his house was crawling with police. Three came charging through the front door and somehow an additional three had entered through the back, but he hadn't heard any gunshots. There were no sounds of a struggle and nothing said about Jennifer's body lying on the floor of his kitchen. Where had the two assassins gone? A large officer stood above him, his gun trained directly on his chest.

"Mr. Harrison... Drop the gun and stand up. We need to get you out of here right now," he said, pulling him up by his arm.

He handed the gun to the officer and allowed himself to be lead outside to the waiting car. They didn't handcuff him or mention anything about Jennifer's body, which he had left sprawled out on the kitchen floor.

"What's going on?" Andy heard himself asking no one in particular.

"Be quiet, sir. We have to get you back to the station. Your life is in danger, as well as your son's."

"But what about Jen? What about my wife? She was shot, didn't you see her? Where's the ambulance?"

"The ambulance is on its way, sir. Now please be quiet."

He couldn't figure it out. By now they should have at least asked him about the gun he'd been holding when they came in, if not outright charging him with brandishing it. And what about Jennifer?

His mind was racing as they stuffed him into the back of the patrol

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car. Two officers rode in back with him, one on each side, but neither would say a word, or even look at him. The ambulance finally arrived as they pulled away from the house. Andy grew tense, something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

He kept waiting for something to happen, a bullet to fly through the rear window, someone to start reading him his rights, something, but nothing did. They drove in silence except for the wailing of the siren that screamed loudly as they wound their way down Ridge Road back toward the police station in the center of town. On their way they passed a smashed police car, its front end was wrapped around the thick trunk of a tall oak tree. There were other officers there as well, speaking with James Farrell, who looked worse for the wear. He didn't say anything, but he knew they were responsible for that accident, as well as the deaths of those bodies Farrell was now standing over. They wanted his virus, and it was apparent they were going to go to great lengths to obtain it. Andy was scared, but he was also angry with himself for bringing his family into this, for putting Alex and Jennifer, in danger. Mostly, he was angry with himself, with his cowardice. The old Andrew Harrison would have made sure his family was safe first and fuck the consequences. Somewhere along the line, he lost his edge.

* * *

Farrell knew he couldn't catch the men as they ran off into the darkness. The night was folding around them like a set of velvet wings, swallowing them. He wanted to catch them, to shoot them dead, but he also didn't particularly want to in there after them. He knew that following them into the trees was certain death, and they would be hoping he'd do just that. Instead, he let his mind drift back to his training. The training Tony used to preach about every morning before they went out on their "nature walks" as he called them. They were really more like a series of repetitive wanderings through the sweltering heat of the Asian jungle while trying to not get killed. His training,

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Farrell decided, instructed him to call the station and get another cruiser out there. It was doubtful that whoever had shot Evans would risk staying around to finish him off no matter how good they were, but there was always the chance that they might. He didn't know exactly what they were after, but he did know that Andy Harrison was at the center of it, as was his son. He needed to find both of them immediately.

Five minutes after Evans had called in to Maria, another cruiser screeched to a halt beside him. The biggest difference between now and five minutes ago was that now Evans was dead. In his mind he began counting how many men he had at his disposal as well as how many cars. He did a quick tally and didn't like the numbers he was getting. Counting the dead, he was in charge of twelve men, two of whom worked desk jobs exclusively. Then there was Maria who had never even held a gun, let alone fired one at military trained killers. That left eight men, including him, and they seemed to be dropping like flies around him. Farrell couldn't help notice the irony that he was now in charge of the exact same amount of men that Tony had been in charge of in Vietnam. Sometimes he wondered how the Lord worked.

"Holy shit! What happened to Evans?" one of the officers who had arrived asked.

"What do you think?" he snapped back. "Get on the radio and have Maria send a call out to the coroner. Tell him we have two dead, maybe more."

The officer looked at him strangely.

"What do you mean, 'Maybe more'?"

Farrell looked off into the trees, struggling with the rage he had been keeping suppressed throughout the whole ordeal, and then replied calmly.

"We sent some men to the Harrison house up on Ridge Road. Odds are they probably ran into trouble too."

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“No, sir, they didn’t,” the second officer in the car said. “I just heard from Maria that they have Mr. Harrison in their custody and he’s under our protection right now. In fact, they should be passing by here any minute. He called in requesting an ambulance saying his wife had been shot, but the officers on the scene weren’t able to find her. What do you make of that?”

He wiped the sweat from his brow and exhaled deeply before he heard the sirens coming from down the road.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

The car began to slow down when they saw him and the other men milling around the smashed patrol car. The two dead bodies at their feet were barely visible from the highway. Farrell stepped forward off the shoulder and onto the road.

“Tell them not to stop. Have them go straight back to the station as fast as possible,” he shouted. “We don’t need anyone else out here.”

“Yes, sir.”

The car raced past them at fifty miles an hour, fast, but not as fast as he would have liked. He could still feel something in the air, something that was telling him this was just starting and wouldn’t end until Alex Harrison was found. Whatever was happening had Andrew Harrison’s son at the center of it all. It was a storm that had been building and was now getting ready to let loose. He causally noted the light, misty fog creeping in off of the water. He hadn’t noticed it before but it seemed to have a calming effect on him. He needed to find out why these people were after Andy and his family before more people died. What information the boy possessed beyond the accident, he didn’t know. Alex himself might not even know, but one thing was certain, this all started with Tony’s death and the last person to see him alive besides the doctors was Alex Harrison, and he was now missing. Unless there was something he was forgetting. He looked at his watch, eight o’clock.

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Eight o'clock.

What was he supposed to do at eight?

"Oh my God," Farrell said suddenly as his memory kicked in.

The only other person who might have spoken to Tony was one of the nurses, the one who claimed that someone had come in afterward to finish him off. What was the woman's name? He reached into his front pocket, searching for the card Maria had given him. He read it.

Abigail Monroe.

He had completely forgotten about her. He was supposed to be over there right now, but when all this started it slipped his mind. He wondered if it was even worth taking a drive over there. If they had gone far enough to kill two cops, then they wouldn't think twice about murdering a nurse. Nonetheless, there was still a chance she might be alive. If she was, then she could hold some piece of information he needed. He had to at least see.

"I'm going to the Monroe residence and I need someone to ride with me. Any volunteers?"

Both men looked at each other and then at him. With the two dead bodies laying at their feet and their killers still at large somewhere in the woods nearby, neither man seemed too keen on being left alone.

"Come on, dammit, there's a woman's life at stake here. If they came after the kid, you can damn well be sure they're going to make a try at her too."

Reluctantly one of them finally agreed to stay behind until the coroner arrived. Farrell immediately jumped into his car with the other officer and together they raced through town toward Abigail Monroe's house. He just hoped that they weren't too late.

CHAPTER 17

Abigail had just finished reheating some leftover pizza from the night before when the phone rang. She walked across the room and picked it up.

“Hello? Hello?”

There was no one there, so she hung up.

Gary, her husband, had been forced to stay late at the office in Portland. They were supposed to go out for dinner, but he phoned her earlier to cancel. He was a sweet man, but sometimes forgetful. The fact that he remembered to call at all was a surprise to her. Not a pleasant one, but he did promise to make it up to her another night. He was a good man with a good heart, just absentminded. In all her years of working at the hospital, he had never once complained when she returned late or even said anything in anger when she was forced into working a double shift. For these reasons she could forgive him an occasional misgiving.

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“What a day.” She sighed as she sat down in Gary’s soft leather recliner and flipped on the TV. The pizza was still too hot to eat, but the warm smell of melting cheese forced her into taking a premature bite, one that instantly burned the roof of her mouth and tongue. She wiped the dripping cheese off her chin with a napkin and took a sip of her beer while recounting the day’s events.

In all her years of service at Portland Municipal she’d never been involved in anything like what had happened today. She had worked in the E.R. for over a decade now, closer to two, and had seen her share of strange cases, but no one had ever been murdered there. People had come in with injuries from attempted murders, gunshots, and stab wounds, but never had someone deliberately ended a life that the doctor’s had saved. She would never forget the man that brushed past her on his way out. He was neither tall nor short, but he had remarkably dark eyes. They were a color bordering on onyx, very lifeless and cold. Just as he appeared to be.

Abigail shivered as she remembered those eyes when she heard a car pull up in front of their small, one level house. She thought she heard a door open, coupled with the sound of someone getting out, but wasn’t sure. It didn’t have the loud, rattling muffler that Gary’s old Toyota had, plus she didn’t expect to see him home this early tonight anyway. He had phoned her only an hour ago to cancel dinner. He couldn’t have finished up and made it back from Portland already. She took another tentative bite from her pizza and then went to the window to see who had stopped. There was a black car parked against the curb on the opposite side of the street from the house with the engine running. The front end of the car was badly damaged, but it was unmistakably a Cadillac. Sitting inside was a man who was busy rummaging through the glove compartment. He appeared to be searching impatiently for something. After a few minutes he finally found what he was looking for and held up a street map. She guessed

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he was lost, but how had he managed to get so far away from the main highway? Route 9 was a good distance away.

He suddenly glanced up in her direction, noticing the porch light, and peered out the window at her. Nodding, he turned off the car's interior light, exited the car, and started walking timidly across the street with the map held tightly in his hands. He seemed embarrassed to be wandering around the streets lost, but he had apparently reached his wit's end trying to figure out how to get to where he wanted. He was dressed like a door-to-door salesman, with a dark suit and nondescript tie on. His face was plain and his hair was trimmed extremely short so that from a distance he almost looked bald. The man cautiously stepped onto her tiny front porch and rang the doorbell. His hands, she noticed, were large and rough. Too rough to be a salesman's. At the same time he was doing this, he was also fumbling with the map, trying unsuccessfully to refold it. She laughed at his efforts and walked over to door, wrapping a sweater around her shoulders to cover the old T-shirt she was wearing before opening it.

"Yes. Can I help you?"

The man peered back at her nervously.

"Um, yeah. I'm, um, well, I'm lost." He sighed, a tiny shameful smile creeping over his face. "I saw your light on and I don't mean to bother you, but I need to get back to Route 9. I'm trying to get to Portland..." he trailed off.

Abigail held back a smile and instead nodded in an understanding way.

"It's no problem at all. You're really not that far off. Is that your car over there?" She pointed at the black dented Cadillac.

He didn't answer right away, almost as if he were considering something, but then nodded.

"Well then, just keep heading down the way you are facing now and that will take you to Green Street. Take a right there and follow it

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through the center of town until you see the elementary school. You'll hit a set of lights immediately after that and that intersection is Route 9. There are a hundred signs there, you can't miss it."

He listened intently to her directions and then smiled appreciatively.

"Thank you so much. I feel like such an idiot. I had no idea where I was going and my little boy is in the hospital and I was driving and I couldn't find the way and no one was awake in town and..." He paused, choking back tears.

"I'm so sorry! Oh my God, please come in," she replied, putting her onto his shoulder. Being a nurse always made her concern for others take precedence over her own worries, which was one reason why she had such a hard time taking time off from work. Especially knowing how understaffed they were up there. She pulled him inside and closed the door behind them.

"Please sit. Sit down right here and I'll get you some tea. It's going to be all right, sir. You'll be all right."

He wiped his face with his shirtsleeve and shook his head.

"I couldn't, er, I can't. I mean, I really can't come in. I need to get to the hospital," he said, standing up from the chair he was sitting in and reaching into his pants pocket.

"But there is one more question I'd like to ask you, if that's all right?"

"Of course, anything."

"Are you Abigail Monroe?"

She hesitated and felt the hair on the nape of her neck stand at attention.

"Yes," she answered slowly, standing perfectly still as if by not moving she might become invisible.

"So you must be the same Abigail Monroe who handled that accident-turned-murder the other day. The one that's been in all the papers? I heard you identified the person who supposedly snuck into

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the E.R. and killed that poor man. Shame about that.”

Abigail studied the man standing before her. He had somehow managed to stop crying and pull himself together quite quickly. He somehow knew her name and where she worked, not to mention the accident, which had just happened and definitely hadn’t been reported in any papers as of yet. She also had the feeling there was no sick son up in the hospital, nor was he having any trouble finding his way around Oceanview. The one word that kept flashing to her head was “stalker.”

Abigail remembered doing papers back in college, before she wanted to be a nurse. Originally she longed to be a social worker or a sociologist, something that would benefit humanity. One of her favorite projects in college had been in her senior year Behavioral Sciences class. As part of her thesis, she had done an extremely detailed paper on obsessive-compulsive behaviorisms. Instead of focusing on the usual topics like persistent hand washing or hair combing, she based her work on how the mind of a stalker worked. How, once the decision to stalk someone had been made, it became an obsession to that person. She received an “A” for originality, but only a “C” for the paper itself. However, she had learned a great deal about the ways stalkers thought and was now seeing a lot of those characteristics in this man.

“I did see *an* accident, but it was a long time ago. And not here in Oceanview,” she lied. She looked at the wall clock and wished Gary was home. “I don’t want to appear rude, but if there isn’t anything else I can do for you, it is late and my husband is in the kitchen waiting for me.”

“No, no that’s all.” He smiled, standing up. “I’m sorry to have troubled you, Mrs. Monroe.”

He smiled at her again and then left. She shut and locked the front door behind him and watched from the front window as he got into his car and drove away. At the end of the street he slowed down and took a

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left. She had told him to go right. Panic began to set in and she thought about calling the police. Surely he hadn't simply making a mistake. She clearly told him to turn right onto Green Street.

Abigail turned and ran into the kitchen for the telephone. As she started dialing the three digit emergency number the line went dead with a soft *click*, leaving nothing but a low hiss speaking into her ear. She looked at the receiver, hung up and tried again. This time even the hiss was gone. A light breeze brushed past her and she slowly turned around. The back door leading into the kitchen was open and swinging back and forth lazily with the wind. That door was always locked unless Gary was out back mowing the lawn and it had definitely been shut when she arrived home earlier. Someone must have broken in while she was talking to that man. They were working together. She had been set up.

From somewhere else in the kitchen she thought she heard someone breathing heavily and dropped the phone. It hit the floor and then recoiled back up into the air as the cord snapped tight. Whoever had broken in was still inside. She scanned the kitchen quickly, but didn't see anything out of place. Suddenly something fell, crashing loudly onto the linoleum floor. She didn't see what it was, a fork or piece of silverware maybe, but the noise itself was enough to send her running from the kitchen and back into the living room. She quickly jammed her feet into her sneakers which lay by the front door. The laces became wedged between her feet and the shoe itself and she fumbled frantically with the doorknob, trying to will it open. Behind her she heard movement and screamed loudly as she pulled desperately at the front door. It finally opened wide and she burst through it, planning on running as far and as fast as she could, screaming until she found help or her lungs burst. Instead, Abigail ran directly into a tall, neatly dressed man. She bounced off his chest and fell backward onto her rear, sobbing in terror. He stood there puzzled, but with a look of concern on

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his face as well.

“Mrs. Monroe? Abigail Monroe? I’m Sheriff James Farrell from the Oceanview Police Department. Are you all right?”

She almost hugged him.

“No! No, I’m not!” she said, standing up and pointing back towards the kitchen. “I think there’s someone in my house. A man came to the door and said he was lost and after I gave him directions back to the highway he started asking me questions about yesterday. He knew my name and where I worked and I think he had something in his jacket. A gun maybe. I got scared and after he left I saw him take a left at the end of my street after I told him to go right. That’s when I noticed the back door was open...”

“Okay, slow down, slow down. I can’t help you unless you slow down.”

Farrell motioned for the other officer with him to go around back to check it out. He drew his own weapon and put his other arm around her plump frame, ushering Abigail out in the front yard.

“You’re okay now. I’m here. Let’s go back to my car where it’s safe and you can tell me what happened, all right?”

“But he could still be in the house.”

“Let us worry about that, now come on.”

She nodded and nearly ran to the waiting patrol car.

Once they were both inside, Farrell peered off into the darkness, feeling the eyes on him again, but not sure this time which direction they were coming from. He sighed in frustration and began calmly asking her questions about the man she saw.

“I first saw him parked across the street from my house. He was fumbling around with a map so I assumed he was lost and needed help. He said that when he saw my light on he came over to ask for directions back to Route 9. After I told him the way, he said his kid was in the hospital and started crying. I couldn’t just let him drive off like

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that, so I let him in...oh God, how could I have been so stupid?"

"You were only doing what you thought was right, Mrs. Monroe. There's no fault in that. He was obviously lying about his kid, so don't let that bother you either. Do you remember anything else? What he looked like maybe?"

Abigail nodded, but he could tell she wasn't handling this very well. He would need to ask her as many questions as he could before she lost it.

"Do you remember what kind of car it was? Could you see it from the window?"

"Yes, it was parked right out front. I got a really good look at it. It was a long black Cadillac with weird plates. I don't know if they were out of state or not, but they sure weren't Oregon plates. Maybe government workers or something? And the whole front end was smashed up, like he hit a tree or something."

Farrell tensed up when he heard it was a Cadillac. That meant that they had beaten him across town. His town.

"You're sure it was a Cadillac?"

"Positive. It was right here, plain as day."

"Did it have any damage that you could see, besides the front end? A dented bumper or any signs of paint, like maybe it had hit another car?"

"No, nothing like that. This car looked almost new except for the front end. Although, come to think of it, I couldn't see the whole car very well from where I was. I didn't really see him that well either. I guess that's why I didn't think he was dangerous or anything. I mean he just looked like a regular guy, maybe a salesman or something, but not threatening by any means."

She shook her head in disgust.

"Did he have any distinguishing features at all? A tattoo that was showing, an earring, a scar, a limp? Anything unusual at all?"

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She thought hard for a moment before responding.

"Nothing like that, but he did seem distracted by something. As if he was waiting for something or somebody. Does that help?"

"I don't know, maybe."

The other patrolman came back from his search of the backyard and knocked on the car window. He rolled it down.

"I didn't see anything back there, Jimmy. I also checked the neighbor's yards and the house."

"And?"

"There's nothing there. The back door didn't look like it was forced open."

Farrell turned to Abigail.

"Are you sure the door was locked?"

"Absolutely. I locked it right after I got off the phone with my husband. Oh God, Gary. You don't think they will go after him do you?"

"No, I doubt it, Mrs. Monroe. The only reason they came after you is because of what you saw at the hospital. Your husband shouldn't be in any danger, although I think we should get him into the station as soon as we can, just to be safe."

She pressed her face against his shoulder and started crying, her shoulders jerking each time her body convulsed from the effort. He let her cry, it was probably best to get it out of her system now so he could ask more poignant questions later, when she was calm again. Right now though, he felt distracted. There was someone out there watching. His eyes kept sweeping over the tiny house for signs of movement. There were many things that didn't sit well with him, being beaten him across town was one of them. It meant that they were anticipating his movements, and doing a good job at it. Another thought suddenly flashed through his mind. What if there was more than one black Cadillac driving around Oceanview tonight? What if there were several

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black Cadillacs out there? He assumed there was only the one car, but these teams generally had ten to twelve men working on an assignment. If that was the case, then he was really in over his head. Still, she said the car had front end damage just like the one that hit Tony would have had after the accident.

“What now, Jimmy?” the officer asked with his hand on his gun, nervously caressing it and shooting worried glances out into the night.

“We’re all going back to the station till we can make some sense of this. Get in.” The young man didn’t need to be told twice.

Farrell didn’t bother with the lights or siren; he preferred to drive without all the noise and attention right now. He could feel the eyes of his enemy on him as he drove, or maybe he was just paranoid, either way he was going to make sure he got Abigail Monroe safely back to headquarters. Maybe from there he could decide what to do next.

* * *

After they pulled away from her house and made the right turn onto Green Street that would take them back to the center of town, a black Cadillac slowly rolled down the street from the opposite direction. Its lights were off and the driver seemed impervious to the darkness. His eyes though, were focused intently on the police car’s license plate.

“124,” it read and the patient man operating the vehicle turned on his radio and spoke into it with a deep, hollow voice.

“Car 124 en route to station with the woman. Sheriff looks familiar. Have someone run a check on him, see who he is.”

When he had finished, he clicked the radio off and waited outside Abigail’s house for a moment. From inside, a light flickered on in the attic and then went off. After a few minutes had passed, another man came out of the front door, dressed entirely in black so that it was almost impossible to see him as he approached the car and stepped inside. Neither one spoke a word and together they drove off into the night.

CHAPTER 18

Alex's head was still bleeding pretty badly. Washington knew he had to somehow force the blood to clot or the boy would die. He couldn't take him to the hospital because they would certainly check there first, or at least have people waiting there just in case he showed up. Washington also knew going to the police would be a mistake as they would be more willing to throw him in jail for kidnapping the boy than they would believe his story about a guerrilla force rampaging through Oceanview. A story that he himself still had doubts about. As he sat in front of the small fire he had built, an idea suddenly struck him. He lay Alex down on the cool, lush grass of the grove as the blood from his wound still flowed out onto the ground. He had an idea and leaned over to speak hurried words into the boy's ear.

"Hang in there, kid. I'll be right back."

"Back...okay..." Alex murmured.

Washington left the camp in a run, heading north along a deer trail

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that he hadn't used in a long time. In the darkness of night, he moved expertly along the path, taking the proper turns and always moving with the silence and speed of the wind. He had also been trained well and he hoped that with some luck he might be able to save Alex from the men who so desperately wanted him dead. Above him, faint moonlight struggled to break through the thick foliage, occasionally succeeding and spilling onto the forest floor with a brilliance and beauty as tranquil as anything he had ever seen, or could imagine. Through the intermittent patches of light and dark he ran, all the while trying to piece together the series of events that had lead him to this point.

Though he didn't want to admit it, Washington thought he knew why these men wanted Alex and his father. The boy unfortunately, was merely a victim of bad timing and circumstance. His father, however, was not. Washington recognized Andy Harrison in the brief moment that he saw his son's face. Truth be told, he was amazed that the name itself hadn't jarred his memory. Then when he had actually seen Andy outside as he was racing back to the cove, he knew his worst suspicions were now being realized. He was also pretty sure that he in turn, had been recognized by Andy. Why he didn't say anything when Andy saw him rush through the backyard with his son in his arms, Washington didn't know. He wasn't even sure he could trust Andy not to call the police on him. It had been a long time since he had seen Andrew Harrison, a very long time.

Most of the information Washington had about Andy had come from Tony when he stumbled back from town high on heroin and wanting to talk. Washington was always willing to oblige him because his stories were always so incredible that he often couldn't actually believe that they were real, which of course they were. One night he remembered the conversation turning sour, the way it usually did when Farrell busted him for something. This night the topic had been a brief

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hospital stay they both had in Hanoi after the ambush that nearly wiped them all out. It had started innocently enough as they made fun of the food there, but when the subject turned to the other patients, Tony became ugly.

After being airlifted, Tony Hawthorne, James Farrell, himself, and a man from another platoon who called himself A.J., all wound up in the same wing of a military hospital just outside of Hanoi. They were in the “buckshot ward” as it was called because none of the wounds were life threatening. Life threatening meaning that the initial wounds had been dressed and would require several more surgeries before they would be sent home. Out of the eight in their platoon only the three of them had made it back, and both Tony and Jimmy had been amazed to see him there at all. Indeed, he was surprised to be alive himself, his wounds had been far worse than anyone else’s. What he recalled most clearly about the ward though, was that A.J. appeared to be without any wounds at all with the exception of a few cuts and abrasions on his face and hands. No one knew anything about him either, except that he was said to be a part of a platoon that had been cut to pieces by friendly fire. Judging by the look on A.J.’s paranoid face, there was nothing friendly about it. Also of interest was the fact that from day one he had visitors, not just concerned comrades or Army doctors, but high ranking officers and officials who would strut in proudly, their stars and medals flashing. They would close the bed curtain, isolating him from the rest of the room, and discuss matters which seemed to be of some import because neither Tony nor he were ever able to overhear a single word spoken. Generally, the conversations seemed to end in arguments and threats coming from the generals. Threats aimed at A.J.’s life. He seemed to know something that they didn’t. After a while he stopped talking to anyone at all, preferring to remain silent with his thoughts, which was fine with them because he had changed into an extremely dark and distant person, something they didn’t need to deal with while

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preparing to go home.

The one time Washington did remember A.J. being vocal was after some of the high level generals had left from one of their meetings. It had been a very loud and heated discussion. His normally reserved countenance and demeanor had been replaced by nervousness and fear. He was suddenly frantic to get out of the hospital as quickly as possible. When Tony had asked him what was wrong, he merely shook his head and mumbled something about “trying to get out” and “never should have wasted the time making it.” Phrases that didn’t seem important then, but might have some significance now. At the time he had simply ignored him and went about his business. The next morning, however, A.J. had disappeared and no one knew where he had gone. Not the doctors, not the nurses, and not even the generals when they came to see him later that afternoon. In fact, once they discovered he was gone, one of them immediately sent for a jeep and left in a huff, ordering the others to get on the phone and “take care of it before things got worse.”

After that he never saw A.J. or any of those officials again. He was able to find out, with Tony’s help, a little bit about the covert operations that went on in addition to the ones that their platoon conducted. Many of the operations had failed, resulting in the deaths of dozens of highly trained men. Tony had been able to speak to several of these men as they passed through the hospital. He learned of new biological weapons, too primitive yet to be controlled, that were being used on predetermined villages as test sites. He also learned that the man responsible for creating and selecting these targets was a gentleman named Andrew J. Harrison. The very same man they had been asked to find in the jungle. The same man whose fault it was that they nearly died. He knew all too well Tony blamed Jimmy, but when it came right down to it, they wouldn’t even have been out there in the first place if weren’t for Andy and his virus.

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He was breathing heavily by the time he crested the top of a small ridge and began jogging down the slight incline towards a smaller cove that was carved out on the other side of the hill from the Harrison's house. There he saw what he was looking for. Two motor boats rattled loudly against the feeble wooden dock that had been constructed to harbor them. The owners of the dock lived about a mile up the coastline, but found it easier, and cheaper, to build their own dock and take care of their boats themselves rather than pay the marina to do it for them. On board one of them there was sure to be a first aid kit of some kind, maybe even some rubbing alcohol to disinfect the boy's wound.

He kept his fingers crossed that there was no one out tonight working late on one of the boats or even just out for a few drinks by the moonlight. Looking up at the thickening clouds and dense fog that had suddenly crept in, he doubted there would be anyone about, but there was always a chance. Judging by the way the boats were hollowly knocking against the dock, he seemed to be in luck as the area was deserted. Even as he watched them rocking, the fog continued to move in extremely fast, almost too fast to be natural.

His thoughts flashed immediately to the stone cottage somewhere behind him now to his left, up at the highest point of the ridge. He knew the people of Oceanview feared that place. He felt no better about being up here alone. He was so close to it that, but for the fog, he could probably see right into one of the shattered windows. He shivered at the thought and continued down the hill, kicking up rocks and loose gravel behind him. The air tasted metallic to him and his head swam from all the events of the day.

The air tastes funny.

He almost gagged from the taste in his mouth as it had suddenly become overwhelming, but he knew what to do. This wasn't the first time he had encountered this. Covering his mouth with his hand, he

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scrambled down the slope while his thoughts drifted again to Tony.

From some newspaper clippings Tony had passed along to him a while ago, he had learned Andy had returned to Oceanview. It didn't mean much to him then as he didn't know or recognize the man from the picture, and Tony never mentioned the significance of the last name. Tony did know who he was, and that was probably why he had been on edge the past few days. Before he was killed anyway.

Up until he had actually seen Andy, Washington wasn't even sure the man was still alive. Andy had seemed like a bad dream when they were chasing after him in Vietnam, but now he was here and in trouble. As was his son.

He crept silently onto the rickety wooden dock as the waves rolled in silently beneath him. He climbed aboard one of the boats moored there and walked over to the cabin door. With minimal effort he was able to pry it open and wriggle his way inside. He fumbled around for a few moments in the dark, opening and closing drawers, before finding what he wanted. An old Red Cross First Aid Kit. It was easily recognizable, even in the darkness. The shiny red cross stenciled on the white metal box, the whole kit smelling of gauze and antiseptic. It was slightly rusted and creaked loudly when he opened it to examine the contents. He carefully rummaged through it to make sure it contained everything he needed. Satisfied, he sealed the box back up and exited the cabin, being sure to lock the cabin door again on his way out. He then jumped off the boat and started at a run down the dock and back up the hill into the grove where he hoped Alex was still alive. He looked up just as the wind parted the fog briefly, long enough for him to observe the stone house peering down at him from above like an ancient gargoyle leering down from a castle's walls. A light suddenly flashed on from somewhere inside, but the fog was quick to cover up what it had revealed. He had a bad feeling in his stomach, like the fog was covering up more than just the house.

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The waves increased in intensity, crashing blindly against the dock behind him and violently rocking the boats tied there. Beyond the tiny hidden dock lay the open sea itself, and even with only the obscured moon lighting the way for him and the fog rolling in faster by the minute, he could still see the ominous outline of Fire Island looming among the wildness of the sea. The island was small and completely unsettled by man. He thought about it for a moment and looked down at the two boats. It was a tempting hiding place for him and the boy. He quickly shook that idea off though. In order to get there he would have to steal one of the boats and then navigate the treacherous waters of the sound that lay between the island and the mainland, which he knew he couldn't do, especially at night. More than once he had heard of a ship wrecking itself upon the island's jagged shores. Much like the sirens drawing Odysseus and his men to their doom, Fire Island called out to sailors from every walk of life and every skill level, inevitably shattering them upon the rocks that made up its deadly shoreline. Still, at least there he would be fairly certain that Alex was out of harm's way.

After a few minutes of running, he found himself back within the safety of the grove, the faint deer trail seemed as bright as a freeway leading him back home. He managed the twists and turns with an expertise that surprised even him and in no time was back in the camp with its roaring fire and tiny shack. He was relieved to see Alex was still breathing, laying unconscious before the flickering yellow tongues of flame. The bleeding had slowed down slightly but hadn't stopped entirely, which worried him.

Washington ran over and sat down next to him, resting his head against his stomach while he began to rifle through the kit. Using the hands of a man who had spent more than a little time dressing wounds in the field, he stripped off the boy's shirt and tore open a bandage from the first aid kit. He also removed some iodine and a large quantity of

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gauze, both of which he applied liberally to the gash on the side of his head. Alex moaned grimly when the iodine touched the skin, but other than that remained deathly quiet as he worked. In no time at all he managed to wrap and dress most of the boys wounds, as well as a few minor scratches of his own, being sure that the entire supply of antibiotics went directly onto Alex's forehead to prevent possible infection.

Feeling satisfied with his work, he rechecked the bandages one last time before settling back against one of the heavy logs by the small fire pit. He sighed and scratched his head, exhausted from his journey. A slight chill was in the air and he pushed another dry branch onto the dying embers of the fire, watching it blaze up as the flames hungrily licked at the dry wood. He looked over again at Alex, who was silently sleeping with two full rolls of gauze wrapped tightly around his head, making him look like he was wearing a red-spotted headband. Smiling at the thought, he reached into his pocket to remove a cigarette and then dug around for a light.

"Shit," he said, realizing that his matches were missing. He tried all his pockets twice before giving up when suddenly he remembered something. Standing up, he walked over to Tony's shack. It was a dank little shelter even more poorly constructed than his own, made in part from a rowboat that had washed ashore as well as other pieces of driftwood they had come across. Bending down to fit inside the tiny space, he began rummaging through all that remained of his lifelong friend—blankets with holes in them, a pair of boots with no soles, a bent spoon, a needle, and a candle. These were the only possessions he had called his own. Since it was no secret he was a heroin addict, he knew Tony must have had a lighter or matches somewhere around in order to get his fix. He rooted around for a few minutes before coming across a small drawstring bag, the kind he used to keep marbles in when he was a kid and suspected Tony did the same. He opened it up

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carefully and emptied its contents onto one of the blankets. He wasn't surprised by what he saw. A second needle, this one in much worse shape than the one sitting out in the open. A tiny vial nearly empty, but still with a few remnants of a brown powder sticking to the sides and a worn *Zippo* lighter. He picked it up and held it for a moment, thinking how many times he had sat by the campfire watching his friend cook up batch after batch of his drug of choice before injecting it into his veins. He usually used the Zippo if he could because it had meaning to him. It was a U.S. Army, lighter—one he had carried for God only knew how long. The same one he had used to smoke cigarettes over in Vietnam. The lighter had been as much a part of Tony as anything else was and it saddened him to think he would never again use it.

"Here's to old times," he whispered to himself while looking up into the heavens. He flipped the top open and spun the tiny metal wheel to create the spark that would ignite the fluid to light his cigarette. But it didn't. The wheel was stuck. He tried again, but still the wheel refused to spin.

"For God sakes, what now?" he mumbled quietly, trying not to disturb Alex. "A guy wants one damn cigarette and he can't even get that!"

He fumbled with the faded chrome lighter for a few minutes, trying to make it work with no success before he noticed that the wheel was jammed on something. He peered at it closely for a moment before standing up and bringing it outside by the fire where there would be more light. On closer inspection, he noticed that not only was the wheel jammed, but also that the flint was missing. It might have fallen off at some point or simply worn away with age, but it was gone regardless. Frustrated, he turned it upside down and pulled at the bottom half of the lighter, removing the part that held the fluid and unscrewing the top half where the flint should have been. He wanted to see if perhaps the existing flint had merely become jammed as well somehow, as often

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happened with these types of lighters. Turning the top half upside down, he began to gently tap at it, careful to have his other hand directly beneath in case the jammed flint should fall free. To his surprise something did fall free, but not a broken piece of flint. Instead a tiny piece of plastic slid out into his hand. He was suddenly speechless.

What is it? He turned the tiny cylinder over again and again in his rough hands. It was so tiny and transparent that if he hadn't put his hand where it was, it would have dropped into the grass and disappeared forever. Still in awe, he held it up by the light of the fire to get a better look at it, immediately freezing as he realized what he was looking at. His hands trembled and it suddenly became very clear to him why Tony had been killed and why Alex, his father, and now himself, were in such danger.

Microfilm. Harrison gave Tony the microfilm of his virus.

He almost recoiled at the thought, wanting to drop the plastic in case it carried part of the virus on it, but knew that it was highly improbable that the film itself could be a carrier. There was writing on the outside of the plastic casing; it was scratchy but still legible. He strained his eyes and tried to read the tiny print.

"V #3B3 -AJH 1970."

And beneath that written in Tony's unmistakable script was scrawled, "V 31 X 21-1997."

Washington had no idea what the information on the microfilm might say aside from Andy Harrison's initials and the years indicated. The rest appeared at first glance to be a series of letters and numbers with subscripts, the kind that only a chemist or biological engineer would be able to understand. One like Andrew Harrison. He knew that somehow Tony had gotten his hands upon this morsel of information and had paid for it with his life. As would the Harrison family and himself, if he wasn't careful. First things first though. He had to figure

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out how to read what was on the tiny film that had been so neatly packed and hidden inside his friend's cigarette lighter. He looked at Alex and wondered to himself what position the boy's father had really held in the government back then. A simple biological engineer could never have had made the enemies that Andy had, there had to be more.

He started thinking about what Alex might know about it too. There was a connection that was starting to show itself, and without the boy's help he might not be able to save any of them. He needed to speak with him soon. Not this night though. Tonight was a night that required rest, and plenty of it. He walked over, his unlit cigarette still dangling absently from his lips, lifted him up, and put him inside Tony's old bed which was really a mass of dry straw and some old blankets with holes. He then sat in the doorway of the makeshift hut, standing watch over his injured comrade the same way he had done countless times for countless other men back in the war. Slowly, he could hear Alex's breathing evening off until finally he was sure the boy was in a deep slumber. He bent over the fire and lit his cigarette.

The moon had now hidden itself behind some clouds, making the night seem even darker and colder than it already had been. He hoped no one besides Andy had seen him entering the cove earlier, but worrying about that now was pointless. He needed his rest as well and allowed himself to close his eyes for ten minutes every hour. Not really to sleep, but to fool his body into believing so. In a few hours the moon would be completely gone and in its place would be the orange amber glow of the sun coming up over the eastern horizon. With that thought in mind, he broke his promise to himself and fell asleep sitting cross-legged in the doorway with Alex snoring lightly behind him.

CHAPTER 19

The police station looked more like a fraternity party in progress than a state facility. As Farrell walked in with Abigail Monroe clinging tightly to him, the room was divided into two sides, and both were angry.

On one side Andrew Harrison was yelling about his son and the lack of accountability the police were taking in the matter of his disappearance, not to mention his wife who was now also among the missing. On the other side, Maria and the remaining officers were quickly losing their temper with the belligerent man. Many of them had their hands on their weapons, not drawn, but the thought of doing so had definitely crossed their minds. He had to put a stop to this immediately.

“What the hell’s going on in here?” His powerful voice carried over the rest of the shouting and made everyone stop breathing all at once. Andy turned to face him.

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“Well, if it isn’t the leader of the incompetents, James Farrell.”

He stared down hard at him, through him, and Andy Harrison sat down in one of the wooden desk chairs, mentally and physically exhausted from the evening’s events.

“I don’t know what you were trying to accomplish just now, Mr. Harrison, but I’d suggest you get your ass out of my chair immediately and start answering some questions for us,” he growled.

He jumped up out of the seat so fast that several of the officers present chuckled to themselves.

“There’s nothing funny about any of this,” Farrell said, tearing into the offending men. “We have two dead officers out there. Two men with families and friends, and I’ll be damned if I don’t catch the sons of bitches who did it.”

Any trace of laughter quickly disappeared and he turned back to face Harrison. He saw the men behind Andy perk up and stand at attention, their faces beaming red with embarrassment from Farrell’s tongue lashing. Even Maria’s face was flushed although she had done nothing wrong. He then returned his focus to Harrison.

“Andy, I think you know who did this and I expect you to tell me what you do know about it.”

Control. Now they know I’m in control of the situation. And so does Harrison.

From behind him he could hear some of the other men begin grumbling. They didn’t like the fact that they hadn’t been entirely filled about what had happened in the past hour. Abigail still clung to his arm like he was Christ himself come down to save her. He shrugged her off and spoke loudly, addressing everyone present.

“Listen up. Hey! Listen up, people. Please sit down. I need to review with you what’s going on out there and hopefully we can get some insight as to who we’re dealing with and what they want from us.”

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I can't tell them that I already know or that Harrison probably does too.

After everyone had seated themselves in the various chairs scattered about the office, he began to address the group again, this time like a father would explain to his son why it was wrong to steal.

"First, what we know. One, two officers are dead. One in a crash, one shot with a rifle equipped with a silencer. I know it was a silencer because I was there and heard nothing until I saw Evans's head explode next to me. Two, we also know that Alex Harrison and Jennifer Harrison are missing. We have reason to believe she might be wounded." He looked at Andy as he said this.

"Might be?" He jumped up only to have Farrell glare him back down into his chair again.

"I would say we can assume that whoever was after Mrs. Monroe here must also have been after Alex as well. They wanted both of them. What we need to know is why?"

He finished by staring directly at Andy who tried to act nonchalant, but was squirming in his chair. He looked up at him and spoke. "I think we all know this already, Jimmy, but what do you plan to do about getting them back?"

There was muttering throughout the room.

He held his hand up and waited until the room was silent again.

"I think you better let me ask the questions, Mr. Harrison. First of all, what do you do for a living?"

His mouth dropped open.

"What do I do? Is this a joke?"

"No joke. Answer the question."

"I work for the government. I develop weapons for the military."

"That would explain where he got this from," another officer chimed in, holding up Harrison's handgun.

"Check it," he replied.

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The officer removed the clip and checked it carefully, counting and then recounting to be sure.

"Four missing," he called out.

"Care to explain to us where you got this highly illegal gun and why four bullets are missing from it?" Farrell asked, turning to face him squarely.

"Hollow-tipped too. Cop-killers," the officer finished, saying "cop-killers" in a tone of voice that suggested both incredulity and rage.

"I guess you better explain that too."

"Explain where I got a handgun from? I was in the military, remember? Some habits are hard to break and carrying a weapon is one of them. I got it from a pawnshop a year or so after I returned to the states. The hollow-tips are just for protection."

"Sure. Everyone needs the ability to take down a grizzly bear, right? Care to tell is where your wife is, Mr. Harrison?"

Andy stood up quickly, driving the chair back against the wall behind him as he did and spoke loudly so that everyone present would hear.

"Are you interrogating me? *Me*? Shouldn't you be out there trying to find my family? This is ridiculous. I already told you people what happened to Jennifer. She was shot in the head and wounded," he began, choking up just thinking about her innocent face. She had nothing to do with all of this and yet she was paying for it. Why did one mistake have to ruin it all?

"If she was shot, then..."

"*IF* she was shot? *IF*? Do you think I would make something like that up? What kind of man do you think I am? Don't you think I am scared shitless right now? I have no idea where my family is, Jimmy. Do you know how that feels?"

The air in the room went dead as everyone wondered silently why this man had twice addressed their boss as "Jimmy."

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“That’s Sheriff Farrell to you,” he growled. “And sit down right now, Mr. Harrison, before I make you sit down!”

Andy stood there with a try-and-make-me look on his face before leaning back against the desk. He exhaled deeply, trying to calm himself as well as stall for time while he tried to remember where exactly he had got the gun, and the illegal bullets inside.

“Fine. You want to know about the gun, then I’ll tell you. The gun is mine. Being in the business of weapons, one tends to make enemies, especially when you also work for the government. However, I bought the gun, like I said. And I bought the bullets.”

Farrell looked up at him at this comment and studied his face for a moment, as if remembering something...

Someone grunted in disbelief and he turned to face him.

“I usually kept it in the house for protection. We didn’t always live in an area as safe as Oceanview, you know!”

Farrell eyed him suspiciously, not believing him, but also not able to prove what he had said wasn’t true. It was a situation that he had been on the other end of once with Tony. He either could believe him or not. In Vietnam though, it had cost several men their lives.

“And the missing bullets? And your wife, where’s she?”

Harrison cringed and nearly lost it again, choking down tears as he thought of Jennifer’s puzzled face as the bullet struck her. He struggled, but steadied himself and continued.

“Again, I told you, my wife was shot at and wounded. Maybe lethally, I don’t know.” He paused, rubbing his eyes which were now beginning to well up. “Someone shot at both of us through the kitchen window. She was hit. I wasn’t. I wish to God it had been the other way around, but it wasn’t, and now she’s gone.”

“And the missing bullets?”

“The bullets were from when I shot at someone who tried to break into our house back in Union, before we even moved here. I panicked

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and tried to scare him off by letting him know I was armed. It worked,” he smiled, a weak, sad smile as he remembered the tiny apartment they had shared there.

“And Jennifer?” he pressed, sensing the story must have a weak point somewhere.

Andy’s face turned bright red with anger. “What about her? She might be dead, you bastard. I don’t know. How many times do I have to say it before you believe me?”

“Convince me it’s not a lie.”

“A lie? Are you serious? She was shot dammit, I saw her body...”

“Well, that’s just the problem, Andy. There is no body. My men never found one. Not in the house, not out back, not in the street. Should we check the cove?”

“You insensitive asshole. Who the fuck do you think...”

“Tell me what really happened, Andy. This is your last chance. Now will you tell us where she is? Or why your gun is missing four bullets? And don’t lie this time. Tell me the truth.”

“Lie? Why do you keep saying that? Why do you think I’m lying to you about this? I’m not lying. She was hit just below the left temple. I saw her fall...”

“You already told the dispatch that. Maria?”

Maria nodded from behind her desk while letting her eyes drift from him to Harrison and back again. The two men were locked in a battle of wills and it appeared that neither was willing to back down.

“Yeah, I called and told her that someone had shot at us and Jennifer had been hit. You don’t really think I did this, do you? I mean, she was mad at me because of the way I treated you when you first came in, but I would never hurt her. I love her. I could never, I mean, I couldn’t ever hurt her.”

He fought against tears of rage and sadness. “How does any of this relate to me being here? And why do I have to do this in front of all

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these people? Normally an interrogation is done in at least the privacy of a room if not with a lawyer present,” he sobbed. Many of the people present began to shoot questioning looks over at Farrell who seemed determined to remain relentless until Abigail suddenly cut in.

“I’m here because I was the one who saw the man who eventually murdered Tony Hawthorne.”

He suddenly realized that he hadn’t even had the chance to question her thoroughly yet about the incident, but there wasn’t time now to do so. Just then his phone rang, making Andy jump back from the desk. He stood up, walked calmly over to it, and picked it up.

“This is Farrell.”

The room fell silent as everyone watched his face grow even more stern than it had been only moments before as he listened to someone speaking in a low, calm voice on the other end. The call lasted less than a minute, but it seemed like ten before he hung the phone back onto its cradle and sighed heavily. It was the sigh of a man who had already worked a double-shift and had just been asked to fill in for someone.

“Well?” Andy asked, breathlessly waiting for an answer. He thought he knew who had been on the other end, but in Farrell’s presence he still felt like he had to act surprised.

“That was a member of the group who killed my men. They claim that they have your wife and son and demand that we immediately comply with their demands.”

“And what are their demands?” Andy asked nervously.

He looked him in the face and replied.

“They want you.”

“And what if I don’t feel like giving myself up to them?”

“Then they will kill them.”

Abigail gasped as the rest of the room stared at Andy, waiting for his reaction. He slumped down into the chair, his head in his hands. Even though he knew his life wasn’t really what they wanted, he still

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knew they would have no problem killing his family. But they didn't have Alex, Washington did. Maybe they were bluffing.

"That's all? Just me? They just want me? That's the deal?"

"Just you, Harrison...and something else...a formula. They said you would know what they meant," he said, his eyes narrowing as a grim recognition began to form deep within his mind. "I hope you know what they want for your family's sake. Oh, and if what they said you did to Jennifer is true, I'm more than willing to shoot you myself."

"What did they say?" he replied, terrified at what the answer might be.

"They said you two had a fight and you hit her. According to them, it seems like you did that a lot. After we left you the first time, they said you shot her four times and then tossed the body into the cove behind your house. That would certainly explain the missing bullets, better than your story would anyway. And you did seem quite agitated when you got home. Care to explain yourself again before we put you in the lock up for tonight?"

"You're going to believe them?" Andy asked, incredulous. "You don't even know who they are!"

Or did he?

Suddenly Andy thought of something he had missed earlier. He had seen this man before in Vietnam, but he never really knew him. Just because he was a sheriff didn't mean that he was on his side. He looked up at him with a look of absolute mistrust.

"You *do* know who they are, don't you? You know exactly what's going on. You..."

"Someone put this asshole in a cell!" Farrell replied, cutting him off before he could finish. "I don't want to hear his whiny voice again tonight. We have too much else to worry about."

"If you're going to charge me with something, then you'd better do it now and put me in jail. Right now, I don't see a thing, not one

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goddamn thing, that you could hold me on. Just keep that in mind tomorrow morning when my lawyers will be suing you for wrongful imprisonment. Not to mention gross negligence on your part as an officer of the law.”

“Negligence? I have been sheriff of this town...”

Andy continued, ignoring him. “Not to mention wrongful arrest and...”

Farrell leaned forward and slapped him across the face, immediately silencing him.

Andy wiped his mouth and glared at him. “And assault.”

Several of the officers had already moved forward, trying to get in between the two men.

“I do things my way here, Harrison. *My way*. I brought this town back from the brink of extinction doing things my way and until I see fit to change those ways, I will continue to do things my way!”

“And does your way include hitting defenseless civilians and ignoring the fact that an innocent boy and his mother have been kidnapped?”

He grunted, turning away.

“Fine, lock me up then. Please feel free to put me behind bars while my wife and my son are being held captive somewhere in Oceanview.”

Farrell took a deep breath, a long meditative breath before speaking.

“Listen, Andy, we want to find them as much as you do, but until you start talking, until you start telling us why these people are after you, I can’t do anything.”

Andy glared right back at him. “You know why they are after me. You of all people should know.”

“For the last time,” he interrupted, “will you please explain to me what the hell is going on here? Why are these people after you and where is this formula they mentioned?”

Andy drew a quick breath and exhaled slowly, feeling the world

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cave in around him as he sat in front of Farrell's desk. He knew that the man standing before him, accusing him of the crime of kidnapping and possibly murder of his own family, was working for the very group that had done it. There was little point in trying to drag it out of him; he already knew Farrell was involved. How else would they have known where Tony was, or even where he was for that matter? Better yet, how did they know Farrell's direct phone number into the station? A number that was unlisted. The only answer was that someone had been checking up on him for sometime now. It was the only thing that made sense. He had to find a way to get out. He couldn't allow Farrell to lock him up. That would be the same thing as a death sentence.

"Fine, Jimmy, I'll talk. But you already know what is going on no matter what you say. I was over there with you, or have you already forgotten?"

He shook his head.

"No Andy, I remember you. Believe me I do. Do yourself a favor and tell me about the formula. Where is it?"

"I don't know. It could be anywhere now. When you killed Tony, you killed the last link to finding it."

"Me? I didn't kill him!" he said, looking around at his men who were beginning to doubt him. He could see it in their eyes.

"Come on, Harrison, you expect me to swallow this crap? I didn't kill anyone, and if you don't tell these people where this formula is, your family is going to die. Do you hear me? They're dead! If the only thing they want is that formula, then give it to them for Christ's sake."

"I really don't know where it is, Jimmy. Tony was the only one..." he paused and looked down at Farrell's right hand which was resting on his radio. The button was in the "Talk" position and he could hear a low static noise coming from it. After a quick glance around the room he noticed that none of the other officers had a radio that looked like Farrell's. It was one that seemed to be a little bit too high-tech for such

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a small police department.

“What are you looking at?” he asked nervously, covering up the radio with his hand.

Andy’s mouth dropped open. “Son of a bitch. You really are working for them aren’t you? You set me up. Do you know what they will do to us if they come here? Are you nuts? They’ll kill us both! They don’t give a shit about you. You’re a pawn to them! Oh shit! I’m getting out of here and I suggest that everyone here does the same!” he shouted as he stormed past him towards the front door.

He had to get out of town quickly and that meant he had to make a break for it, right now. He had been snared in a very well executed trap and now his only chance for escape was out the front door. Within minutes the station would be swarming with agents who had only one thought on their mind—finish the job, complete the mission, kill Andrew Harrison. As he ran into the lobby he saw a car drive past the station. He paused for a moment, remembering how bold these men were. Surely they wouldn’t try and get him while he was still inside the police station. Or would they? From behind him Farrell was mumbling something into the radio.

His question was answered less than a second later as a bullet whizzed past his head, shattering the pay phone that hung on the wall behind him. He dropped to the ground instantly and struggled back into the main room of the station where Farrell and the other officers had already turned over some desks and were hiding behind them. He felt like asking him why he was hiding. Was he afraid that they might “accidentally” shoot him?

From outside the sound of heavy machine-gun fire erupted, sending shards of glass flying in all directions while he ran. One bullet struck his left heel, not hitting the flesh, but ripping part of the sole from his shoe. He dove forward over one of the overturned desks and landed in a pile of papers and tacks, some of which stuck to him, making him look

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and feel like a human pin-cushion.

He saw Farrell and the others had their weapons drawn and were firing out the front door. He desperately wished he had his own gun handy as well. Scanning the room, he suddenly occurred to him why they had decided to attack now. Not only were all of their targets in one place, but Farrell had sent almost all of his other men out around town trying to find them. That left only four officers including him to protect them. He shook his head in disgust. He had been duped into coming here under the guise of protection, the same way they had duped Abigail Monroe. Now they were all going to die here. Even though Farrell was working for them, there was no way for him to know what Andy already did—that no one here would survive. Not himself, not Abigail, and certainly not Sheriff James Farrell. From somewhere in front of him, he could hear the woman Maria screaming at her desk as the switchboard lit up in a series of sparks and flame.

Professionals. Fucking professionals.

“Stay down Maria. Stay down!” Farrell shouted above the approaching gunfire, a slight strain in his voice.

The switchboard exploded, followed by a small explosion on the roof where the antennas were.

They’re shooting out the radio first. Objective number one: Isolate the target with radio silence. He had watched Tony do the same thing a hundred times back in Vietnam. Without communication the fight was over. They couldn’t possibly defeat the men outside by themselves. He picked up a phone and listened to the silence there. They had already cut the phone lines.

“What next?” Andy yelled over to him from behind one of the desks. “Do you believe me yet? They don’t care about you or me! They are going to kill us all!”

“What do we do?” Abigail cried, tugging on his shirt with her pudgy hands as if to pull it off him.

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“They’re all over the place, Jimmy. What do we do?” one of his officers shouted as he peered out of one of the windows.

CHAPTER 20

Alex awoke in a strange position. He had been sleeping sitting up which always left him feeling sore. He looked over and saw the dying embers of the fire, encircled by stones to prevent it from spreading. He recognized the place, but his head was foggy and his wrist hurt. Was it from a dream or had he really been run off the road? He couldn't be sure, and being in this strange place only reinforced the confusion he felt.

Washington's camp? But how? And where is he?

He tried to get up, but a shooting pain in his back and head forced him to the ground once again. He reached up with his good hand and gingerly felt his head. It was covered with some type of cloth, and the cloth was wet and sticky.

"Well, Alex Harrison lives after all," a deep voice resounded, scaring him half to death, but it was a voice he immediately recognized. "What's the matter, boy? You forget about me already?"

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He turned his head slowly. The pain that was only mildly throbbing a moment ago had begun to grow more intense. His eyes met with the large, dark ones of Darrell Washington's and he knew that it hadn't been a dream at all.

"Washington."

"That's me. Your head hurts, huh?"

Alex nodded, dabbing at the gauze again.

"You got banged up pretty bad back there, almost killed. Would've been too if I hadn't pulled you out of there. Those guys are nasty, but they ain't always clean in what they do, or how they do it."

He could feel his head beginning to swim and tried to speak. What came out was a dry cough which Washington immediately quenched with some water from a small metal bucket he kept by the fire. After several large gulps of the cool liquid, he could feel his senses returning to him.

"Thanks. My head, I-I felt like I was going to pass out."

"Well, that sometimes happens when you get hit by car." He laughed. "You should just be happy you're still in one piece," he finished as he stood up and stretched his long arms towards the fading moon above.

Alex listened as more than one of his bones popped and cracked as he stretched out, a sign of age and weariness.

"How did you know? I mean, how did you know they would come for me?"

He looked over and grew serious, sitting down close to him, close enough for Alex to smell the stale tobacco on his breath and the salty smell of the ocean on his clothes. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out the lighter that had once belonged to his friend.

"I can answer your question, but I'm not sure you're going to want to hear it. I think your dad is more involved in this than I originally thought." He sighed.

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Alex looked past him, at the ramshackle camp Washington lived in, at the tiny fire slowly burning itself out, and finally at the man sitting next to him holding an ancient Zippo lighter between his rough fingers. His wrist was broken and his head hurt. The only thing he wanted right now was his father, and to hear that Washington thought he was somehow responsible for this made his stomach clench tight with anger.

“Look, I don’t want to be rude or seem ungrateful for what you did,” he struggled to his feet and touched his head once again, “but I really should be at a hospital now or at least at home. My parents are probably worried sick about me.”

“I don’t know for sure,” he interrupted, “but there was some gunfire at your house tonight after Farrell’s men took you away. Alex, these men never leave survivors.”

He stared at him, a cold, uncomprehending glare that he had never used before. “That’s impossible. Why would anyone shoot...”

“I heard the gunshots myself Alex. Your dad...he’s deeply involved in this. They came looking for him.”

He continued to stare at him. There was no truth behind what he said. There couldn’t be. Washington casually lit a cigarette and puffed on it while he waited for him to respond.

“You’re a liar. You’re lying to me. They can’t be dead. Who would want to kill them? My dad always said there were a lot of people who didn’t like him, but no one would ever kill him because of it.”

“Your dad,” Washington interrupted, “isn’t exactly who he says he is. At least not who he said he was to you and your mom.”

“She’s my stepmom,” he stammered, thinking of Jennifer before regaining his composure. “How do you know so much about my dad anyway? I thought you said you’ve been living in these woods your whole life?”

Washington’s eyes widened in surprise from his outburst.

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“Not my whole life, Alex. My whole second life,” he replied, reflecting on Vietnam.

“Your second life? What does that mean?”

He took a long drag on the cigarette and exhaled a plume of smoke. It drifted toward the fire, mixing with the smoke from the burning wood, and then floated away.

Ignoring the question, he began discussing Andrew Harrison.

“Your dad works for the government. Although I doubt that he does what he tells people. At some point he may even have been working for other governments as well, I really don’t know. What I do know about him is that his specialty was and is, bioengineering. More specifically, biologically active viruses that could be created in his labs and sold to the U.S. government.”

“My father? You’re crazier than you look. My dad never did anything like that. He wears a suit and tie everyday to work and he even carries a briefcase. He doesn’t even work in the lab anymore. He told me he worked with bacteria. He cures colds, like a doctor.”

“Your dad,” Washington continued, unfazed by his statements, “does work with bacteria, but I assure you he doesn’t cure colds as much as he creates them. He developed a weapon when we were back in Vietnam, some type of super-virus that we were supposed to dump on all the villages. It was rumored to kill anything organic it came in contact with. Like napalm, but completely airborne, no fires, no burning, no ash, just death. The problem was that you couldn’t just drop a weapon like that on villages that you didn’t know for certain were supportive of the Vietcong.”

“Napalm?” he asked, puzzled by the direction the conversation had suddenly gone in. He was only ten and he knew a fair amount about the war over in Southeast Asia, but he didn’t know everything. One thing he did know was that a lot of people died over there and that the hippies took drugs back home to protest the war. Other than that he was pretty

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vague about it, especially the term napalm.

Sensing his confusion, Washington explained.

"The bad guys, Alex, remember? The Vietcong were the bad guys as far as we were concerned, and they had developed a network of underground tunnels to avoid us. When we would drop napalm on them..."

"What, like a big firecracker?"

"Something like that. It was a gasoline based eradicator. I guess it was something like a firebomb. Anyway, the Vietcong would scurry underground and hide like rats in their tunnels until the fires burned themselves out. That's why your father was responsible for creating a new weapon, an airborne viral weapon would be able to penetrate the tunnels and kill them."

Alex's face twisted in disgust.

"Anyway, we couldn't bomb them like we did with Hiroshima and then force them to stop fighting. Not while the powers that be were discussing the progress of the weapon with your father. Terms of its sale I guess would be more like it. When they came looking for him, he just disappeared. Vanished completely."

"Where did he go?" Alex asked, suddenly enthralled in the story Washington was telling, although he still had doubts that his father was responsible.

"That was the problem, no one knew where he was. And we still had a war going on. Some people thought he might have sold the secrets to the Communists, but he wasn't a traitor. He wasn't even a profiteer. He was just a man with a good heart and a heavy conscience."

He sighed and looked solemn.

"In any case, he was gone and no one heard from him again until after the war was over, until after Saigon fell. That was when Tony first came in contact with him. When he must have discussed plans to hand

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over the formula and virus to dispose of or hide somewhere.”

He reflected again on the days leading up to the fall of the city, and the terrible days that followed while he and Tony were out looking for Andy Harrison in the jungles outside the battle-torn capital.

“Tony and I had been assigned, along with Jimmy, now Sheriff Farrell, to find your dad in the waning days of the war. As luck would have it, we did find him. At least Tony, Jimmy and I did. We were involved in a bad fire-fight and took heavy casualties. Most of my friends died back there. They were like my brothers,” he trailed off. “Tony and I were hit pretty badly too, and so was Jimmy. Tony even took a bullet for him, the ungrateful bastard. They wound up airlifting us out of there in helicopters, but split us up once we were at the hospital. Tony and I were in the same unit, but Farrell was on his own in another wing. We never even knew he was alive until one day when he came rolling by in a wheel chair and stopped in to say hi.

“We considered it a miracle that any of us were alive, so we didn’t question it, but I think even then Tony knew something was wrong. Once Farrell knew Tony was in the same hospital, he stopped coming by to see us. After a while he stopped coming by altogether, and then one day he was gone. He just disappeared from the hospital. When we asked where he was transferred to, the doctors said that no one by the name of James Farrell had even been admitted.”

He flicked the cigarette into the orange embers of the fire and watched it flame up quickly as it ate the white tipped filter and then died away.

“So you were trying to find and kill my dad?”

“Not kill, just find. We needed him alive to find out where the virus was and who he had told about it. Back then the fear was that the Communists would try to get their hands on it, and if that happened then there wouldn’t have been a cold war. There would have been a World War.” He looked off into the distance as if remembering

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something else before returning to his story. “Anyway, a few days before Tony and I were going to be discharged and sent home, I woke up from a bad dream to find Tony missing from his bed, which was right next to mine. I sat up, and just as I did, I heard him arguing softly with someone in the hallway outside our room. I pretended to be asleep so I could listen without arousing suspicion.

“I couldn’t make out everything they said, but I heard your dad’s name mentioned several times during the conversation to a janitor who was working the night-shift. After a few minutes, they stopped talking and sounded like they had reached some type of agreement. Then Tony crept back in and slipped quietly back into bed.”

“What were they saying about my father?” he asked, feeling overwhelmed but slowly beginning to make sense of what may have happened so long ago, and was happening now.

“I talked to Tony later, after we got out of there. He told me that he paid off the janitor, who was a South Vietnamese farmer, in order to get access to the admittance and discharge logs. Turns out that the same day we checked in, so did two others—A.J. Harrison, your father, and James D. Farrell. Both with massive head wounds and declared D.O.A.” “D.O.A.?”

“Dead on arrival. The logs said they were shot through the head twice at close range. There was even a note written about the possibility of foul play. At the time there were so many people coming and going that it was impossible for someone to keep any records straight. So your dad just came in pretending to be hurt, somehow changed the charts to indicate he was dead, and then received treatment for whatever was really bothering him. My guess is that he needed supplies, antibiotics, and other drugs readily available at a hospital. Farrell on the other hand, must have been working with some other agency altogether in order to have had his records changed. That agency, I think, is the same one that is now after you.”

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“So my dad is technically dead?”

“Let me finish first, then I’ll try and answer your questions. Yes, your dad was considered dead by the U.S. government, but that didn’t mean much then. Hundreds of people’s names got mixed up and confused after the war. Some claiming they were dead when they were alive and some claiming they were due home when they were MIA or even KIA. It was just so confusing then...”

“Anyway, after Tony told me about check out log, we found out that someone showed up and personally checked both your father and later James Farrell out of the hospital. They never had to show anyone any papers or anything. We guessed that Andy must have escaped because of the way that the generals reacted when they found out he was missing. Farrell, it turns out, was working for them the whole time, so naturally they had come back for him. Most likely to send him out after your dad. To this day I think it’s a safe bet that our being ambushed in the jungle wasn’t an accident. Till the day he died, Tony didn’t trust Farrell, apparently with good reason. Look here.”

Washington removed the lighter from his pocket and held it up for him to see.

“Check this out.” He unscrewed the bottom of the lighter and pulled the mushy cotton cloth out. “Tony knew that your dad was in danger from Farrell and those generals. He told me that if something should happen to him, to make sure that I held on to his lighter. He would always joke with me about quitting smoking. He’d say that I couldn’t quit because I needed a reminder to hold onto it. I never thought I’d actually have to take him up on his word, but now I know why.”

He tipped the Zippo upside down and shook it, tapping the bottom lightly with his hand until the small plastic cylinder fell out onto the ground. He bent down and picked it up, still in disbelief about how he could have been so blind to its existence the whole time. Slowly he removed the film from the plastic casing it had been in for the past

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twenty years and unfolded it.

“Wha-what is it?” Alex asked nervously.

“It’s microfilm labeled with both Tony’s and your dad’s initials, as well as some numbers. I don’t know exactly what it means, but I have a pretty good guess.”

He leaned over and looked again at the unrolled plastic in his hands. Written in a scrawled hand faded with time he read the letters “V 31X21,” out loud. He ran his finger carefully over the plastic, tracing the numbers as if that might help him find an answer to their meaning.

“That’s my dad’s handwriting,” Alex said softly, almost with a twinge of awe to it. “Did they ever use his virus? You know, to kill people?”

Washington shook his head. “Not that I know of. I doubt that anyone really knows for sure, and if they did it’s extremely doubtful they’re still alive. Only Andy knew how to create it and when he disappeared, I guess he probably took it with him.”

“What kind of virus is it?”

“I don’t know the details behind it. All I know is that your father is the creator of the virus whose composition I now hold in my hands. This is the reason why those men killed Tony. Why they tried to kill you and your mom...er...stepmom and are now trying to find your father. They want the secrets that this microfilm contains.”

“All this for a piece of film? But what do the numbers themselves mean?” he spoke loudly. “The numbers could be a combination or something. Maybe Sheriff Farrell knows what it means.”

He nodded. He hated when Alex referred to him as the sheriff because it implied he had some type of power. “I’m sure he does, but remember, he’s one of them and by now there’s a good chance he’s dead. Along with the rest of them.”

“The rest of who?” he replied, starting to wonder for the first time since he arrived back at Washington’s camp if his parents were okay.

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He could feel fear beginning to creep its way up his spine, stopping briefly to make the butterflies stir in his stomach. If what Washington said was true... If people had really been shooting at his house, then he prayed that they were okay. At this point, he wanted to believe they were still alive, he needed to. He cleared his head and tried not to think about either his father or Jennifer again. Better to deny his fear for now until the truth presented itself.

“Well, your dad, for one. And Farrell obviously, and probably anyone else who knows or saw anything.”

He thought of the nurse who had helped him. What had her name been? Abbey something or other.

“So what are we going to do now?”

“Now? Right now we rest. You rest. Your head’s still bleeding like a stuck pig and your cast looks like it’s about to fall off your arm. There isn’t anything else we can do tonight even if we wanted to. Now lie back down and try and get some sleep. The sun will be coming up in a few hours, and I’m going to set the traps so maybe we can have some breakfast tomorrow.”

Alex made a face that showed he didn’t want to eat anything that his traps might catch.

“What about the house?” he asked suddenly, catching Washington off guard.

He turned to look at him, surprised and more than a little concerned.

“What about the house?” he replied.

“I want to see it. I still have the key,” he finished, pulling the key out of his pocket and holding it up for him to see.

Washington cursed under his breath.

“This is a bad time to be wandering around, especially up there.” He shot a side glance up in the direction of the house. “You really want to go up there? Why?”

“I-I don’t know why. It’s just that...I...”

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“Not tonight, Alex,” he interrupted. “Not tonight. We’ll talk about it tomorrow. For now just try and rest, and forget about that house.”

He peered around nervously as a light mist began to creep in through the trees, settling around the tiny camp like an unwanted visitor.

“But I want to see...”

“If the only reason you want to go up there is to see it, then you should have just stayed at home and looked out your window.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It doesn’t matter. That place is nowhere you should go for amusement. There are things up there...” he started before catching himself and stopping. “That’s enough. Tomorrow I’ll explain to you why that place is not a good place to go exploring by yourself. Especially alone at night. Now get some rest.”

Alex watched him stand up angrily and stuff the film into his pocket along with the Zippo. His whole body ached and he knew that Washington was right. There wasn’t anything that either of them could do at this moment other than wait and rest, but he desperately wanted to see the house. He really hadn’t thought too much about it since he first saw it. But now that he was so close, he couldn’t bear to not see it and touch it. To go inside and see what it was that had drawn him through the grove to it. It was like he had been drugged and needed more than anything to be there, to see what lay inside that stone cottage.

As he closed his eyes, he tried to focus on anything else. At first he pondered what the numbers on the microfilm could mean, where his parents were, who was after him, but eventually his thoughts drifted back to the house once again. What was inside that made him want to go there? He had to find out, even if that meant going by himself.

I’ll find out why Washington is keeping that place such a secret. There has to be something up there he doesn’t want me to see. Maybe it has to do with my father. Maybe it has to do with me.

CHAPTER 21

“So what’s our play?” one of them whispered into the radio.

“Rule number one of our protocol: Ascertain who is inside,” replied another voice, much lower and calmer than the first one. “Give me a head count and then an estimate on their weapons cache. After that, I want reports on where the rest of the police are. Where the cars are, whose driving them, and what weaponry they’re carrying.”

“Yes, sir.”

He stared at the low police building with expressionless eyes. Over the years he had been in situations far more dangerous and risky than this one was, but none more important. For most of his life he had been working for a group that was completely autonomous, although many claimed they were government run. Including the government. He had been trained by the best military personnel from the age of eight. Had killed his first man at ten, and had disappeared into the underground network that opened itself up to him by the age of twelve. He was no

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stranger to life on the streets and learned a great deal about gunplay from those he befriended, many of whom he now employed as part of his tight-knit group of mercenaries. That's what they really were when it came right down to it. They were mercenaries with little or no loyalties except to themselves and to the money that the client provided. In this case, the United States Department of Defense. His radio crackled to life.

"Maybe five inside. Weapon supply minimal. Mostly handguns with some twelve-gauges."

"I want names," he spoke carefully into the radio.

There was a brief hiss of static on the other end before the voice returned.

"Abigail Monroe. Two unknown uniform cops. Andrew Harrison and Farrell, sir."

He smiled at this, knowing that it would only be a matter of time now before the elusive formula would be in his possession. The boy would have to wait for the time being. If Farrell hadn't already retrieved the formula from Harrison, then he would have it soon enough.

"Excellent. Get me the rest of the information concerning the locations of the other cops. I want no more slip-ups. This has to go smoothly."

"Roger that, sir. Getting that information now."

The radio clicked off as the man on the other end scrambled to follow through with his orders.

The operation was going very poorly so far, but not bad enough to abort it. In fact, when things were at their worst that was when he was at his best. His only real concern was the boy. Alex Harrison had somehow disappeared, not without help, he was sure. But who would help him? Who else knew what was happening? Who else knew they were here? The radio crackled to life again.

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“All officers are patrolling locations along the southern and eastern parts of town. Their orders are to maintain their patrols until told to do otherwise by Farrell.”

“Just like we told him to do. Excellent. And their weapon status?”

“The same, sir, handguns with some shotguns. Their objective is to search for the young Harrison as well as to attempt to engage us. I have to say though, sir, judging by the way they’re talking, they really are hoping to avoid us.” He laughed.

“Understood. Keep everyone updated on their status.”

The police scanners they brought with them always came in handy, especially in a small town like Oceanview which only had a small squad to contend with. The mistake that cops always made was that they liked to talk. Whether it was about some girl at the bar they had slept with the night before or the shitty weather they had been having or an ongoing case, they liked to swap stories. And Oceanview’s policemen were no different.

“Our orders, sir?”

“Move in. You know what to do. Bring me Harrison, alive. If Farrell lives, fine, bring him out too. But don’t go out of your way.”

“Sir?”

“He’s expendable lieutenant,” he growled. “Just like you if you’re not careful.”

“Yes, sir!” the man responded.

“Over and out.”

From his position he could watch the whole thing take place. He knew where his men were positioned and he knew how good they were at what they did. They should be; he trained most of them himself. The killing never got to him. It was a shame that the old woman and two policemen inside would have to die, along with the boy when they found him, but he never made it personal. You couldn’t if you wanted to sleep at night; he had learned that from a friend a long time ago. A

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friend he once had during the war.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in the plush leather seat of his black Cadillac. He made it a point to make sure all his men drove the same car he did. By doing so it made it impossible to track any one car, and also made the odds of someone getting to him pretty slim. He pulled a cigarette out of his suit pocket and flicked the flint of his shiny Zippo, barely touching the flame to the tip of the tobacco before snapping it shut. He ran his fingers over the engraving, over the emblem that he used to serve before he traded his loyalty in for money.

He smiled as he pictured what was happening inside the police station. Farrell would be barking orders, probably just realizing he was going to die with the rest of them. Harrison whining and pleading for his life while the two officers were shooting wildly at anything that moved. The operation should be over and he should be speaking to Andrew J. Harrison in no more than five minutes, and his men knew that.

Andrew J. Harrison.

He swore that he would find him one day, and when he did he would kill him. Now it looked like he would finally get his wish.

* * *

"I think someone's coming in. There. Do you see him?" one of the officers shouted, standing up with his gun pointed at the front doorway littered with broken glass.

"Get down!" Farrell shouted, but he was too late. The approaching man sprayed a precise volley of bullets through what remained of the front door, striking one man repeatedly in the chest and dropping him to the floor dead and bleeding.

Silencers. Not one bullet fired made a noise other than a soft thud when it broke through the flesh. From somewhere behind him, he could hear the sound of a window trying to be pried open. The man at the front door was only a distraction, but he was a distraction that was still

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approaching them like a hungry animal waiting for the right moment to pounce.

“Jimmy, they’re coming in from the back too,” the second officer shouted before a bullet burst through one of the side windows, taking him in the neck. Blood spurted out from the hole in his jugular vein and he fell to the floor, writhing in the throes of death before finally losing the battle. From outside someone called out.

“That’s two more, Jimmy. All we want is Harrison. You hear me? Send him out and we’ll let you and the others go.”

He knew that was bullshit. The deal was that he and his men would be left unharmed if he turned Andy over. Once he heard about Les, he suspected the deal was beginning to sour. Now he knew it had.

“Just send him out and everyone can walk out of there alive. If you don’t, then everyone dies.”

He knew the second they opened the door he would get gunned down along with the rest of them. They might have actually only wanted Harrison, but now there were others involved. Loose ends that needed to be tied up, and he was now one of them, the same way Andy and his family were. He had to get his head straight and figure out what to do soon or he was going to die in here. He knew that the chances of them getting out alive were next to impossible, so he tried to prepare himself to go down fighting. However, he hated to think of poor Maria and Abigail, two innocents who were merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. It seemed like life was a constant series of being in the right place at the right time, but few people ever wanted to mention the opposite.

“Well, Jimmy? What do you think?” the voice called out again.

“You can’t send me out there, Jimmy. You can’t! They’re going to kill me if I...” Andy stopped suddenly.

Harrison’s head sank, but only slightly.

“I can’t believe I’m going to die here, not like this.”

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“You’re not going to die, Andy. Come on now.”

“What the hell do you care? You’re working for them. You don’t think I know that?”

“I am, but I think it’s pretty obvious they aren’t planning to let me walk away from this any more than they are you.” He turned to face him. “You really don’t have the formula?”

“No, for the tenth time! Tony was the only one who knew where it was. I trusted it to him, along with the rest of the product.”

“What do you mean the rest of the product? You never actually finished it, did you?”

“What?” he replied as a bullet struck the front of the desk they were crouched behind.

“Did you finish it?”

He nodded his head.

“Yeah. That’s why they are coming after me. I did more than not give them the formula. I didn’t give them the virus.”

Farrell’s eyes lit up with fear.

“You mean you actually produced it? How? Where is it now? In Oceanview?” His eyes searched around the room as if it might be floating around in the air about them. “Christ, just tell them what you remember and let’s get the hell out of here!”

“It’s not that easy. After we left Saigon, I had already produced enough of the main virus to allow it to grow on its own. The strain I was able to stabilize began replicating at a phenomenal rate, too fast for me to feel comfortable controlling in the outside world. When the military found out about it, they immediately wanted to use it on a few test sites. When I said no, they demanded I give them all the data I had on it. Again I refused and did what I thought was right.”

“And what was that?”

“I packed up what I could and sent it back here with Tony to Oceanview. The formula, the sample, everything. I don’t remember

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what the formula was, Jimmy, not anymore. After so many years of repressing all memories of the experience, it never occurred to me that Tony might still be alive in Oceanview hiding my terrible secret.”

“Tony? Tony Hawthorne? You gave it to him? Looks like you really picked the wrong guy,” he said wryly, not believing the connection between a well respected man like Andy and a degenerate like Tony. As he peered over the top of the overturned desk he tried to see what the men outside had planned for them next. To his left Abigail was lying facedown in a pile of broken glass, he couldn’t tell if she was alive or not. Maria was curled up in a ball next to her, crying hysterically, but right now there wasn’t anything he could do for either one of them.

“I would have come back earlier to look for him, but I had a hard time tracking him down,” Andy continued. “Not to mention that I really didn’t want to ever remember what I had done.”

Farrell looked at him warily.

“You think he tried to double-cross you?”

“You mean like you did tonight? No. But I think someone tried to pry the information out of him before he died, one of your goons maybe.”

“You think I had anything to do with that? Are you out of your mind? They want me dead as much as they want you dead.”

“You already admitted that you’re working for them. Why is it so outrageous for me to think you’ve been setting this whole thing up from the beginning? I’m just saying that it’s awful suspicious to me.”

“Whatever, Andy, you can go to hell as far as I’m concerned. Just give them the damn virus.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why the fuck not?” he replied, already well past being reasonable with him.

“Like I told you, I don’t know exactly where it is. Only Tony did

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and now that he's dead I have no idea where to look."

He sighed. "You've got to be kidding me. How is it possible that you don't know where it is? After all these years of waiting to find it, you lost it? Is that what you're telling me, you lost it?"

"I didn't lose it. I know it's in Oceanview, and I know it's in a military base, but as far as I can tell there aren't any compounds within ten miles of here. Tony not only hid it for me, he was also hiding it from me. I didn't want to know where it was, that's why I gave him the microfilm with the formula on it. He should have written the exact location of the live virus on it after he hid it.

"You're an idiot, Harrison. For someone who might be one of the smartest biological warfare minds in the world, you are a complete moron."

"If you weren't on the payroll of those mercenaries out there, I might take that as an insult, but right now you are in no better position than I am. And if they hadn't killed Tony, you would have your precious virus. I wish they did have it. I don't care anymore."

"Well, he's dead now and that can't be helped," Farrell replied as another round of bullets began blasting through the windows.

"Think, Jimmy!" he shouted over the roar of the gunfire. "You knew him too. He lived here in Oceanview for most of his life. Is there anyone you can think of who he might have given it to? A friend or co-worker? Maybe someone else from the Army?"

"Nah, Tony didn't have a job. He was homeless. And I don't think he had many friends." Suddenly an idea hit him. "I guess he could have stashed it out in the cove somewhere, maybe with that other guy who lives up there. What's his name?"

"The cove? You mean the one behind my house?"

He nodded and fired a shot out in the direction of the attackers who were slowly moving in to finish them off. Their blank, expressionless faces peering back at them like carved stone.

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Harrison thought for a second and then smiled. "I know who has it."

"What? Who? Who has it?"

"Darrell Washington."

"Washington? You're joking."

"No, he's the only one who really knew Tony well, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so, Andy. He nearly died from what I recall."

"Yeah, he nearly did. I remember seeing him in the hospital one night in Hanoi. His face just sort of stuck out to me. He was lying right next to Tony, bleeding all over the place. It must have been a few hours after the fight because they were both pretty roughed up. I remember wondering who he was and how the two of them had managed to not get completely killed out there. I remember almost feeling sorry for him."

"That's a great story, Andy, really touching, but how does that help us now?"

"I saw him creeping around the back of my house tonight with Alex, that's how. I'd be willing to bet that he and Tony both lived up in that grove of trees back there. And if that's true, then I'd bet my life that Tony gave him the formula."

They heard scratching sounds on the roof and looked up. They knew what was coming next. Farrell unholstered his gun and handed it to him as he stuffed shells into a shotgun.

"I think you did bet your life on this, buddy. You remember how to fire one of these, right?"

"Naturally." He slid back the mechanism and locked a bullet into place. "You know something, Jimmy?"

"What's that?"

"I don't like you, even after all this time. Fate, however, seems to enjoy sending us once again into battle together."

He turned and saw Harrison had the gun trained on one of the men crawling forward through the doorway.

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“I guess if we are going to die, we might as well go down with a fight, right?”

Farrell stood and fired the shotgun, catching the approaching man in the shoulder and tearing away a large segment of flesh from the bone. The man didn't make a sound, didn't scream or yell for help. He simply rolled off to one side, out of their line of sight.

“Nice shot,” Andy said as he squeezed off two quick rounds towards another approaching figure. “That guy didn't make a sound though, Jimmy. Not one sound and you hit him right in the shoulder!”

Farrell nodded solemnly and fired another series of shots towards the front door, striking one man and causing the other to drop to the ground for cover.

“I know. These guys are more like machines than men. It's frightening. I sometimes wonder if they even bleed.”

From behind them someone shouted.

“Hey, Jimmy, looks like you picked the wrong side once again,” a harsh voice called out from the battered rear door. “Meridian doesn't like turncoats, especially when they are on his payroll.”

He fired the gun he was holding twice into Farrell's chest and then watched as the stunned sheriff rolled over against the wooden desk bleeding. Andy went to say something, but the man had already fired another shot just past his head as a warning, nicking his ear. He motioned for him to drop his gun, and he quickly complied. The man then walked calmly over to Maria, who was screaming her lungs out and silenced her with two more shots. Abigail was already a mess, partially crushed under one of the file cabinets that had been knocked over by the first volley of bullets. Her face was cut up badly and she looked dead. Her broken body lay shattered and bleeding on the broken floor.

The stranger smiled to himself. “No loose ends.”

He put the gun into the front of his pants and grabbed Andy by the

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collar, dragging him along behind him like a sack of potatoes as he walked out the front door.

“I overheard the last part of your conversation, Andy. Care to tell me more about this Washington person?”

He knew he was done for. Now that they knew about Washington, they knew where to find the microfilm of his precious toxins, and his son. The game was all but over. The man kicked the door open, watching it as it fell off its hinges and crashed loudly to the ground. From all around him he could hear the sounds of guns silently moving through the night air and felt them being aimed directly at him. He hoped they recognized that he was already a prisoner, otherwise he was as dead as Farrell was.

“Hold up, it’s him,” a voice called out from above them. They were on the roof too. He watched them quickly climb down and run over.

“You got the info? Does he know where it is?” one of them asked his captor. Each man was dressed entirely in black with black ski masks on as well. He didn’t know any of them, but he knew their boss, and that was all that mattered.

“First of all, get your gun out of my face,” he said, slapping the semi-automatic machine gun away. “And, yes, I think he knows where it is.”

“Let’s go then. Meridian wants to talk to him,” another one said, grabbing Andy by the arm and dragging him around to the back of the station where a running black Cadillac was waiting. They stuffed him inside just as another group arrived—the cleaners. Their job was simple—burn the building and erase all traces of the fight that had just occurred. Within ten minutes there would be no trace of a police station here, let alone a gunfight.

The driver shut his door and put the car in gear, slowly pulling away from the station, which was already beginning to smell of gasoline and other flammables. The radio next to the driver came to

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life.

“Do you have him?”

The driver responded immediately.

“Yes, sir.”

“And the location?”

“We believe he knows it. We overheard him discussing it with Farrell. A man by the name of Washington might have it.”

“Washington? Bring him over immediately.”

“On my way, sir.”

The radio went dead and they drove along a road that he had never been down before, a twisting dirt road that wound its way up to a high elevation before flattening out. As they crested the top of the small hill he saw another Cadillac parked at what looked like the edge of a cliff. His heart jumped up into his throat. Perhaps it was because he had seen too many movies where the informant was pushed over the cliff after the bad guys got what they wanted from him, or maybe because he hadn't seen the man called Meridian since Vietnam.

CHAPTER 22

No matter how hard he tried, Washington couldn't find sleep. His mind was fixated on the key Alex held as well as the strange house now draped in a thickening fog. He paced restlessly around the camp for a while, smoking cigarettes until he grew too agitated for even that. He needed to find out what "V 31X21" meant and what, if any, connection the key had to it. He didn't like thinking too hard about either, but knew that Alex held in his hands the same key Tony had once used to enter that house. When he returned, he was never quite the same. Asking him questions about it only made him retreat more inside himself. That was when his heroin use increased dramatically. He seemed to want to forget about whatever he had seen. He never found out exactly what had happened to Tony in there, nor did he volunteer any information about it. The key had remained hidden ever since then and until now he had thought it gone forever. Tony's mind was never the same after he entered that house. His normal demeanor was

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replaced with paranoia and he was afraid of almost anything that moved. One night, while lost in a dream, he remembered overhearing him mumbling about a force, something he later learned was no secret to the people of Oceanview. He had called it “the keeper of the cove.”

He looked down at Alex and saw his breathing was slow and regular, indicating the boy had finally fallen asleep again. He knew he wasn’t going to get much rest this night, so he pulled his thick jacket tightly around him and walked off down a side trail. In a round about way it would take him along Route 9, in an area where he could walk in the woods without being seen until he reached town. Maybe he could learn something about what was happening along the way, but mostly he just needed to walk.

The tide had long since reached its high point and was now slowly receding back into the sea, dragging all the debris it had washed ashore earlier, mostly Styrofoam cups and a few battered lobster traps, back with it. As he walked along the high tide mark, he thought he could hear off in the distance the sounds of one of the bells on the buoy markers clanging loudly in rhythm with the waves. He also thought he heard the far off voices of people talking, but quickly dispelled that thought. The only people who ever came up here besides Tony and him were the occasional high school couple looking for some time alone, or Farrell because he wanted to bust them for something. He looked around and shook his head. No one would come up here tonight, not with the fog, and not this late.

A light drizzle had begun to fall, making his walk all the more difficult and uncomfortable, but he didn’t mind, he needed time to think and a little rain wasn’t going to affect that. He paused as again he thought he heard muffled voices coming from the marshland. The longer he strained his ears to listen to the sound, the more certain he was that it was only the perplexing noises of the ocean, which had fooled him on more than one occasion before, and not someone’s voice.

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Refocusing himself on the task at hand, he marched off down the narrow trail that cut between the thick growth and even thicker trees, leaving Alex sleeping peacefully at the camp underneath the covered moon hanging overhead.

He followed the trail as far along as it would take him before it spilled out onto the marshy plain of the cove. From there he would have to make his way around without the benefit of cover. It was always risky, and being seen tonight would not be wise, as the people who were looking for them were more likely to shoot first rather than try and figure out who was trudging about in the wetlands at this late hour.

He felt bad telling Alex about his parents' fates, especially about his father, but sometimes fear was your best ally as well as your worst enemy, and in this case he hoped it was his friend. The boy desperately needed rest; tomorrow he would have to look at the cast in the light of day to see if any serious damage had been done. For the time being he seemed to be handling both the physical and emotional pain that had been dumped on him extraordinarily well. He could sense Alex was mature for his age, but it was a rare ten year old who didn't cry when put in the situation he had. Although having to experience what he had experienced tended to make a person grow up fast. And Alex was doing just that, growing up. He stopped abruptly, more out of surprise than fear, as two dark figures loomed ahead of him. They were no more than forty yards away, partially obscured by the weather, but still visible. They were carrying something, rather discarding something, grotesquely human in shape.

He dropped flat onto the wet ground, feeling the cold seawater that was still draining back into the cove seep into his clothing, drenching his pants instantly and slowly working on his coat. The two figures hadn't seen him; they appeared too preoccupied with what they were doing to have noticed. He held his breath and listened carefully as they

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spoke.

"Heavy bitch, ain't she?" one of them mumbled just loud enough for him to hear.

"Sure is," the other grunted as he threw an elongated black lump over his shoulder.

"Well, look on the bright side. At least we didn't get caught back there. I thought we were done for when those cops busted in."

"Yeah, me too. I wonder if they got, Andy. Any word from Meridian?"

"Nothing other than to dispose of her. He sounded all right, not too pissed off, so everything must be going smoothly." He stopped walking. "How about here?"

The other one paused and looked around briefly, trying to figure out if anyone from along the road could see what they were doing. Where they were standing it was almost impossible to be seen from the highway.

"It looks like as good a place as any. You have any last words you want to say to her?" the one shouldering the body said with a laugh.

"No. Dump the bitch and let's get out of here. This place is giving me the creeps." He looked around the marshes and then up at the grove. "It's almost like the water is watching us or something. I don't like it."

"Oh, are you scared of the ghosts that live here? Or was it vampires, I can't remember," the other one chuckled.

"No, they said it was haunted. It does feel weird though, doesn't it?"

"No, it feels cold and wet. You're just imagining things because you talked to too many of these locals. They'll fill your head with all sorts of nonsense if you let 'em."

"I don't know. There is something about this place," the first one said. "Let's just do this and get out of here."

Washington knew exactly what he meant, although it wasn't the

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water that was watching them; it was whatever force lay behind it. The same power that watched over the cove had also protected both him and Tony while they lived there. It had allowed them to exist in harmony with it for a long time, but with more and more people venturing out into its domain, he could sense its resistance growing. They had never talked about it much, only occasionally mentioning that perhaps something else was in control down here, something that had its origins in that house perhaps, but a force that was willing to coexist with them. It was, he guessed, the same thing that Alex had first sensed when he wandered down here yesterday. The boy possessed a powerful imagination, but also a terrible sadness as well. It would be up to him to help him break free from his fears and see how beautiful the world could be. It was a part of life; it was also part of growing up.

He remembered the first time he felt how powerful the mind could be out here. One night he came down to the cove for a midnight walk, much like he was doing now, because he couldn't sleep. The moon was full and low but with a sour yellow color to it like moldering bones unearthed from an ancient tomb. He followed a narrow path down the hillside that spilled out right in the middle of the cove. Nothing seemed unusual at first, but as he walked further and further away from the grove he began to notice a progressively uneasy feeling settling over him. The more he walked, the worse he felt. It wasn't something he could ever really put into words or explain, but he had the distinct feeling that the dark, midnight blue waters of the cove were watching him as he crunched over the dead sea grass. It was like the water was angry he dared to trespass on the land that it had so recently covered with its icy waters. He felt certain that if given the chance, the waters would rush forward at him, defying all laws and manners of nature, and swallow him up. It was a horrible feeling that brought him many sleepless nights afterward even though nothing had actually happened to him. It was the same feeling, he was certain, the two men before him

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now felt. It was only the power of his mind that had scared him. He knew the sea couldn't reverse its course and come after him, but in his mind he wasn't entirely convinced, and that was his downfall. That doubt he felt, that single doubt, had made him turn around that night and run back to the camp to wake Tony. That was his first lesson and the first time he began to learn the true power of the cove.

"On three," one of them said, pulling him back to reality.

He watched them swing the body back and forth to build up momentum like a pendulum before they released her. He couldn't see clearly from his position on the ground, but he heard one of them curse as the trash bags that held her body broke, sending it flying off in the opposite direction, away from the cove. He also heard something smack into the water loudly. Cinder blocks, which meant they had intended to sink her. Since the tide still was receding, there was a chance her body would be seen, but with the strange currents that flowed through the cove the odds of her body being discovered before dawn were next to nothing.

"Shit. Now what?"

"I don't know. Wait. Go get her and we'll bring her up to those woods and bury her. No one will know the difference, but we have to hurry before Meridian starts looking for us."

"Bury her? But she's still alive."

"And would it be worse for her to be buried alive or drown in a trash bag?"

"I just think that it's kind of...well..."

"Listen, I don't care what you think about this. Our orders are to get rid of her body, and unless you feel like shooting her in the head while she's unconscious then we have to bury her. I personally would rather just bury her, but feel free to squeeze a few shots off. Just be sure to tell Meridian what you did."

"Meridian? Well..."

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“Christ, she’s probably dead by now anyway. She’s been in those plastic bags for almost an hour. She probably suffocated. Not to mention the head wound she has. Just get her body and let’s head back there and finish this.”

“Fine. Fine, I’ll get her. Let’s just get out of here. Something feels wrong. I don’t like it.”

He could hear them walking over toward where he was, and he pressed his body as flat to the ground as he could manage, holding his breath until his lungs seared with pain while the two men dragged the woman’s body toward the forest grove. They passed within a few feet of where he was, but thankfully never saw him. He saw them, however, and he saw who they intended to bury—Jennifer Harrison.

He knew he was lucky these two were sloppy about what they were doing. If it had been anyone else, he would have been spotted before he even left the safety of the grove. He didn’t know who they were, but he knew their boss. He knew it the second he heard the name Meridian, and he also knew they must be working as part of his clean-up crew. They were what Tony used to simply call the cleaners. And if they were here, that could only mean his gut instinct, which he had tried to deny, was right. The people looking for Andy Harrison and his son were professionals, the same men he heard stories about during the war. It also meant that if Jennifer Harrison was the body these two men intended to bury, he was going to have to do something to save her. But what, he was unarmed?

He waited a few more minutes after they had passed before he stood up, mud and water dripping off his clothes along with sweat from his forehead and neck. Whenever he got tense he would sweat like a sow in the summertime. It was his body’s way of slowing him down, and although it was uncomfortable, it had saved his life many times. It forced him to slow down, not just his body, but his mind as well. Realistically, he couldn’t go after them now. He had no weapons, and

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from their conversation he knew they were armed. He decided that the first thing he should do would be to head back to the camp and check on Alex. Once there he could find something to use as a weapon. From ahead of him he could hear the two men arguing. He would have to take the long way back, which meant that it would take some time, but it was the safest way. He broke into a jog and made his way toward another path in the grove, one that would keep him far enough away from being seen or heard, but close enough to know where they were. Time was of the essence right now if he wanted to save Jennifer.

* * *

Alex listened as Washington left the camp. He had been hoping he might leave for a moment, at least long enough for him to sneak away. The pull of the house so close by had made it impossible for him to think of anything else. The key seemed to burn in his hands as he raced through the thick trees along the trail's edge. He had no real idea of where the stone cottage was, but felt certain he would find it somehow. The key would guide him. It was the most irrational thing he had ever done, but he needed to know what was inside. Something was compelling him to find out; something was willing him towards it.

The dark trees whipped past him as he ran—a blur of foliage that blended together into a black nothingness. The trail he raced along remained straight, only occasionally bending one way or the other, but never for more than a moment. He was following a path that was leading him directly up the hillside, straight to the house. In the wilderness surrounding him he could feel the eyes of the night creatures on him as they observed the strange intruder in their realm stumbling and falling, stumbling and falling as the thickening fog and exposed roots made his way extremely difficult going. The moon was hidden so well behind a sea of clouds that he had given up trying to see it, or use it as a source of light. Instead he relied on instinct and the unwavering belief that the house would pull him toward it the same way it had been

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leading him thus far.

The path ahead bent slightly to his right and then quickly back to the left where it finally opened up into a small clearing. The low stone building sat just beyond, overlooking the sea like a king looking down upon his subjects. He paused, breathless at the clearing, and for several long moments merely observed the structure. Time lost all meaning as he stood there letting the ancient house take him in, for that was how he felt. It wasn't like he was watching it, but rather like it was watching him. It was curious about him, inviting, not menacing, but not quite friendly either. Similar to the way a driver picking up a hitchhiker might feel. Not quite trusting the stranger sitting beside him, but not quite afraid of him either. For what seemed like an eternity he stood with his mouth open as he drank in the scene before him. How long he stood there he couldn't be sure. Five minutes? Ten? Twenty? He didn't know. He wiped at his nose as a strong odor began falling in around him. He coughed, but continued to move forward.

It was a one-story building with crumbling stone walls and a thatched roof that had a multitude of holes in it from the weather. There were two windows, both with tinted glass panes that somehow had remained intact, as well as a heavy looking wooden door bent and warped with water damage. On the door, was a large white mark engraved in the wood itself. He broke out of his trance and walked along slowly, his eyes darting around nervously, wildly, like he had just stumbled upon an animal's hidden lair and expected it to return soon. He wiped away sweat from his face and coughed again, the strange smell suddenly enveloping him, making him dizzy. Alex looked down at the key in his hand and then back up at the door. He wanted so badly to place the key into the lock and turn it. He knew it had to open the door, it just had to. Another step brought him closer. One more and he was almost there when all of a sudden he stopped as a light came on from inside the house. It wasn't an electric light as there were no power

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lines that connected this decrepit building to the rest of the town. In fact, there was nothing at all that connected this place to the town. It was almost like it had been forgotten, or at least put aside.

His body went as rigid as the stones that made up the house in front of him when he suddenly saw a humped figure hurriedly pass by one of the windows. It paused, staring briefly out through one of the colored panes, making its eyes seem red and large. Minutes later smoke began pouring out of the chimney as a great blaze from within lit up the inside enough for him to see that there were actually two figures milling about. He was still too far away to see them clearly as distance and the colored windows made it difficult to get a good look. He waited until it looked like the people inside were focused on something else, which he really had no way of knowing other than by instinct, and crept forward once again. The thick, oily smell still hung heavily in the air and although part of him screamed to turn back, another part insisted that he go forward. He slowly lowered himself to the ground and began crawling off to the left side of the house where there were low scrub bushes that would provide him with some cover. Inch by painful inch he struggled, moving forward and dragging his body after him, his broken wrist beginning to throb again. He was sure that he had broken it again at some point, but right now all that mattered was getting closer to the house.

He finally made it to the side of the building and leaned up against the cool stone wall, breathing heavily and sweating like he had run a marathon instead of having crawled twenty yards. The sweat was from his nerves, he knew that, but the pain in his arm was from something much more serious, and it would require medical attention soon.

What am I doing here? This is ridiculous, I'm spying on these people. They are probably an old couple who just want to be left alone. That's why they moved up here to begin with. But still, I do have the key. Maybe if I just tried it. That couldn't hurt, if I just tried once... He

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held the key in front of him. He licked his lips and then ran his tongue over them and wiped at his face with his shirtsleeve. The noxious fumes that he had been inhaling had made his eyes blaze red with madness.

"I'll just try once. If it works then..."

"You could just try knocking instead," a voice from above him spoke, causing him to jump up immediately, bumping his head against a stone that was jutting out from the wall. He slid back to the ground rubbing it to soothe the pain.

"Here now, I didn't mean to scare you there, lad. I was only curious to see who was poking around in my backyard. Are you okay?"

He looked up and saw that in his haste to get to the bushes he hadn't bothered to look at where he was actually hiding. As he looked at the wall now though, he realized he had been sitting beneath another window. This one was twice as long as it was wide, and he was leaning up against it. From the inside his silhouette was completely visible.

"I say there, are you okay, lad?" the voice asked again. It was a tiny voice, but full of life.

He peered up in the direction it was coming from and was shocked to see a tiny face peering back at him. He saw a small man, hunched over with age, but with the brightest eyes and most cheerful smile he could ever remember seeing, staring back at him. He immediately thought of his grandfather. The man grinned at him broadly and he couldn't help but start laughing, which perplexed the tiny man.

"I say, you might have hit your head harder than I thought. Stay there, I'll be right out. Mary, boil some water. There's a lad out here who hit his head on our house!"

He paused and stared down at the cast on his arm.

"Got something on his arm too. Better get some cloth."

From somewhere inside he heard a woman's voice answer, a pleasant voice that reverberated throughout the entire structure.

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"I must be dreaming," he mumbled to himself as he struggled to his feet just as the tiny man hopped out the window and onto the ground.

"Come inside, my boy, we have to get that head looked at. Come on then," he said, leading the way and letting him use his shoulder as a crutch while he walked.

"What is this place? Wh-Who are you?" he asked once they were at the front door.

"Not now, Alex, not now. Come inside and all your questions will be answered. We have been waiting for you for a while, but you really shouldn't be sneaking up on us like that. We're too old!" He laughed, a soft cackle that startled and amused him at the same time.

"How did you know my name?"

"I told you, inside. Once we're inside I can speak of such things, but not out here. You have the key right?"

"Th-the key?"

"Yes, yes, the key. One can't open a locked door without a key now can he?"

"Locked door?"

He looked up the front door and was surprised to see that not only was it shut tightly, but also all the lights inside had suddenly gone off as well. He was standing in front of the doorway, but there was no longer any light coming from inside. No fire roaring, no colored window panes, and no old man standing beside him. He was all alone. Even the chimney refused to show him any signs that it had been used recently as no smoke issued from it. In his hand he held the key, but that was all. There was nothing else around except the bizarre rancid, metallic smell. The same one he thought he had smelt earlier when he first ran into Washington. The only difference was that up here it was extremely powerful, an overwhelming odor that filled his mouth and nose with a thick indescribable stench. He coughed again and began to grow dizzy, his legs quivering and starting to give way beneath him. He

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reached out for the door and fell into it, leaning his weight up against it. He felt the damp wood pressing against his skin just as he began to lose consciousness. As he dropped to the ground, he thought he saw the old man trying to coax him up, or maybe he was reaching for the key, he couldn't tell. Before he had time to think about it, he was lost again in a sea of blackness.

* * *

When he got back to the camp, Alex was gone. Washington looked around quickly, but he already had a pretty good idea where the boy had gone to.

“Shit, Alex. Shit. Not tonight.”

He paced back and forth, trying to decide whether to go after him first or try and save his stepmom. He knew where Alex was, he had to be at the house, but if he didn't go to Jennifer right now, they would bury her alive.

“Damn it, Alex. Why now?”

He went into his small hut and dug around for a few minutes before emerging with a small hunting knife. It was old and had spots of rust on it, but it was the best he could do for now. He had given up violence and weapons forever when he came back from the war, but this was an exception, one last battle against a very tough enemy. He had used the knife a few times to hunt with, but it was much easier to set traps out than to wait around for an animal large enough to use the blade on to wander by. He glanced down at it and was immediately reminded of the wicked deeds he had done to his fellow man with similar blades. He had allowed himself to keep one knife for just that reason, to remind him. He never wanted to go back to being an animal again. As he looked around at his surroundings, he suddenly wasn't so sure he had succeeded in doing that.

Down in the cove he heard a loud chuckle and knew that he had to hurry. Jennifer was running out of time, whether or not she knew it. He

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raced off in the direction of the laughter, careful to keep the blade tip down before him as he ran. Something deep inside him had been awakened, the savage animal he hated, the beast he had fought so hard against, was now coming free. What scared him wasn't the fact that it had returned, but the fact it felt like it had never gone away. God had made him a man, but the United States Army had made him a killer.

CHAPTER 23

Andy didn't like being bossed around, and at this moment he felt like he was no longer in charge. It was a feeling that usually meant something bad was going to happen. It was.

The black Cadillac was parked along the ridge, precariously teetering on the edge overlooking the ocean, and inside the car sat a man smoking a cigarette, its tip flashing orange as he drew on it and then dulling as he pulled it away from his mouth. The man who had pushed him into the back of the car at the police station appeared tense as they approached, continually checking his watch and shaking his head. He looked like he was frightened, and he could only assume that the gentleman sitting in the Cadillac was the reason. He knew him, and he also knew the man had good reason to be nervous around him. He was dangerous.

He watched as Andy approached the car. He looked scared, which was good. People who were scared usually told the truth. He hadn't

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given Andy his real name when they first met in Vietnam. He didn't even give him a name to call him, he only asked him one question, "Is it possible?" He was referring, of course, to the virus that he had been developing, supposedly in secret. All that seemed so far away now, though it felt like it was from another lifetime.

Andy could hear his heart rattling around in his chest as he walked closer and closer to the car. He remembered this man very well. He never told him his name, but through other sources he learned he went by the moniker "Meridian." Their first meeting was in his laboratory in South Vietnam in the late 1960's. At the time, he had been dressed in a green military uniform, complete with a full breast of medals and an armful of stripes that lined his jacket. He had no distinguishing qualities about him other than the fact he appeared to be a high ranking official of some sort, although he did have a unique voice and smoked more than anyone he had ever seen. His voice wasn't quite raspy, but it was headed in that direction, probably from smoking too much, and it was extremely low. When he assured him that, if given time, it could be done, the man nodded gravely and briskly walked away, lighting a filterless cigarette as he left. After that he never saw the man again, nor thought of him until a few months later when he arrived at the hospital where he was being treated for gunshot wounds received during a raid on his facility. He had been air-lifted to Hanoi with several others, including Tony and Washington. It was there that he began being visited by other high ranking officers and officials, but mostly by the man who called himself Meridian. They grilled him for two weeks straight about the virus and its whereabouts. He lied at the time and said he had never finished it, which they accepted the first day, only to return and call his bluff on the second. They searched through his database and discovered that he had finished stabilizing the viral strain V #3B3. And now they wanted it.

For days he was able to throw them off as he prepared his escape.

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The last day he was hospitalized he had been involved in a brief conversation, but one full of substance. They did more than threaten his life that last day. They threatened to kill his parents, his grandparents, as well as his friends and their families. When he laughed at this threat, they then listed off the names and whereabouts of each and every person he knew, just to get their point across. Not wanting to be responsible for the deaths of his friends and family, he did the only thing he knew that would keep them alive as well as keep his own skin intact. He took the virus and ran.

He knew that as long as he was still alive, they couldn't risk killing anyone. They believed he had the virus, and if they had to negotiate to get it, then they would. Threats were generally effective, but not when the other guy was were holding all the chips, as Andy was. The virus was his wild card and because of that no threat could hold any water.

He met up with Tony later that day, someone he had revealed his secret to once he had talked to him long enough to realize his trustworthiness. He gave him all the information about the virus he could, everything he could think of, but it was Tony's idea to have the whole package sent to Oceanview. It was a simple solution to a problem he didn't want. Even if Tony turned around and sold it to the government, which he knew he wouldn't do, at least he didn't have the guilt of knowing that it was taken directly from his hands and then used on innocents as a test. A small consolation, but one that he was willing to live with.

After leaving Vietnam under extremely suspect circumstances, he had all the information concerning the virus delivered to an address Tony had named in Oceanview, Oregon. He hoped he would dispose of it, but really didn't care what happened to it as long as his name was removed from it. He attached the package to a crate load of military supplies headed to the west coast, giving it to a private who assured him Tony would receive it. He had lied to the private, telling him the

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package contained documents about his brother's death over in Vietnam. He said he wasn't allowed back in the country as he was a Canadian defector, but hoped he would find it in his heart to deliver the package to his cousin back in Oregon. Reluctantly the man agreed, mostly because the supplies were being dropped off at a base in Oceanview anyway, and the rest was history. Even though that was over twenty years ago, he still remembered the feeling of freedom that came over him once he gave that man that package. It was like watching a nightmare that had kept you in its grips for the whole night finally letting go. The funny part about it was that the lieutenant who delivered it had no idea that he was carrying the most deadly weapon ever created in his front pocket. It's true what they say: Ignorance is bliss.

"Move faster, we're late," the driver said, prodding him in the back with his gun. "And don't bother trying anything or I'll shoot you."

He could feel a trickle of perspiration growing just below his hairline, soon it would bead and then roll down his forehead. A sure sign he was nervous. He hoped Meridian wouldn't notice.

Who is this guy anyway? Just another tough military guy really. I can't even remember what he looks like, yet I feel I should be afraid of him. What am I going to tell him? That my boy or some old war vet might have the formula he's looking for? He'll kill me on the spot.

"This way, Mr. Harrison," the man pointed toward the running Cadillac. "He doesn't like to be kept waiting and we're already five minutes behind schedule."

He walked over to the car and the man opened the passenger side door for him, helped him in, and then shut it behind him. The doors quickly locked as he settled in. The car smelled of stale smoke and rich upholstered leather, an acrid combination that made him want to gag, and he struggled to maintain his cool in spite of it. The man sitting next to him was dressed in a dark business suit with a black power tie

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knotted tightly just below his protruding Adam's apple which was distinguished compared to the rest of his features, which were bland and common. His shirt was starched white and stiff looking, although Meridian himself appeared loose and relaxed. His eyes were dark, as was his face. He had a rough, square jaw that appeared hard, as if made of iron, and a light beard that had speckles of white in it. His hair was dark as well, but without any white areas, which meant that he must have dyed it at some point recently. What he lacked in appearance he made up for in the way he stared at him, through him, as if he weren't there at all, but rather outside somewhere.

"So it appears that fate has brought us together once again," he said suddenly, catching him off guard.

His voice was low and raspy, the sound of a man's voice who has been smoking for too long and finally decided that it didn't matter anymore. "I know you don't have the formula with you, so you don't have to bother lying to me."

"Meridian?" he asked, amazed that the man was able to remain so youthful looking after all these years. "Is that really you?" Even though he knew Meridian was responsible for everything that had been happening, he still found himself slightly surprised to see him.

"I see you do remember me. That's good."

He watched him as he crushed out his filterless cigarette in the car's already overflowing ashtray, lit up another one, and continued.

"All I want to know is where it is. I don't know for sure whether you know or not, so why don't you try and convince me to not kill you by telling me what I want to hear."

He swallowed. He remembered why he should be afraid of this man now. The slow, patient way he spoke, as well as the short questions, quick and to the point were only a prelude to the pain he would inflict if his questions went unanswered. It had been at least twenty years ago, but the flat, low voice made him certain the man he was sitting in the

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car with was the same one who had first approached him about developing the virus in Vietnam. Meridian had found him.

“Well, I think that...” he started before Meridian interrupted as only he could.

Without a word he leaned over and put his cigarette out on his left arm, using his other hand to clamp his mouth shut while he tried to cry out in agony.

“Listen to me, okay? Are you listening?”

He nodded as tears of pain began forming in his eyes. He could still feel the searing pain of the cigarette burning on his arm as well as the sour smell of burned flesh.

“Good. I don’t care what you think, Andy. What I’m interested in is what you know, understand?”

He nodded again and watched in disgust as the man removed the extinguished cigarette from his arm and relit it using the car’s lighter. He took a long, purposeful drag and then looked at him and waited.

“Start talking then. And remember if you lie to me, or if I think you’re lying to me, you’ll get another burn, and I have plenty of cigarettes to keep this up all night.”

As if to reinforce this he patted a pack of cigarettes in his right breast pocket.

“Okay,” he muttered while rubbing his arm. “Okay.”

“Good. Now give me some names and places to find these names. I also want to know who has knowledge of the virus and where they are too.”

“I don’t have the exact location, but I know it’s in Oceanview. I originally put the formula on a piece of microfilm that I had mailed here. Along with some of the product.”

“So you did finish it.”

His eyes blazed when he said this, turning from their dull brown color to a fiery red.

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“Yes, but I sent them back to Oceanview, to a friend, who passed away and...”

He leaned over again and jabbed the cigarette into his cheek. He howled in pain, but Meridian ignored him.

“I don’t want a story, Andy. I want the facts, and I want them now,” he said angrily and then sighed. “Let me tell you something. I know that Farrell knew a lot about it, probably more than he let on, but now that he’s out of the picture I have to rely on you for my information. Tony was a good man in his day, but he was a junkie and could barely remember his name let alone where he had hidden something twenty years ago, that’s why he was killed. Most of the platoon he ran had some knowledge of what you were up to, and they’re all dead as well. Now let me ask you this...”

“They’re not all dead,” he whimpered as drops of blood from his cheek began to roll down his face. “Washington. Darrell Washington is still alive. I saw him tonight.”

“So you’ve said. I think it’s impossible. Every file I checked confirmed this.”

“But I swear. He was in my backyard running somewhere.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

He leaned over again, cigarette blazing. “Guess.”

“M-maybe to the cove. Tony lived up there in the woods from what I’ve heard. I suppose they both could have lived up there.”

Meridian reached down and picked up a two-way radio from beneath the seat, speaking in an authoritative tone into it.

“Three units to Ridge Road. There’s a cove behind Harrison’s place. A black man named Darrell Washington might be holed up somewhere in the woods back. Check it out and report anything unusual back to me.”

“Yes, sir,” a voice snapped back.

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“Darrell Washington,” he said, more to himself than to Andy. “What are you up to I wonder?”

“Do you think he knows anything?” Andy asked, trying to feel out the situation.

“I’ll tell you what I think when I feel like telling you. What about your boy? Tell me about Alex. Where is he?”

“I don’t know where he is,” he lied. “The police said he was in a wreck when one of your agents slammed into him. By the time they got to the scene, the only thing they found was a dead cop. He could be anywhere.”

“Not likely. I’ll bet he’s with Washington. What does your boy know about what you do?”

“Nothing. Not a thing. He’s only ten for God’s sake. He has no idea what’s going on.”

“One of my men saw a cast on his arm the other day, what happened?”

“He got into a fight at school and broke his wrist. It wasn’t a big deal. He just had to go up to the children’s hospital to get it set.”

“Portland Municipal Hospital?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“That’s the same one they brought Tony into.”

“Yeah, but he died. I was told he died en route to the hospital after he was hit by a black car, one of yours I can only assume.”

“We were trailing him because someone got word he had access to the formula. When we found out he didn’t have it, we took him out and came after you, as you were supposedly the only one in Oceanview who knew of its existence. But now that Washington’s here as well...that makes two people.”

“You don’t really think he has it, do you? That would be crazy. He’s probably a junkie too!”

“What better way to throw us off? Now that Washington is back in

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the picture, my guess would be that he has your son up in those woods somewhere. And he has the formula.”

He picked up the radio again and spoke with a sense of urgency into it.

“I want all units to converge on the cove behind Harrison’s house. I think Washington has the formula and he probably has Alex Harrison as well. Take him and the boy out and get that formula. I’m on my way.”

“On our way, sir.”

He jammed the car into gear and pulled away from the ridge, heading back toward Andy’s home, heading back toward the cove.

Andy stared blankly out the window as they drove. He had tried to protect his son from this, but now it looked like his mistakes might cost him everything. And he still didn’t know what happened to Jennifer.

CHAPTER 24

She awoke face down in the damp earth. The cool smell of the dirt both repulsed and invigorated her all at once. She didn't know if she wanted to gag or stand up and brush herself off first. Then she heard the voices of two men talking and her mind slowly began piecing together the events that had taken place. There was the fight Alex was in at school, the hospital, the homeless man, Andy's secret, and then a gunshot. My God, she had been shot!

She resisted the urge to reach up to her head and inspect the wound. She could feel a dull throbbing just below her left temple, but suspected that whoever was standing above her talking likely wasn't there to patch her up. Something had gone wrong. Where was Andy? What had happened to him and Alex? How long had she been knocked out and where was she?

"I don't care what you think you saw up there. Just start burying her while I radio Meridian."

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“I’m telling you, this place has a funny smell to it, and I thought I saw lights go on up there in that house we saw earlier.”

His companion scoffed.

“What, that collapsed, dilapidated stone artifact up there? No one has lived there in over twenty years. The only lights you’re going to be seeing are the ones in your eyes after I punch you in the head. Now get going.”

She almost screamed when she heard him mention burying her. That could only mean they thought she was dead, or at least close enough so that it didn’t matter. From somewhere in the distance she could hear the waves of the ocean leaping up onto the shore. Where was she? She didn’t dare roll over or even move until she was sure she wouldn’t be detected. At the same time, being face down in a shallow grave dug especially for you wasn’t exactly a situation in which she was accustomed to dealing with, and that made pretending to be dead all the more difficult.

“Whatever, just call Meridian.” He paused. “You don’t smell that? It’s almost like heated metal or something.”

“I don’t smell anything but your breath. Now bury her and let’s get out of here. I think all your talk is starting to get to me.”

“What do you mean? Did you see something too?” the other replied quickly.

“No, not see something, but...never mind, just finish up.”

She drew a quick breath, tasting the air slightly. It did have a weird taste to it. Didn’t Andy say something about the virus being airborne? She couldn’t recall; her head was ringing. Just then a pile of cold earth landed squarely on her back and it took all the courage she could muster not to scream. That was when she realized something else, she couldn’t move even if she wanted to. She was paralyzed. Another shovelful landed next to her head and she opened her mouth to scream, but only air came out. Was she completely paralyzed? Or had the bullet

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left her in a state of shock? Another pile, this one closer to her face. She tried to roll over, but her muscles refused to obey her. The smell of the earth was noxious now, an overpowering smell of moist dirt mingled with a peculiar metallic smell. She thought it most closely resembled the faint smell that iron gave off as it oxidized into rust. Another shovel full.

Her thoughts raced to Andy and Alex. She loved them so much it seemed grossly unfair she should have to lose them. It all seemed very unfair. The man shoveling stopped and tamped down the loose earth that he had thrown onto her legs. Again she opened her mouth to scream, but only a dry hiss escaped. She was paralyzed, she had to be. What else could explain it?

"Stop. Hey hold it for a minute," the other man's voice said in a harsh whisper.

"What? What is it?" the man shoveling replied, the fear evident in his voice.

"I just saw something move up there, in the trees. There! Did you see it?"

"No, I...oh my God, over there! Look! Did you see it?"

"Yeah. What do you think they...oh shit! There! They're over there too!

"I see them. They're everywhere. Take your safety off. I'm calling Meridian."

"Who are they?"

"I don't know. Shut up for a second. Maybe he knows what's going on."

She didn't know what was happening above her and in many ways she was glad she didn't. The terror both men were suddenly exhibiting was enough to make her glad she appeared dead. She heard a radio crackle and hiss with static.

"Meridian, come in. Meridian, come in please. We have a situation

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here. Over. Meridian..."

"It's not working. Turn it off before they hear you."

"But it doesn't make sense. I just had a clear connection two minutes ago."

"Maybe they're jamming us."

"Maybe, but how would they know which frequency to jam? We never use the same one twice."

"I don't know. Shit. Get down. Over there behind those trees."

"I see it. They've got us pigeon-holed, you know that right?"

"Yeah, I know."

"You ready for this?"

"Who are they?"

She heard the click of bullets being loaded into guns and then the sound of the men above her—the nameless, faceless men who had until recently been her executioners—whimper to themselves as they realized that whoever was after them finally had them cornered.

"There," one of them said after a brief silence, one that seemed interminable to her but in reality may have been only thirty seconds.

"This is not possible. There is no way this is possible."

"Is this a nightmare?" one coughed.

"It has to be," the other replied, coughing loudly. "It has to be."

Suddenly the still night erupted with the sounds of gunfire. Gunfire coming in from all directions. The two men never uttered another word, not even a scream as the bullets tore through them. For twenty seconds the sound of gunfire roared, thundered, and screamed around her until, just as quickly as it had started, it abruptly stopped, leaving the grove in a heavy silence once again. She had been saved, but by who? And what did they want?

She still wasn't able to move, and even if she could, she didn't dare, not yet. The air still tasted strange, but not with the smell of gun smoke, as it should have, but rather it held the taste of metal again. What had

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Andy said about the virus being airborne? She was going to drive herself crazy trying to remember, or maybe she had already crossed over the threshold from which there was no return.

* * *

Washington heard the men talking as one of them began burying Jennifer. He didn't know them personally, but he knew their type. Cocky, arrogant, and careless. He had a handkerchief wrapped over his face, covering his mouth and nose tightly. He looked like a bandit out of an old western movie, but he also knew what happened when the air began to get that smell to it. Bad things happened. Things he had no control over. Things he wanted nothing to do with. Tony had called it the "keeper of the cove" because it protected its own as vehemently as it did itself. The air around him grew tight, he could feel it awakening.

The two men had grown quiet and were crouched down now, side arms pointing out into the forest. From where he was there was little chance of being hit by a stray bullet, but he still stayed low to the ground himself, just in case. They were growing agitated and breathing heavily. One deep breath in, one out, another in, another out, another in... They were beginning to lose their cool and he knew what was coming next. He didn't want to see it, but he had to make sure Jennifer was okay.

Although there was nothing else in the woods more dangerous than Washington himself, the two men began whimpering and pointing out into the darkness. He followed where their fingers went, but saw nothing there. They were breathing even heavier now, their nerves were making them panic and when you panicked, your heart beat faster and that made you breathe quicker to compensate. It was a cycle that was supposed to help calm the body down, return it to normal. But up here, it only made things worse.

Suddenly both men started shouting and firing blindly into the trees. Then they were shaking and convulsing violently as if their bodies were

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being riddled by a thousand bullets at once from every direction. They did this for ten seconds and then dropped to the ground dead. No blood, no screaming, no noise. They were simply dead. He wondered what they saw when they died. What had killed them. He knew what had really killed them, the keeper of the cove, but he was always curious what people saw before it took them. Did everyone see the same thing or did it customize its torture for its victims? He had guessed long ago that each individual's death was just that, his own.

He stood up and tightened the rag around his mouth and nose to the point where he almost couldn't breathe, and walked slowly down to where the two bodies were. He was careful to pace himself and not get his heart pumping too rapidly. He didn't want to increase his own breathing and wind up dead himself. He only wanted to get Jennifer and then get out of there. He also still needed to find Alex. He only hoped the boy didn't get very far, otherwise he might suffer the same fate that these two had.

He took a full ten minutes to walk the twenty yards to where he saw the half dug hole with her body poking out. He reached down and touched her on the shoulder. She didn't respond. She was face down in the ground. He immediately felt for a pulse, which he found. It was weak, but steady.

"Hang on, Mrs. Harrison. I'm getting you out of here."

He bent down and pulled her out of the makeshift grave, being sure not to overexert himself in the process. He then tossed her over his shoulder in the way that a fireman would and slowly started walking away, back toward his camp. He paused just before leaving and turned to look at the two dead bodies. The taste of metal was beginning to seep through his rag and he fought hard not to let it make its way into his lungs, into his blood, into his brain. His head began to grow light and he felt himself growing faint when one of the bodies suddenly rolled over onto its hands and knees and slowly started standing up. He closed

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his eyes and tried to forget it, but there was something in its face that compelled him to look again. He opened his eyes and gasped, drawing in a deep breath of the tainted air. The face was one he recognized, not a friend's or even an enemy's, it was his own. He gasped again, knowing it was the worst thing he could do. His corpse opened its mouth in a mockery of his fear and laughed loudly; its hollow sound reverberated in his ears like thunder. It stuck its thick tongue out at him, blood pouring out of its cavernous mouth. He turned away, holding his breath, and ran up the hill, away from the dead bodies and away from the sour air.

Only in your head, he thought to himself as he ran, Jennifer's body bouncing up and down on his shoulder, *only in your head, only in your head, only in your head...*

CHAPTER 25

There were five black Cadillacs already in his driveway when Andy arrived home with Meridian, who had extinguished two more cigarettes on him during the ride, just for fun. His enjoyment stopped when he saw all the traffic in Andy's driveway. He growled with anger and stopped in front of the house, jamming the car into park and jumping out. He gave him a look that said "I dare you to try and run" before racing over to the parked cars. He marched directly up to one of his men who was sitting on the hood of his car and began shouting at him. He knew why Meridian was mad, if anyone drove by and saw five, now seven cars, including the one he was in as well as the one that followed them here, it would undoubtedly arouse suspicion. After a few minutes of shouting orders and much finger pointing, which everyone did until it seemed like everyone was pointing at someone else, Meridian managed to regain control of the situation.

One by one, the cars started up and began backing out of the

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driveway, scattering in different directions once they were on the road. Within five minutes, the only car remaining was the one he had arrived in and Meridian was headed back to it, an angry scowl lining his face. He got in and slammed the door shut behind him hard enough to rock the whole car. Without a word he started the engine and pulled it into the now vacant driveway, where he sat quietly and waited for his men to return. He appeared frustrated and angry, which also meant he was vulnerable because he was distracted. Maybe not right now, but soon, he might be able to make a run for it.

Meridian lit another cigarette and puffed away on it with the windows shut, filling the car with the hot smell of smoke.

Soon. He's definitely upset about something else that happened. Maybe they couldn't find Washington and Alex after all. If they go into that grove looking for them, I can get away, no doubt about it.

As if reading his thoughts, Meridian peered over at him and seemed ready to say something, but was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps. His men were back. A short man walked up to the window, and he rolled it down to speak with him.

"We're all set now, sir. The cars are hidden from the road, and we've left two men to watch over them."

"Good. I want everyone else to meet me inside the house. We're going to need a plan of attack."

"What's our next move, sir?"

"We're going into that grove of trees and try to flush them out."

"But, sir, if it's only the boy and that homeless man you mentioned, then we shouldn't really have any problems finding them."

He turned his head and looked the short man directly in the eye.

"Your job was to get the boy as he was on his way to the police station and you failed. I asked you to find out where he went, and you couldn't. I don't think you are qualified to assess the situation, let alone make a decision about it. Do you?"

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“No, sir, not at all.”

The man visibly appeared to shrink before them, as if the words had actually cut him down. He nodded, accepting his brow-beating and moved off to assemble the rest of the unit.

Having finished with him, Meridian got out of the car and stretched his legs.

“Might as well get out, Harrison. It is your house. What do you have to drink in there? Any bourbon?”

He nodded and they walked over to the back door. He fumbled around with his keys for a moment before Meridian pulled out a metal tool, one of the same make he had seen the two assassins use to break in earlier, and jammed it into the lock. He turned it quickly, listening carefully until it clicked, and then pushed the door open for him.

“After you, sir,” he said in a mocking tone while half-bowing.

Behind them the rest of the crew were making their way inside. He saw there had to be at least fifteen or twenty men all told. The brief thoughts he had of escaping slipped out of his mind as quickly as they had entered it.

* * *

She didn't know how long she had been unconscious, nor did she even really know where she was at first, but it all came back to her once she saw Maria's body full of bullet holes. She was still in the police station, but why was it suddenly so quiet? Where had everyone gone? She tried to move, but there was a large metal filing cabinet pinning her legs to the floor. From outside, she thought she heard the sounds of people talking in hushed voices. She sat up and pushed at the desk, scraping it along the tiled floor and making enough noise to alert anyone in the vicinity who might have been listening. After a few hard minutes of struggling with the weight, she managed to free one leg, which she used to kick the desk until both were out from underneath it. Staggering slowly to her feet, a sound silenced her. She had heard a

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sound like that only once before, when she was a little girl and accidentally set her mother's azalea bushes on fire. It was a sound she would never forget. The feeling of control she had had began to slip through her fingers as the flames grew higher and faster. With an angry rush it jumped to the garage where the greedy flames licked the wooden frame until it turned black before finally burning itself out. No real damage had been done, and she was unharmed physically by the incident, but in her mind she had never been able to forget the total feeling of helplessness that took over her body as she heard that rushing noise and sat there helplessly watching the garage burn. She could still remember the terror she felt then as a child and quivered as she started to feel it again.

She stood up quickly and caught herself on a desk before she lost her balance. Her legs were wobbly and difficult to stand on, but she didn't think they were broken. She tried to step forward and swayed like a drunk before grabbing again at the turned over desk for support. From somewhere nearby, the sound that still made her cringe cried out in a soft, soothing voice to her.

"Ssss-wwwhhh-ooo-ssshhh," the fire cooed as it finally showed its implacable, uncaring face in the front doorway. Its rich orange mouth hungrily snapping and spreading its way along the floor toward her, gobbling up chairs and files and desks on its way. She had been convinced since her incident with the azalea bushes that fire itself was a living, breathing force, an organism that could take life the same way a man could. She feared it, but respected its power at the same time, an odd combination that oftentimes confused her.

The flames, as if seeing her, made a direct route for her, scorching everything in its path along the way. Gasping, she turned and fled, praying that the back door she had seen upon first entering the station was still open. The smell of gasoline filled her nostrils, and it took a moment for her to realize that not only was the entire room saturated

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with it, but she herself had also been doused with enough of the flammable liquid to burn her to ash if she were to catch fire, which appeared to be the intention. Outside she heard the sound of cars starting up and driving away in a hurry. Whoever had started this blaze apparently wasn't sticking around to watch their handiwork.

She raced through the room, stumbling over chairs and file cabinets that had been rearranged and scattered about the office area haphazardly. Some lay on their sides while others stood upright, their drawers wide open and files inside soaked with gasoline. As she surveyed the area again, she realized that whoever had moved the furniture around had done so purposefully. They may have looked like they were randomly placed, but in reality she could see that they had been moved to certain areas in order to speed the flames on their way. A loud popping sound distracted her, and she turned to watch as the rounds of ammunition in one of the officer's guns was going off, heated to the point of explosion. She also saw Sheriff Farrell lying dead against a desk. There was a gasoline can sitting on his stomach and his face portrayed a look of shock, as if he hadn't expected to meet his end in that fashion. The flames eagerly leapt onto him and began charring his white flesh a rich black, filling the air with a sickly sweet smell of roasting meat. She gagged and screamed with terror, but continued running, moving deeper into the building. There was a back door somewhere, but where was it? If it wasn't there, if she had simply imagined it, she was going to be cooked alive. She came upon a half closed door and pushed hard against it, knocking over a small file cabinet that had been placed behind it. On the other side there was only darkness, but the blaze behind her was quickly dispelling the shadows that were there.

Mops. Brooms. Water bucket.

Dead end. She was in a utility closet.

She spun around and raced back into the main office where the fire

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had now engulfed the entire room. It spat out thick billows of black smoke in its wake, which made her cough violently. She knew she had to leave the room otherwise she was going to choke to death. All around her the windows began to bow and crack from the heat as she made her way out of the main office area and into a smaller corridor across from the closet she had just left. Above one of the doors she saw a dimly lit sign that said “Exit,” and she ran towards it. The hallway appeared to be an extremely old fire exit, one that probably hadn’t been used in years, but if it was still working then she might get out of here after all. At the end of the hallway there was a metal door, it was slightly open and something appeared to be holding it that way, but she couldn’t tell what it was from where she was standing. She turned the knob and pushed hard at the door, but it wouldn’t budge. She took a step back and threw her weight against it, but only bounced off it. The door still remained partially open, but refused to budge any further. She slid her hand into the narrow opening and felt around, trying to find the impediment that was preventing her from getting out. The cool night air touched her fingers, a cruel torment considering that the temperature inside had risen dramatically in the past few minutes and showed no signs of stopping. Her hand also felt something else cool, but this time wasn’t the air, it was steel. There was something on the other side of the door locking it into place. A large piece of metal? No. An iron crowbar.

“Cross ventilation,” she said to herself, backing away from the door in awe.

She had seen many movies in her life, but one of her all time favorites had been *Backdraft*. Because of her obvious fear of fire it always made for a good scare, and Gary and she had spent many nights on the couch, curled closely together eating popcorn and watching it. What she remembered now was that by leaving doors open during a fire you allowed the air to circulate and thereby let the fire breathe and

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spread. The end result was that it burned quicker and harder than it would normally if the doors were shut. Whoever started this fire had done this before and knew exactly how to make their fire burn quickly and violently. This blaze was meant to liquefy the entire building and everything in it.

Inside the main office she heard more popping sounds as the rest of the glass windows began cracking and breaking from the heat. She had also noticed she was sweating profusely. Some of it could have been attributed to nerves, but not all of it. It was growing hot in there, too hot. Thick smoke began to drift past her and out the crack in the door. She began coughing again and bent down to breathe in some of the smoke-free air. Feeling slightly better, she kicked violently at the door, straining her muscles to their fullest, but still the door refused to budge. Behind her she could feel the heat of the fire as it closed in around her, and her head began to swim. Her vision was clouding from the smoke and her mouth was running dry from the heat. She started coughing again, but this time the smoke was so thick that even bending down didn't help her find clean air.

Well, if it gets close enough I'll probably go up in flames because of the fumes coming off of me. At least it will be quick.

More smoke was beginning to flow past her, making its way to the only place it could go, out the door. She felt herself rapidly losing consciousness and forced herself to crouch even lower to the ground and stay there. She was so close, how could she not be able to get out now?

From her vantage point on the floor she couldn't see much, but still struggled anyway. She was looking around frantically for something to use, anything to pry the door open just a little further, just enough so she could squeeze through. The heat had grown even more intense, and she could almost feel the flammable molecules on her becoming agitated, waiting to explode into flame around her, engulfing her flesh.

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She was so concerned about this she almost didn't notice what else the heat had been doing, it had made the iron crowbar expand slightly, not much, but enough so that it had begun to move, sliding slightly along the door. It would never move enough for her to walk out the door, at least not before she exploded, but it might have moved just enough to allow her to escape. It was the only option she had left so she stood up, took a deep breath, held it and threw herself at the door one last time, trying to wedge her body into the four inch space preventing her from escaping. In the back of her mind, she wished she hadn't had that slice of pizza earlier in the evening.

She slammed into the opening just as the corridor behind her erupted in flames. An explosion rocked the building and its force was funneled towards where she had been standing seconds earlier. The blast shot her into the door like a missile, throwing her through the door and out into the parking lot outside like she was a doll. She hit the dry asphalt with a dull thud, hearing something snap and hoping it wasn't a part of her body. Rolling over, she watched as the small police station behind her was devoured by the hungry flames. She crawled on her hands and knees rapidly away from the heat and flame, gasping for breath that refused to come as she struggled. When the roof suddenly collapsed with a creaking and then snapping noise, it occurred to her there were no sirens going off and no firemen or police officers anywhere to be found. Whoever had organized this had known everyone would be out searching for the men who had tried to abduct her and that poor Harrison boy. She also wondered what had happened to his father, Andy. Andy had been at the station earlier, along with several others, but now they were all gone.

There was an empty police car at the far end of the parking lot. She struggled weakly to make her way over to it. Behind her the sound of breaking glass and the roaring fire forced her to remain awake, although her body wanted nothing more than to shut down. She bit her

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lower lip in an effort to keep herself alert, ignoring the pain and fresh blood she had drawn, a thin stream that ran down across her chin. Determined to get to safety, she pressed on until she reached the vehicle. Another wave of pain hit her suddenly, a different sort of pain, not self-induced, and she peered down at her right pant leg and screamed. She was on fire. If she hadn't already been in a panic, this sent her over the edge. Remembering all the drills she had to teach the children at the hospital, she instinctively rolled around on the greasy concrete until the flames were smothered. Gray vapors of smoke drifted up from where her clothes had been burning. She also smelt burnt flesh. Slowly she began to black out, leaning against the car, her head resting against the front bumper and her burnt legs sprawled out in front of her. As the darkness closed in around her, her ears began ringing from the deafening explosion she had been in.

This has to be a nightmare, or at least a really bad dream. She slowly lost consciousness. Behind her the station burned itself out just as quickly as it had started.

CHAPTER 26

They were all sitting around the kitchen table while Meridian started going over their next step. Andy wasn't sure if that was his first or last name, or either. More likely than not it was a fictitious name he used during the operations. A way to ensure no one could find out his true identity if one of his men happened to be caught and stupid enough to talk. Some of the men present appeared more comfortable speaking to him than others. Andy guessed they had probably worked with him before. But there was also a fair percentage of the group who seemed nervous, even scared, of raising their voices to him.

He watched them go through his house and garage looking for useful items, though they looked armed to the teeth already with their automatic rifles and side arms in hand. They were all wearing thin black gloves and some of them were actually drinking soda from his refrigerator while others were munching on chips and crackers from his cupboard. They did this so nonchalantly that it bothered him. How

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many other homes had these men entered and taken what they wanted? How many families had they slain to complete their missions?

What really scared him the most was that some of the voices sounded vaguely familiar to him. Faces and appearances could be altered, even changed, but a voice generally remained constant. Some of these men had been in Vietnam with him, he was sure of it. Meridian stood up and began to speak.

“All right, listen up. This is how we’re going to attack this. The cove is directly behind the house here, and the forest where we think Darrell Washington and Alex Harrison are located is just beyond that. There is a small region of marshland between the two, probably still wet from the tide, but with no other known obstacles. I want one team to take this route, but be quiet, no radio contact until all the units are safely within the grove. I’ll personally notify you when it’s okay with a radio signal. I’ll use Morse code so be listening. To the left of the cove is the water. I know we didn’t bring any Army equipment, so we will have to improvise using what we can from here.”

Just then a tall, lanky man entered the kitchen holding a compact cardboard box under his right arm with a picture of a woman smiling as a child played with a long plastic oar. He nodded respectfully at Meridian and then spoke.

“I found this in the garage. It can’t hold more than two or three men at the most, but it’s the best we can do.”

Meridian nodded as he saw the tiny inflatable raft the man was holding. Andy remembered buying it at Toys ‘R’ Us for Alex a few years ago. It had never been opened and he was surprised it had even made it to Oceanview in the move. Jennifer must have brought it. She was very meticulous when it came to things like that. His face went blank. It hurt just to think about her. He wondered where she was and if she was still alive somewhere, crying out for help he couldn’t provide.

“Good work. The second team will take that raft around the cove to

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the other side to see if they are over there and to prevent them from escaping via the sea. That just leaves Andy and me, and we'll be taking another route."

One of the men looked at him and then questioningly at Meridian.

"Sir? Don't you want someone to go with you as well?"

"That's fine, soldier. I'll be okay. The route we're taking goes through the center of the salt marsh between the highway and the cove itself. It's all swamp land for the most part, but there is always the chance that those two might try and hide out in it until we go up there and then slip past us. And if Washington knows this terrain as well as I would assume he does, then that's his best option for survival. If he even suspects we are coming." He smiled venomously.

"Yes, sir."

Meridian continued smiling to himself as he thought about storming up into the forest and taking Washington by surprise. The mere anticipation of a fight was enough to get him geared up.

"Okay, everyone, gather your equipment and remember, no radio communication until you get my signal. We leave in ten so be ready. Understood?"

Everyone responded in unison, startling Andy with their unquestioning loyalty to their leader.

"Sir, yes, sir."

"Get with your teams, and if you're ready in less than ten, then go ahead. Dismissed."

The men quickly transformed before his eyes. He watched them go from a group of men eating and drinking and basically hanging around his house like a group of college kids, to a well-oiled, disciplined military unit. Without a word they stood up and separated into their pre-designated teams. Each unit consisted of three men and a commander for a total of nine men altogether, including Meridian. He was sure others were still in town somewhere, perhaps covering up

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what happened at the police station or patrolling the waters just outside the cove. Maybe some of them were even disposing of the bodies of the people they had killed. Either way, there had to be more of them around somewhere. He tried to focus on the one good thing he had heard during the impromptu meeting Meridian had called. He would be traveling alone with him. If he was alone, then he might be able to escape. Maybe, just maybe.

“All right, Harrison, on your feet. We’re moving out.”

“Sir!” one of the men called out, a carbon copy of the man who brought the inflatable raft in earlier, except his arms were thicker, more well defined.

“Yes, commander, is there a problem?”

“I’m not sure, sir. The two men we sent to take care of Mrs. Harrison, sir, they’re still missing.”

Meridian wrinkled his brow and turned to look Andy in the face. He had clenched his fist and was taking a step forward, but Meridian stopped him with an elbow to the stomach, causing him to double over gasping for air.

“Bastard! Leave her out of this. This is between you and me, not her,” he spat at Meridian as he looked up from the kitchen floor.

“Save it, Andy. You’re going to need your strength.”

“We haven’t had radio contact with them for some time, sir,” the man continued as if nothing had happened.

“I’ll handle it, soldier. If you see them on your way, alert me. Use your radio, but tune to a lower frequency.”

“And if I find them?”

Meridian looked past the man and out the broken kitchen window another one of his men had put a bullet through earlier this evening.

“If you see them, kill them.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied, grinning cruelly, saluting him and then racing off to alert the rest of the platoon of the new orders.

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“Get up, Harrison. Let’s move out.”

He stood up slowly, still holding his stomach, and walked in front of Meridian out the back door. He tried to think of escape tactics he could use to get away, but nothing came to mind at the moment. He would have enough time to think while they sloshed their way through the salt marsh. Then maybe he could devise some plan. He suddenly felt Meridian’s hot breath on the back of his neck and could feel the cold steel of a gun barrel pressed against his temple.

“You don’t think I know what’s running through that little head of yours right now, Harrison? I’ve killed men just for thinking it, so why not do yourself a favor and focus on helping us find that virus. I’m not going to guarantee I won’t kill you afterwards, but it might help me change my mind. Now move.”

They walked outside. He waited while Meridian carefully closed and locked the door behind him, another precaution, one Andy felt was unnecessary but didn’t dare say so. After that he watched as the teams broke up and followed their different routes to the forest. He thought that it was overkill, searching this way for a ten year old boy and a homeless black man, but Meridian was cautious and so far that had been enough to keep them from being caught. What was even more impressive, in a sadistic sort of way, was the fact that other than himself, Alex, Washington, and perhaps Jennifer, no one else who had encountered them was still alive. No witnesses was another precaution Meridian strongly believed in, as evidenced in his order to exterminate the missing men. Even if they did find the virus, he was as good as dead anyway, no matter what Meridian said. They would have their own scientists and their own laboratories in which to work. They would not need him around.

Unless they only find the virus itself. Without the formula they might need to keep me alive until they crack it. That at least might buy some more time.

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“This way, Andy. We’re taking the scenic route tonight. Hope you brought your boots, lots of rats down there.” He laughed as he pushed him forward down a gradual slope that ran parallel to Ridge Road and into the marshlands.

Rats? What rats?

After descending a few feet, they were out of view of the road as well as of any cars that might pass by. Off to their left was a small stone wall that ran alongside them for a while before abruptly stopping halfway down the hill. To their right was a sheer wall of earth and rock with the road running above it. There was no way to escape, but the only thought that continued to run through his mind was “rats.”

He loathed and feared rats more than anything in the world. Something about their beady eyes and thick, leathery tails made his skin crawl. He hated them. Although he had never thought about it, he knew there were likely to be rats in the marshes behind his new house. Probably wharf rats too, the big ones. He could already feel the sweat building as his anxiety grew. Every sound was magnified and his eyes interpreted every movement as that of a giant rat moving around, searching for a better angle as it prepared to rush him. His mind kept flashing to the laboratory where he was attacked. Meridian laughed.

“You want to know why I don’t need anyone else with me, Andy? You figure it out yet, smart man?”

He didn’t answer, already knowing he’d been set up once again.

“Don’t you think I did some research on you first? We met when you were in Vietnam, I know you remember that. I also know you were supposed to be this great scientific mind, but that isn’t how you can tell what a man is really like, not by his intellect alone. Hell, you can teach a monkey to do sign language or a dog to lead a blind man across the street, that doesn’t tell you anything about the ape or the dog. It doesn’t tell you if the dog will turn on its master, or if the monkey is scheming to escape the second it gets a chance. No, there’s only one way to really

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tell what makes up a man, fear. I judge a man by what scares him the most. Some men are afraid of dying and that's fine with me. Everyone at some point is or at least should be afraid of that, but what distinguishes one man from the next is how they fear dying. What they fear will be their end is as unique as the man himself. Will it be a plane crash? A car wreck? You don't really know until it happens."

He could see where this was headed, but he had no idea how he could he have been able to access that data on him.

"You, Andrew J. Harrison, according to some information I managed to get my hands on, paid a visit to a shrink a few months after you returned from the war. Seems that you had a little incident in one of the labs you worked at. Says that you were afraid of being in confined areas. More specifically, you were afraid of being trapped in confined areas with rats. Stop me if I'm wrong." He grinned.

He continued walking, his eyes still shifting about nervously for movement as he felt a cool trickle of sweat roll down his neck.

"I thought as much. So, as you can see, my backup is actually the vermin that inhabit this swamp. Once we're in deep enough, the worst thing you could do to me would be to cry on my shoulders for help. Am I right? It's okay, Andy. Everyone is afraid of something." He laughed loudly, his low voice sounding like a fog horn.

How had he been able to get that information? What else did he know about him? Actually, a better question might be, what didn't he know about him? Things had just gone from bad to very bad, and they were about to get even worse.

They had reached the bottom of the incline and the salt marsh spread out in all directions before them. The rank smell of decaying vegetation overpowered his nostrils and stung his eyes. He tried to turn away, but from behind him he heard a scurrying noise in the brush and froze up immediately.

"Looks like they want you to go in too," Meridian mocked. "Now

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move it.”

He stepped forward and felt his shoe sink deep into the wet swamp. He grimaced, then forced his other foot to do the same. He noticed Meridian had changed into a pair of high-cut army boots, the kind that were water-proof as well as thick enough to prevent his feet from getting cold.

He was angry, very angry, but too frightened by the scurrying sounds of the rodents hiding in the reeds to say anything. As far as he was concerned, he was about to enter a living hell and the only way out now was to wait until they passed through the marsh, if he even made it through. From behind him he could hear Meridian fumbling with his cigarettes along the metallic clink of a Zippo lighter being opened. Moments later he could smell the rich tobacco smoke as it drifted up to him while he sloshed along.

“Reminds you of the good old days, doesn’t it?” he called out. “Just like walking through that damned place again, huh? It’s almost scary.”

He just kept on walking. He didn’t want to get involved in a discussion about the war with this man; he only wanted to get through this alive. The sooner it was over the better, no matter what happened.

Meridian continued to prattle on about Vietnam, retelling stories that may or may not have happened to him, but always ended with him saving someone’s life or killing the enemy with his bare hands. The kind of stories that the soldiers returning from tour would tell those on their way out into the bush in order to bolster their courage and make them believe in themselves, and the war. Few of the tales were ever true. In fact, many were so fictitious that after a while it became a contest to see who could come up with the most outrageous story, the winner receiving a case of Budweiser for his platoon.

“...and I only had my knife with me, but still managed to carve that guy up like Swiss cheese...”

He wanted to carve him up like Swiss cheese, but knew he had to be

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patient. Eventually he would let his guard down, and when he did, that would be when Andy made his move.

“...now I don’t want to brag, because I usually don’t, but there was this one time...”

They continued on through the marsh, he shuddered each time an animal stirred. Meridian continued to prattle on about old war stories. The deeper they walked into the swamp, the more he noticed the fog beginning to roll in off the water, as well as a rank smell. Not one that seemed to be coming from the swamp though, a smell that was vaguely familiar. He recognized it, but from where?

A light wind picked up, pushing the fog, and the strange odor, around them. If it held true to form, soon the fog would be too thick to see well, which meant he might be able to make a break for it. It also meant he wouldn’t be able to see the rats that might be crawling on the ground around him. He shivered at the mere thought of being blind to their advances. He was beginning to feel light-headed. What was that smell?

Suddenly Meridian’s radio came to life.

“Team one to team three. Team one to team three. Meridian, pick up.”

He grabbed the radio from his belt and pressed the “Talk” button.

“Meridian here. Who the hell is the one who just disobeyed a direct order from their commander?”

“It’s me, Wilcox, sir. Sir, we found Washington’s camp, but they’re gone.”

“Wilcox, you know better than this. If you hadn’t served with me before, I’d shoot you the second I saw you.” He put a hand to his head, as if to steady himself. “Good work, though. Any sign of a trail?”

“Yes, sir. Several deer trails, but there is one that seems to have been used recently. You want me to track him?”

“Affirmative. Team three, status. Where are you?”

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“Sir, we are having trouble navigating the raft with this fog, but we have made it around to the backside of the cove with no sign of them. The only thing we have seen is a wooden dock with two small motorboats moored to it. You want us to get in for a closer look?”

Meridian rubbed his cheek absently and sniffed the air. Andy laughed quietly to himself; it reminded him of something John Wayne would do before he made a crucial decision.

“Check it out. We will be there in five. Team three out. Team two, rendezvous on that point.”

“On our way, sir.”

“Good, and, Wilcox, don’t go shooting up the place if you find them, all right?”

“Understood, sir. Team two out.”

He snapped the radio back onto his belt and pushed him forward slightly.

“Let’s go, cowboy. We have five minutes to make it through to the rendezvous point and I don’t plan on being late. And what is that smell?” he finished, the last part he mumbled under his breath.

They both began a light jog, something he hadn’t been prepared for. He hadn’t done any real running in years and this would be enough to tire him out completely. He could hear Meridian laughing behind him.

“I guess you won’t be making a break for it after all, huh? Maybe you should’ve taken better care of your body.” He lit up another cigarette while on the run. Even though he was in much better shape than Andy was, he could still hear Meridian sucking just as hard at the air while they ran.

All around them he could hear the sounds of rats and other animals scurrying away, frightened by the noise of their running as they crashed through the brittle reeds. He could hear their tiny claws scratching on the rocks; it seemed amplified because of the relative darkness in which the fog had left them. He wanted only to get out of the swamp and

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away from the rats. Once he did that he would be better able to think of another way to escape.

Although right now he was finding it more and more difficult to focus on anything else besides the possibility of rats following him, watching him, closing in around him.

Above, the moon was slowing disappearing as the fog had finally made its way onshore. His worst fear was being realized as all around him he could see nothing but white mist while somewhere in the marsh below rats scratched and clawed at each other as they burrowed their way into the rotting sludge.

From behind him he heard Meridian mutter something under his breath, something about Vietnam, but there was something like a note of fear in his voice. The air smelled foul and both men started coughing violently.

CHAPTER 27

Abigail knew she had to get help fast. After the initial shock of waking up in the parking lot to the dull ache in her legs and head, her mind had gradually begun to clear and the urgency of her situation became apparent. She didn't know how bad her wounds were, or how long she had been lying against the bumper of the police car, but she did know that the police station was now nothing but a smoldering pile of grease that gave off a pungent odor which made her gag. Whatever chemical they had used to start the fire—she was certain that it must have been more than simply gasoline—had managed to reduce the building to dark ash. Nothing remained. No bricks, no beams, no steel, nothing.

Using the car's hood as an aid, she pulled herself up to her feet. Sharp pains immediately rippled through her body, making her ears ring loudly and her eyes glaze over. She fought hard against fainting again and finally managed to regain control over her body which

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reluctantly agreed. There had to be a phone or something nearby, some way she could at least call the cops. She paused as the gravity of what had happened settled over her. Who would she call? There were no more cops in Oceanview.

She thought hard about who she could phone and not sound completely crazy when she told her story. She could already imagine the person on the other end listening to her yelling into the phone about a group of terrorists who had taken over her town, burning the police station down and killing the sheriff in the process. The person she spoke to would be more apt to believe she burned the building down herself after she went on a shooting spree. The whole thing sounded like the storyline for a cheesy B-movie Gary would make her watch. Of course worrying about what anyone thought was pointless now. None of it even mattered at this moment because she still didn't know where to find a phone to make the call in the first place.

As she leaned against the car thinking, she heard the sound of another vehicle approaching. Panicking, she threw herself across the hood of the car and landed hard on the asphalt on the other side. She was in intense pain and the smell of her burnt legs made her nauseous, but at least she was hidden from view of the passing vehicle. There was no telling who it could be, and the last thing she wanted right now was another encounter with the men who had torched the police station. It was late, so whoever was driving past must be working with those men, perhaps returning to make sure everything was destroyed. She struggled to see who it was. By hiding behind the car, she had successfully blocked herself from being able to see anything; all she could do was listen.

The vehicle slowed down as it passed the spot where the police station once stood; it then turned into the parking lot, its headlights flashing briefly on the police car she was hiding behind. She listened intently as it stopped and someone pulled up an emergency brake. The

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car door opened and she heard someone step outside.

“Did they see me escape the fire?” she wondered nervously, preparing to run if she had to.

“Holy shit, what happened here? Hello? Hello! Is there anyone there?” a man’s voice said in a thick Southern accent.

He sounded confused and scared at the same time which was evident even through the low Texas drawl. She peered underneath the car and saw he was walking towards her slowly, wearing brown cowboy boots. The man she encountered at her house had been wearing a well manicured suit and immaculate black shoes, nothing like the dirty jean bottoms and worn boots she could make out from her vantage point. He couldn’t have been one of them, not dressed the way he was, and no amount of training could make his voice sound any more scared than he actually was. She took a chance and stood up. After slipping on the side of the car, she regained her balance and willed herself to her feet. She was beyond tears at this point and in desperate need of medical attention. He immediately saw her.

“Sweet Jesus, lady, what the hell happened to you?”

She ignored his question and started in his direction on unsteady legs, her voice wavering as she spoke.

“Help! Please help me. I can barely walk, my legs,” she moaned, looking down at the two black sticks that were her legs.

His mouth dropped as he noticed her legs and saw her struggling to remain on her feet. He was tall and strong-looking with broad shoulders and a big cowboy hat on his head, also of a worn brown variety. He was staring at her through dark eyes that seemed to burn with intensity as if he had begun to piece together some of what might have happened here. He shook his head in amazement as he got another look at her legs and swore again.

“What the hell? Don’t move, lady. I’m coming. Don’t move,” he said as he started running over to her, one hand on his hat to prevent it

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from falling off, the other extended toward her, motioning for her to stay where she was. She saw his car behind him and imagined herself sitting in the front seat as they raced up Route 9 to Portland Municipal Hospital. In a few minutes she would be in the care of the competent staff there, all of whom were her friends and co-workers, and soon after that she would be resting comfortably in Gary's arms. All she had to do was keep going a few minutes longer, just hold out until she got there.

She smiled a determined smile the closer he got to her and kept on smiling right up until a gunshot ripped through the night, hitting him in the chest and sending him flying back in the opposite direction. She screamed, but was quickly silenced by a gloved hand which slipped around her head and over her mouth. She could smell an acrid chemical on the cloth that was stuffed into her face, it burned her skin fiercely, but it also had a soothing effect on her as well. She guessed it was ether, or something similar, but she was finding that she really didn't care what it was, or who was forcing it on her. Within a few seconds she was lying on the black asphalt again, this time in a drug induced sleep.

* * *

The five man cleaning crew that had remained behind to make sure everything went smoothly had been waiting for her. Darin, the leader of the unit, looked up from where Abigail lay and watched as two of his men dragged the dead cowboy across the parking lot and into the thin woods where they had been watching. Another man hopped into his car and drove it back onto the highway where it would later be dumped somewhere, likely a few towns over, to avoid suspicion. He had been doing this sort of thing for years and had yet to be caught. He was the best at what he did, and he loved his work. He had been hand picked by Meridian for this particular mission because of his spotless record and meticulous nature. He charged plenty for his services, but he was worth every penny he asked for. He had been working with this unit for years

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now, and each man knew his role and did his job just as flawlessly as he himself did. As a rule, he never allowed outsiders into the group. If it wasn't for the large amount of cash that was promised to him, he would never have allowed one of Meridian's men to stay behind with them, especially someone like Ortiz.

Ortiz was a Mexican-American who worked for Meridian from time to time. Darin had met him on several occasions, and hated him more and more each time. He wasn't professional, that was what bothered him the most, but there was also the matter of him being trigger happy as well. Darin didn't like killing, but if that was what the job required then so be it. Ortiz appeared to do it just for fun. Even Meridian had been using him less and less lately, almost as if he could see the man was a ticking time bomb. He had immediately objected when he was informed Ortiz would be the man who would stay behind with him, but Meridian eventually convinced him to relent. As long as he didn't start shooting the place up, Darin would keep his feelings about the man to himself. In all his years doing this, he never had anyone complain about his work, and he had no intention of letting Meridian down either, even if that meant working with a homicidal killer.

"I'm a pretty good shot," Ortiz said suddenly, scaring him half to death.

"What?"

"The cowboy," he pointed to the dead man lying in the parking lot, "I got him with one shot. With all those trees in the way, no less. That's a tough shot and I got him anyway."

Darin nodded and walked away from him to finish up the cleaning process. He wasn't upset he had shot the cowboy, but the fact that he didn't know if Ortiz was planning on shooting him bothered him more than a little. The man was unpredictable and now there was a dead body that needed to be dealt with. At least he hadn't shot the woman, who might still be useful.

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He had them stuff her into the back seat of his Cadillac while the body of the dead cowboy was deposited in the trunk. If she woke up and started screaming, she could spend some time in the trunk with the corpse; that always helped keep people quiet. He started the car with Ortiz sitting next to him, holding his gun like it was a piece of gold bullion, and they drove out onto Route 9 heading west for Ridge Road where they were supposed to meet up with Meridian and the rest of the team somewhere around the cove behind the Harrison house. For most people that would be like finding a needle in a haystack, but he had worked with Meridian more times than he could remember. He knew him better than he knew himself, and finding him and the rest of his men would be easy enough. He could track them the same way a hunter would track a deer, all he had to do was look for the signs. Beside him Ortiz was mumbling something under his breath about Jesus and gently stroking his gun. Darin calmly reached into his pocket to make sure his own gun was there. Feeling slightly reassured, he sped up a little.

They rode along the desolate side streets and empty highway in silence. Abigail still lay unconscious in the back, and he drove the car through the town on predetermined routes he had selected earlier. Routes picked as much for their randomness as for their relative seclusion. He even had helped Meridian out with some of his planning, something he usually never did. Meridian liked him he guessed, because he was as detail oriented as he was. The only part of the plan that the two didn't see eye to eye on was his concern that there weren't enough men available in case something went wrong. Meridian had thought of everything, but sometimes the only flaw in his plans was over planning. He had a tendency to spread his resources so thin that if something unexpected happened then a major problem could arise, and he told him that. Meridian merely laughed and told him he was being too picky, but if something unexpected did happen, he trusted him to handle it. Ortiz stopped muttering and was checking the side mirror.

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“Ah, another little rabbit coming out of its hole. Is it rabbit season?”

He ignored the comment and checked his own mirror.

Behind them a sleepy patrol car pulled out from a small dirt turn off on the road and began following them slowly. At first, he tried to pretend he didn't see it, that it wasn't there, but soon he realized he was being pursued, not with flashing lights, but stealthily by a seasoned patrolman.

“This guy wants to play,” he heard himself say.

Ortiz cocked his head slightly, adjusting the mirror to get a better look at the car. They had never worked together before. This situation was tense and growing tenser by the second. They couldn't be stopped. If they were, could they risk killing another police officer? He didn't know.

“Little bunny looks like he's going to make his move pretty soon. I think it's rabbit season, how 'bout you?” Ortiz asked, stuffing a clip into his handgun while waiting for an answer. He noticed he was smiling as he removed the safety from his gun.

“I think we should play it cool. He hasn't done anything yet and we haven't given him any reason to stop us. And, for Christ's sake, put that gun away. You're making me nervous!”

“Whatever you say, boss,” he mumbled as he returned the gun to the leather holster underneath his suit jacket and began muttering again to himself.

He started wondering if he should turn Ortiz in just to get away from him. It sure sounded like a good idea. Just then the blue lights came to life behind them along with the scratchy sound of a man's voice echoing through a megaphone.

“This is the town of Oceanview Police Department. Please pull over to the side of the road and turn your automobile off. Thank you.”

“Such a polite bunny,” Ortiz said, fingering his gun again.

He checked the rearview mirror, but couldn't tell if the cop was

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alone or had a partner with him.

"Something unexpected just happened, boss," he mumbled, thinking back to the conversation he and Meridian had had earlier.

He pulled the car over onto the dirt shoulder along the side of the road. There was no way they could explain why Abigail was laying in the back seat, stinking of ether and with legs that were charred black to the bone with burns. He even noticed parts of her pants had actually melted into her flesh at points. She would likely be scarred permanently.

"So can I use my gun now?" Ortiz asked mockingly. "Or are you going to talk your way out of this? Talk to the bunny rabbit?"

They would have to kill the cop after all, and he knew it as well as the psychotic sitting next to him did. Might as well let Ortiz do it, maybe he could get it out his system. Anyway he seemed to want to, and if he heard him refer to the man as a bunny rabbit one more time, he might shoot him himself.

"Okay, wait until he gets up along side me then take care of him. Just make sure I'm out of the way, all right? If there are two, you take the one on your side and I'll take the one on mine. One shot only, don't get trigger happy on me. I don't want bullets flying around in here."

He smiled, slowly pulling the gun out from underneath his coat and checking again to make sure the safety was off. "It's about time I got to shoot someone," he said, seeming to forget that he had just killed someone not twenty minutes ago. Psychotic.

The cop was ambling slowly toward their car, strutting as only an officer of the law can, a cocky, meaningful strut.

That's right, you pompous son of a bitch, just keep right on walking up here. He watched the officer's approach in the side mirror.

There was only the one; the others must be out trying to find the rest of Meridian's crew, a duty that he didn't envy. Using his flashlight like a knocker, he rapped loudly on the driver's side window when he

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finally managed to walk the twenty feet over to his car.

“Roll it down and get your license and registration out while you’re at it,” he said gruffly. He looked in the backseat. “What’s wrong with her?”

If he didn’t have to explain to Meridian why he shot him, he was certain he would have killed Ortiz for what he did next.

Three shots rang out before he even managed to roll the window halfway down. They sounded like cannon fire when coming from inside the enclosed vehicle. The glass shattered as the officer stumbled back, hit in the stomach while he reached for his own weapon, blood spreading a wet stain on his blue uniform shirt. He watched as he fell to the ground, spitting up blood. He wasn’t sure if he was dead or not because Ortiz reached over with his left foot and stomped on the gas, sending the car careening back onto the road.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he screamed, drawing his gun and putting it Ortiz’s face. “Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“I shot him, didn’t I? He’s dead right?”

“Dead? No, he’s not dead. Even if he were, we can’t just leave him there on the side of the road, you idiot! Honestly, are you that stupid?”

“I killed him?”

“Dammit, take your foot off the gas pedal before I blow it off!” he screamed, pointing his gun at his companion’s foot. “Do it now!”

“Whatever you say, boss,” he replied coolly, taking his foot off the pedal and staring straight ahead at the road like it contained the most interesting thing he had ever seen. He was mumbling something again under his breath, but this time he heard part of it.

“...bad little bunnies always get caught. Bad little bunnies always get shot...”

He was insane. The longer Darin had to sit in the car with him, the more afraid he was of him. There had to be a way to get rid of him.

Later. Later.

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He turned the Cadillac around and headed back to where the cop was laying in the street, slowly struggling to get back to his car. Apparently the wild gunshots weren't as lethal as Ortiz had thought. He was going to tell Meridian all about this, if and when they found him. This kid was reckless and dangerous and was becoming a pain in his ass. This would be the last time he ever let anyone observe his work, and he would let Meridian know that too. Ortiz looked over at the cop in amazement.

"He's still alive? I shot him like five times. How can he still be alive?"

"Listen to me, you little shit," he said, leaning over into his face. You fired three shots, maybe one of which hit him. The other two are probably buried in the car door here because of your shitty aim. You shot him in the stomach which means he isn't dead yet, and probably wouldn't be for a few hours," he finished, fuming. He took a deep breath.

"Okay, this is what we're going to do. You'll take this car and meet Meridian at the rendezvous point. Make sure you keep an eye on the girl too."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to clean up your mess. It's what I do. Only this one I'm not getting paid for. I'll take care of the cop and his car. You just make sure you tell Meridian what's going on and why I'm delayed, okay?"

He nodded.

"All right, let's just get this over with. I'll see you in twenty minutes. If you haven't heard from me by then, assume I'm dead or somewhere in South America."

He got out and slammed the car door, spraying the remaining glass from the shattered window all over the inside of the car. The cop was almost at his cruiser now, but he would never be any closer to it than he was at that moment. One shot, right in the back of the head made sure

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of that. With a dexterity that only repetition could provide, he lifted the body over his shoulder and tossed it into the passenger seat before getting in himself. In the rearview mirror he watched the Cadillac spin off behind him. Ortiz seemed like he was trying to make as much noise as possible.

He reached up and turned off the flashing lights before pulling out onto the road, heading in the opposite direction that he was supposed to be going. But he couldn't risk stashing a cop car anywhere near the Harrison's house, not with a dead cop riding shotgun with him.

"I'm going to kill that kid when this is over. I swear to God I will," he said to himself as he drove, cursing under his breath the whole way. "I swear he's a walking corpse."

CHAPTER 28

Washington felt better once he was further away from the two dead bodies. The overpowering smell that had caused him to run had gradually dissipated, allowing his head to clear enough to stop and rest. Jennifer was still unconscious on his shoulder and her breathing was regular. She had even begun moving about slightly which was a good sign. He wasn't sure whether or not to bring her back to camp or take her with him to look for Alex. His decision was made for him moments later when he heard the distinctly macho voices of soldiers ahead of him, coming from the direction his camp was in. Being as silent as he could, he stepped off the thin path he was walking on and disappeared into the trees that lined it. He was certain they were on the same trail he was on as there weren't many that wove their way directly into and out of the camp. He dropped down to one knee as they approached. He wanted to see them, to see how many men he was up against, to see their faces. One of them was on the radio, hanging on every word

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spoken like his life depended on it.

“That’s right, sir, no one is at the camp.”

A loud intermittent hiss was broken by a scratchy voice.

“Sir, I can’t hear you, you’re breaking up. Come again, sir.”

“...move out...closer. Hold for...orders...”

He watched the man on the radio as he passed by. His face had the appearance of being carved from rock. He had a square jaw and small, beady eyes that surveyed the path he was on as well as the surrounding forest, looking for signs of movement.

“Sir, I didn’t copy the last part. Sir? Come again, sir.”

The radio went dead.

“Shit. I lost him. All right, we continue searching for them until we hear otherwise. Fan out and keep twenty feet between you. We’ll make a fence and flush them out the same way we did in training. If you run into trouble you signal. No heroes, you got me?”

Each man nodded, broke off the path, and began crashing through the forest in a vain attempt to find them. Fortunately they had already walked passed him which meant their search was going to begin some thirty feet below where he now sat with Jennifer. They wouldn’t walk back up the hill from here; the search would be downhill from this point on. They were safe for now.

“Move out and I’ll keep trying Meridian.”

Meridian? The name screamed out at him. He recognized it, feared it, but remembered it from somewhere.

Meridian. Meridian.

His eyes widened in recognition.

Oh, God. Meridian.

* * *

Alex woke up, leaning up against the wooden door of the stone house. He had a pounding headache, but it was nothing compared to the pain in his arm, or the throbbing from the cut in his head. He was in

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rough shape and knew it, but all he could think about was the old man he had seen. Or did he imagine it? He couldn't have, it was all so real. He could have touched him, he did touch him. He looked down and saw the key in his hand; he had apparently tried to use it to open the door. He stood up and a wave of nausea came over him and then he remembered the smell. The metallic, rancid stench that had overpowered him just before he saw the old man. It was gone now, as the wind was blowing lightly in from the ocean, but there was still a lingering taste in his mouth where it had once been. He spat, trying to get rid of the last remnants of it before he tried the key again.

"Alex? Alex!" a voice called from the forest behind him and he froze. He didn't dare turn around, not if this was only in his mind, like the old man might have been. There was a definite fear that about seeing things that weren't there, about hearing voices that weren't speaking. He had seen enough television programs to know the people who heard voices and saw things that weren't there eventually wound up in a hospital for the rest of their lives. He didn't want to be in a hospital, he was too young. His hand instinctively reached for his medication, which wasn't there.

"Alex, it's me...Washington. Get over here. Get away from that house! Alex!"

He couldn't stand it. What if it really was him? He couldn't turn around, he was too afraid of what he might, or might not, see. The smell was returning as the winds shifted direction momentarily, making the fog swirl around him maddeningly. The lights suddenly went back on inside the house and he saw the old man beckoning. His bony fingers like tiny serpents inviting him in. The soft rhythm of his movements, the fluidity of it, drew him toward him. He was hypnotized by him and felt himself inserting the key into the lock and turning it. It slid into the keyhole easily, clicked softly, and the old door creaked as it opened. The metallic smell poured out from inside as if he had just

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opened up a long sealed tomb rather than opening the door to a house. From behind him he could hear the voice calling, insisting that he run away from the house, that he drop the key and run, but he could not. The old man was smiling at him, a cracked, toothy grin that looked like a jack-o-lantern's. He wanted him to come in and visit. He was pointing at a wooden stool where he wanted him to sit down. He desperately wanted to sit down with him. He moved forward through the doorway just as a powerful hand grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him back outside.

"Hold your breath!" the voice whispered harshly, covering his mouth with a rag.

He wanted to scream, but found he couldn't. His body was paralyzed, his legs refused to move, his arms were useless limbs that dangled at his sides and his tongue hung limply from his mouth.

"Hang on, buddy. I'm going to get you out of here. Just keep holding your breath, okay?"

He rolled his head over to look up at who was helping him. It was Washington, as he knew it had to be. He forced a smile. He wanted to thank him, but he couldn't even blink, let alone speak.

"Stay with me, sport. Focus on your breathing. You're going to make it, just focus and stay with me."

Sport. He called me sport.

He was amazed at how strong Washington was, his arms felt like steel cords beneath him. Even carrying him, he was still able to manage a good pace away from the house and away from the peculiar smell.

What is that odor?

Washington continued speaking to him in his thick but soothing voice as the trees enveloped them. They were moving downhill, but not along the same path he had used to come up here. Washington was going somewhere else, and he was doing so as quickly as he could, which made him nervous.

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“...just stay with me...stay with me...”

He wanted to, but he could also feel a dark force tugging at him, wanting him to give up. Wanting him to go back to the house. To sit down. To stay and visit for a spell. He had to fight.

* * *

“Where’s Meridian? He said he was going to be here and he’s not. And no one has heard from him in a long time. I don’t like this,” one of the squad leaders began before being silenced.

“Shhh. Quiet for a second.”

From somewhere in forest around them faint shouting could be heard, but not from behind them, not from the grove, but from above them, uphill, toward the house.

“What is it?” the first one asked.

“Sounded like someone shouting to me,” the second replied.

“That’s what I thought. Someone try and get Meridian on the radio. Tell him that we found them, they’re uphill from here, by that old house we scouted earlier.”

“I’m on it now, sir.”

“The rest of you get ready. This is it. The standing orders are alive or dead.”

“Sir, yes sir.”

* * *

“I’ve never seen anything like this before in my life. I can’t even see my hand in front of my face. What about you, Harrison? The rats still keeping you around?” Meridian laughed.

Andy cursed under his breath and continued plodding through the unseen muck beneath him with paranoid eyes still darting back and forth. The fog had rendered his plan for escape useless. It did provide cover for him to make a run for it, but not in the marsh, not in the rat-infested swamp through which they were walking. Without being able

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to see anything, he would freeze in fear just knowing the writhing vermin were scuttling about at his feet. To his left he heard something crash loudly into one of the taller reeds, knocking it down.

"Now there's a big one, eh, Andy? I'd say a five-pounder at least. That guy would feed a family of four for a week!"

He wanted to reply with something sharp and caustic, but instead he found himself focusing on something else, something that was more dangerous than Meridian could ever hope to be. The rancid smell that had permeated the air earlier was back. The same one that had a disturbingly familiar scent to it, one he remembered from a long time ago. His breath was coming quick and shallow. He couldn't stand the pent up anxiety that had been building within him for the past twenty minutes. They must be almost out of the marsh. How much further could it go on? Forever?

To his relief, the terrain slowly started to turn rocky, a sign they must almost be free of the swamp, and of the rats. He quickened his pace, the solid surface of the stones beneath his feet helping to bolster his courage as he went. One foot in front of the other. Left. Right. Left, right, left, right...

"Slow down, Harrison, you think you're running a marathon or something?"

A gust of wind blew a heavy haze over him and he didn't respond. Instead he seized his opportunity and stopped walking.

"Hey! I'm talking to you, Harrison? Andy? Andy!" Meridian called out blindly even though he was a mere five feet away from him. The fog had successfully managed to hide him momentarily from his captor's keen eyes.

"Andy? Where are you, Harrison? You're not going anywhere, so you might as well show yourself. Remember the rats? That's right. The rats are still out there watching you. They can smell fear you know. You afraid, Andy?"

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He shivered at the thought of them, but knew that he was almost free of the marshlands now. The rats wouldn't likely venture too far away from their nests.

Or would they?

"Harrison, I'm warning you..."

He was waiting for him when he heard the sound of Meridian's voice. He had a plan, albeit a bad one, but it was still a plan. He swung hard at the sound of his voice, feeling his fist connect solidly with Meridian's chin. He heard him groan loudly in shock and then stumble backward, falling down onto the damp ground with a thud.

Now was his chance and he took full advantage of it, running as hard and as fast as he could through the blinding fog, feeling the reeds and thick swamp grass tear at his clothing and skin. He could hear Meridian cursing and crashing along after him. If he was going to make it, he was going to have to find a place to hide because Meridian would easily be able to track him by following the sound he made while running. Not to mention he could never outrun him, even if he were moving soundlessly.

He had to think, and quickly. The smell seemed to be stronger where he was now, more concentrated, and his eyes began to water slightly. He reached up and felt his forehead. He was burning up and his head was pounding with a dull ache. Where did he recognize it from?

A soft breeze floated by, clearing a small patch of the fog briefly, but long enough for him to see a thick cluster of reeds and debris piled high. It looked like some type of animal's hutch. The odor was overpowering.

"Harrison? I'm right behind you, Harrison. You hear me?"

He looked at the hutch again. Did he dare do it? Did he dare put himself even closer to the very animals he loathed and feared so much?

The thick mists slowly crawled their way back, filling in the area

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blown free by the wind. It was now or never.

“Harrison? Virus or not I’m going to kill you when I find you! Harrison!”

Ignoring him he dove forward into the pile of rotting vegetation, drawing a deep breath of the foul air just before he buried his face into the soft, warm mass of putrefying grasses. He writhed his way like a worm into the deserted hutch, pulling himself along with his hands while at the same time using his feet like claws to drive him forward. He scratched and clawed with his fingers like an animal, digging them deep into the moist ground. He had to survive, he needed to live. For Alex, for Jennifer, and for himself. It was strange, but sometimes the fear of death could make you do some things that you normally wouldn’t, like crawling into an unknown animal’s lair in the middle of a swamp. He prayed Meridian would pass by without seeing him, almost as hard as he prayed that the owner of the hutch wouldn’t return soon.

He managed to pull himself entirely inside the small structure, which was hollow and spacious once he had broke through the outer layers covering it. In the darkness he sat and panted, trying not to breathe at all. He opted instead for short, quick breaths in order to avoid tasting the foul, musky smell that lingered around him, a smell that was as much animal as it was something else. Where had he first experienced this odor? The war? It must have been during the war, but where exactly? Outside he could hear Meridian crashing blindly through the marsh searching for him.

“Harrison! This is your last chance. Harrison!”

Just then another voice began speaking, a staticy voice that sounded both irritated and urgent at the same time.

“...found them. Come in, Meridian. Repeat, we found them. Heard noises in area of stone cottage uphill from here. Moving to inspect it now. Please advise. Meridian, come in...”

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Meridian stopped running and snatched the radio off his belt, drawing his pistol with the other.

“Meridian, here. Understood. I’m on my way. Harrison’s gone missing. We’ll have to deal with him on the way back. Try and secure transportation and find out where the other teams are. They should all be there by now. Meridian out.”

“Come again, sir... last transmission... unclear... want... advise... over...”

“Come in. Team one? Team one? Team two? Come in.”

The radio went dead.

He jammed it back into his belt and took one last look around at the fog covered swamp, rubbing his sore jaw. Visibility still was at zero and he knew his prey couldn’t have gone far, he was just hiding. He also knew his mission wasn’t to settle personal grudges, it was to locate and obtain a copy of the formula and virus Andrew Harrison had stolen. Once he had the formula, or even better, a sample if it existed, he could always come back to look for him. He reholstered his gun.

“You win, Andy. This time. Washington and your son still know where your virus is. Maybe they can be of some use,” he goaded, trying to get him to reveal himself.

* * *

Andy did love his son, even if he didn’t show it as much as he wanted to sometimes, but right now the best course of action was to stay put and wait until Meridian moved on.

“Have it your way then. When I see that kid of yours I’m going to toss him into the cove with a pair of nice-fitting cement shoes. Just like I had my men do with Jennifer. Adieu.”

He stifled a small cry at what he had said about Jennifer. It couldn’t have been true, it just couldn’t. She had to be alive, somewhere. He poked a small hole in the concave hutch to keep an eye on Meridian as he left. Andy could hear him muttering to himself and coughing loudly,

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but he sounded far enough away to make a move. And now that the coast seemed clear, Andy wanted nothing more than to get out of the foul smelling nest. He stifled a cough of his own and suddenly felt his head begin to swim slightly. The smell was strong, but it could never have been created by an animal alone. It almost smelled like ammonia, but it left a metallic taste in his mouth. He wiped at his nose, which was bleeding and he gasped.

The virus! His olfactory senses suddenly remembered. He knew he had recognized the smell; it was the same one he remembered from the laboratory back in Vietnam. The one that had caused the deaths of three of the technicians working on it with him. This was his toxin, V #3B3, the airborne viral weapon he had sent back to Oceanview to be hidden forever from prying eyes and reckless men. But now it had somehow gotten loose. It had escaped and was now traveling about in the air as freely as the oxygen or hydrogen molecules that surrounded it were.

His head was throbbing as he ran through in his mind what the primary symptoms of infection were. He hadn't thought of them in almost twenty years, but now he needed to know if he had already been infected, his life depended on it.

First the smell then the sounds. Sweat dripped off his face as his breathing quickened. He needed to get out of here fast. He started to move when a noise stopped him.

"Hrrmmph."

First the smell then the sounds.

Something was inside the hutch with him, an animal. The low, guttural tone of the sound immediately triggered a response. It was a wharf rat, it had to be, what else could make such a noise?

Then paranoia followed by the hallucinations, the terrible, terrible hallucinations.

In your head, Andy. It's not really there. It's only in your head. Stay focused.

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“Hrrmmpph,” the noise insisted, and he shrank back in fear.

Behind him he could hear the furtive scratching of a large animal crawling into its nest from some underground entrance. He shuddered to think what it might look like. Long, pointed yellow teeth dripping with acidic saliva. Dark, sharp claws, oily matted brown fur, it had to be a rat, there was nothing else it could be. He was frozen to the spot with terror. If he simply stood up, he could easily break his way free of the debris above him, but that would give his position away to Meridian. If he stayed put he might live, but would have to deal with not knowing what, or where, the creature was that had just come home. It came down to certain death versus absolute terror, and he hadn't come this far to simply stand up and get shot in a swamp behind his house. He would stay put, for himself, for Jennifer, and for Alex.

Something brushed past his left leg, making him recoil in fear. It was long, thick and leathery, just like a rat's tail. He could feel the smooth, worm-like skin slide by, this time over his arm. Tiny claws scratched and a wet nose sniffed at him inquisitively. He felt like screaming, but didn't, not until he knew exactly where Meridian had gone. He felt like vomiting, but could only gag, his terror was so extreme. All he could do was just sit there, breathing heavily and wishing the rat would lose interest and go away.

After the hallucinations comes death. A painful death.

Instead, it squealed irritably at the intruder. Seconds later the sounds of another one arriving met his ears. He could tell, even in the darkness, because the two began squeaking back and forth maliciously. If he could understand them, he knew that they were deciding which part of his body they wanted to bite first. Two of them now, and they both began pressing their vile wet noses against his hands and arms, sniffing, taking in his scent, absorbing his sweat, tasting his fear. He wanted to die.

The terrible hallucinations.

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They crawled slowly across his wrists and up his forearms, one on each side, making their way cautiously toward his face. He was paralyzed with fear and could feel his bladder loosening itself as the two rodents slowly plodded ahead on a direct course for his eyes. He stared into the darkness around him, searching wildly for them. What were they waiting for? The waiting only made his fear all the more intense. They must have known that and were going to prolong his pain as much as they could. He squirmed and they slowly moved forward again, tiny claws pressing on soft skin, tiny mouths licking tiny teeth. Suddenly they stopped and began nosing around again, tasting the air. He could feel their hot breath on his skin and smell the disease that brooded on them. Then he felt the third one arrive.

It fell out of nowhere, its whiskers brushing past his face, lightly caressing his right cheek. He turned instinctively from the contact, repulsed, and felt a sharp pain in his right arm. One of the rats had bit him, breaking the skin. He could feel a small rivulet of blood trickling down his arm and felt the scurrying of the creature as it moved up three inches. Three inches closer to his face. *Oh, God, where had the third one gone?*

A slight pressure against his skin told him the third had crawled down from the ceiling and was now sitting on his shoulder, brushing its whiskers against his neck as it examined him in the blackness of the hutch. He could almost picture the animal resting there. Its thin, hair-like whiskers sensing the fear in the air and feeling every beat of his heart that was pounding in his ears like cannon-fire. It wasn't a question of whether he wanted to stand up now or not because he was far past that point. He was beyond terrified and all he could do was hope they would go away, that they would find something else to do, someone else to torture, but they had no intention of doing that. No, they weren't going anywhere.

First the smell, then the sounds, then the paranoia...

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“Not real, not real, not real...” he mumbled over and over to himself. The metallic smell of the virus was overwhelming, carried along by the light breeze and trapped inside the enclosed earthen nest with him.

“Not real...”

Another squeal came from behind him somewhere, followed by another, and yet another. It seemed like he had stumbled upon the nest that supported all the rats of the cove. They crawled over him, writhing and squeaking as they sniffed at him. Some taking an occasional bite to see if he would move. He didn't. He couldn't.

...then the hallucinations...then death...

He began crying, wishing he hadn't lived his life the way he had. Wishing he hadn't hit Jennifer back at the house. Praying his son would someday forgive him for not always being there for him, begging God in Heaven to see him safely into the next life. The sound of the ocean's waves crashing outside sounded in his brain as the tears spilled down his face and across his lips, their saltiness a reminder to him that we are all deeply connected to the sea. Connected in more ways than we could even remember.

One bite quickly followed another and after the first few he didn't even feel them coming anymore. He tried to stand up once he was able to will himself free from his terror, but by that point he guessed that as many as twenty or more rats had come in using the underground passage the first one had. He wept as each one bit and clawed at him savagely. He hit his head on the roof of the hutch, which came crashing down upon him, pinning him face down in the mud beneath a pile of rotting leaves, tacky mud, and coarse animal hair. He couldn't see, couldn't breathe, but still could feel the rats biting. Even as they themselves were suffocating to death underneath the tangled mass of debris, they bit him. He struggled to stand, but his legs no longer worked, they were being crushed down by a heavy weight. It was

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probably part of the hutch, but he imagined it was a giant rat. The biggest rat in Oceanview. The king of all the cove's rats. Its beady yellow eyes flashing red with anger from the sacrilegious intrusion of its lair. He could feel it gnawing on his leg, tugging at him, wanting him to see its face before it ripped him to pieces. Thankfully that would be something he would never have to see. He was struggling desperately to stay awake, but slowly fading as the mud slid down his throat and into his lungs, drowning him.

His breathing became slower and shallower, but he could still hear the rats screaming wildly about him and feel their teeth sinking into his soft flesh. However, they seemed so far away now he didn't care. He tried to draw a breath, but it didn't come. His lungs burned painfully with used up air trying to get out. He exhaled and tried once more to inhale, but nothing came. He began to gag, coughing out dirt that had made its way into his mouth, and felt a heat growing in his head. It was a terrible heat, a heat that meant he was going to sleep now. Going to sleep forever. Still the rats continued to bite him, but they were so far away now, so far away he didn't even believe they were there any more. He wondered morbidly to himself how long they would continue to gnaw at him after he was dead. Would they gnaw his bones forever?

He made one last attempt to breathe, but failed. Even his natural body reflexes had failed him. His head was ringing loudly, yet all he could think about was how long they would keep biting him, it seemed unnecessary for them to do so. They were drifting away from him as he was drifting away from life, then everything went black and he ceased to care any more.

CHAPTER 29

Meridian thought he heard someone screaming as he left the swamp, but it could just as easily have been the wind, or the sea. In the back of his mind he hoped it was Harrison. Suddenly something large crashed through the rushes behind him, making him draw his gun on instinct. He paused and turned around to see what was following him, being sure to keep his finger tensed on the trigger as he did so. His breathing increased rapidly as he stared into the thick fog, but saw nothing there. Nothing he could see anyway. The low mists rising up from the swamp made seeing anything on the ground difficult. The horrible smell of burning metal had been getting stronger the further along he walked. He wondered what it was, but only briefly. He had to meet his platoon and was already behind schedule. He relaxed for a moment, lowering his gun, but not re-holstering it. He didn't know if Andy was watching him or not, perhaps following him, trying to find a way out of the marsh. He paused to listen, but didn't hear anything. He

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was getting the uneasy sensation that silent eyes were peering out at him. After years of training, and even more years of hands-on experience in combat, he knew when someone was trailing him, and he had that feeling now. But this was somehow different; there was something strange about it, something not entirely there. Just a feeling. A feeling that something was following him out of the swamp, something that wasn't Andy. He couldn't even be sure if it were human or animal, if it existed at all. He coughed loudly, gasping for air.

A branch snapped nearby, causing him to spin around and train his weapon on the spot where he heard the noise.

"Who's there? Show yourself! Harrison, is that you? Decided to give yourself up? Come on out then."

Nothing moved, but there was a tension in the air he could taste almost as easily as the metal there. A swift wind from the hillside above him was bringing it down into the swamp where it then sat in the stagnant air. Whenever he was put in situations like these, he could always tell the moment before an attack was imminent because the air would go completely dead, just as it was now. Something was behind him, he could feel it, something large enough to draw his concern.

"Harrison? Is that you?"

Silence.

He wiped nervous sweat from his brow and felt something that he hadn't felt in years, something that was so foreign to him he didn't even recognize it at first. Fear. He was afraid.

"Who-who is it? Who's there?" he spoke, darting nervous eyes back and forth. "I can hear you out there. I have a weapon."

Just then something moved in front of him, something that was low to the ground and fast. He squeezed off two quick shots, but hit nothing but air. From his left he heard another sound, more movement and the chattering of animals.

Rats? There really are big rats here. Looks like Harrison is in for a

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long night.

Again he heard the sound of something moving, this time from behind him and he wheeled just in time to see a man run past, disappearing into the fog before he could get a clean shot. There was something about the way the man was dressed that helped to intensify his fear. Something from his past. He was dressed entirely in a ragged, dirty green and black camouflage uniform with a conical straw hat, the same kind that the Vietcong wore.

Impossible.

From his right another sound. He was being surrounded by something, or someone. He reached for his radio and flipped on the "Talk" button, but all that came back to him was static. He frantically tried changing frequencies, but each one still sang a hiss of empty static back to him.

"Damn it!" more movement caught his eye, along with the low chattering of voices. Voices that were speaking purposefully. They were assembling themselves, organizing themselves, preparing themselves.

The area around him was still enveloped in the thick fog, but it had stopped moving and now just hung in the air before him, still as death. There was no sound now but that of his breathing and the occasional movements of the men surrounding him. He could catch snatches of them talking to each other in their fast, soft language. It was a nightmare, it had to be. How else could he explain why he was now being pursued by his old enemies? The same ones he had fought and killed over twenty years ago half-way around the globe.

His heart and mind were racing as he checked his weapon again, being certain he had ammunition left. He had to think. What did he do in Vietnam? How did he deal with this back then?

Stay low and keep moving. Don't let them set up on you and watch your sides. They like to flank.

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He nodded to himself, taking his own advice, and started moving forward, being sure to do so as quietly as he could while keeping an eye on his sides, which was nearly an impossible task. If it were possible, the fog was somehow growing thicker the further he pressed on, and within minutes he was entirely disoriented. Even his great natural sense of direction was disrupted, as he suddenly found himself right back in the swamp again, sloshing blindly through the mud. The smell was making him gag and he fought hard not to cough and give away his position.

Scattered voices floated through the mist at him and he stopped, dropping down to the ground in a well-practiced motion, gun pointed wildly out into empty space. What was going on? It was inconceivable to imagine he was being chased by the Vietcong here in Oceanview. Or was it? He wasn't sure. Everything seemed to indicate he was their target, the same way they had been his target over there. It was his worst fear come true. They had come back for him.

Quietly he reached down and tried the radio again, but now it was completely dead, every frequency responded with nothing but empty static. Thinking that maybe a decoy would buy him time, he threw it as far as he could into the swamp, hoping the sound of it splashing might cause his pursuers to give their position away to him. At least then he might be able to assess how many there were and where they were hiding. He heard the radio crash into a pile of reeds loudly, but no one gave chase, no one moved. They knew what he had tried to do and were staying put. It was mental torture, a battle of wills. They weren't exactly sure where he was and he didn't know where they were, so the only thing he could do was to keep still and hope that his will was stronger.

He tried to relax, slowing his breathing down so that he could barely even hear it himself, although it still sounded like the wind howling each time he drew in a breath and exhaled. He kept one hand

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on the gun and with the other he tried to brace himself by using the ground as support. In order to make it out of here alive he would need to make a move. His training indicated he do it sooner rather than later as he was less likely to make a mistake now, as opposed to when he was mentally and physically exhausted later on. This could go on all night as he well knew, it had before.

As his hand reached down to the wet earth of the marsh, he felt it hit something along the way, something grotesque, soft and disturbing. His whole body went rigid immediately, but he forced himself to remain calm. He let his hand trace over the object he felt on the ground next to him. It was round and smooth, like a stone, but with holes in it, and it was sticky as well.

A plant. It's a plant of some sort. Or maybe a lump of dirt. Or dirt.

The more he let his fingers explore the object at his feet, the more he feared looking down at it. Behind him he could hear someone closing in, slowly, deliberately, as one would who knew exactly where their prey was and wanted to savor the moment. To his right and left, similar sounds fell upon his ears. The game was up just as quickly as it had begun. Who were these men?

He sighed and looked down at the lump his hand was touching.

"Oh my God!" He stood up, dropping his gun as he did so.

At his feet were the half eaten bodies of the two men he had assigned to dispose of Jennifer Harrison. They had gone missing and he assumed they had simply walked off the job, but here they were, at least what remained of them. The two cadavers were slick with fresh blood from where the bullet holes had riddled them, but what horrified him the most were the rats crawling over them, feasting on the dead bodies. Giant, bloodthirsty wharf rats, the kind Harrison was afraid of, and they were now looking up at him hungrily. He stared down at his hand and pulled it back from where it had just been, inside one of the dead men's partially hollowed out skulls. The dampness he felt was

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actually what little remained of his brain. The warm gray matter was oozing out into the marsh where it was swallowed up by the earth or by the rats, whichever got to them quicker. Judging from the gnawed bone and torn flesh, he could only assume they had been dead before being devoured by the rats, at least he hoped they were.

Voices cut in suddenly, pulling him out of one nightmare and back into another. They had found him, it was over.

“Oh my God, oh my...” he started again, but suddenly gunfire from all directions silenced him, cutting him down, shredding him into ribbons. He forced himself to shoot back, squeezing three shots into the darkness, but hitting nothing. The steady machine gun fire finished him off.

As he dropped to the ground, he finally understood. The voices closed in above, all speaking in their foreign dialect, that soft, beautiful language he had learned to hate. All of them speaking Vietnamese. Their enemies had been each other, but the results of the war were the same no matter what language they spoke, and now he was a casualty. He struggled and managed to turn over onto his back. He wanted to at least see the men who had tracked and killed him, the best soldier the world had to offer. Above him stood three men, all faceless, all dressed in the dated garb of the war. All grinning hollow, skeleton-toothed grins at him. He had been killed by his own fears. One of them bent low and stared into his eyes with empty eye sockets that reeked of agelessness and decay. The smell of death was all around him, the smell of metal was in the air, as was gun smoke. He sputtered out blood from his mouth and tried to speak, to apologize, to beg. The skeletal man’s jaw moved as it tried to speak to him, a horrible whining hiss emanating from its crooked mouth. Like an executioner sharpening his axe blade, it drew its gun, aimed it at his head and fired.

CHAPTER 30

The fog was thicker that night than anyone in Oceanview could ever remember. They also recalled with trepidation the strange lights that issued forth from the isolated house on the hillside slope overlooking the cove. The old-timers sat around and retold the story of the Fire Island fortress and the disaster that befell the soldiers stationed there. How the fog rolled on to shore and simply took them away one night. The younger folk never listened to such nonsense, such fabricated and exaggerated stories, but on this particular night not one of them laughed, and not one soul dared to venture out into the maritime mists. They opted instead to stay inside, close to their mothers, away from the fog and away from the cove. Sound advice, the old-folk reflected, as they sat around their living rooms and fireplaces, swapping stories of what a few of them, the really old ones, called “The Keeper of the Cove.” A natural force that balanced things. It wasn’t a devil or a demon, although in older times, far before anyone living now had been

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alive, that's what it might have been called. They simply saw it as the great equalizer. It made the unjust just. It took life and gave life, depending on how the scales were tipped. But most of all, it revealed to you your darkest fears. It made unreal seem real, the impossible, possible. No one knew what it really was, some dared say it was the hand of God itself, while others said it didn't matter what it was, as long as you lived a good, clean life and avoided it at all costs. At least when God judged you, you were already dead. Whatever force judged you in that cove did so while you were still alive.

* * *

"I don't like this. He's never this late, and tonight of all nights. Christ, he's never late period," one of the men said, nervously checking his watch and then rechecking it to be sure.

"So what do you want to do? He is the boss and everything, but if they are up there somewhere and we can get them, there is an awful lot of money at stake here," another one replied.

The first one sighed, turning to a third man standing next to them. "And you?"

"I agree. Give him five more minutes though, after that we can head out after them," he said, then turning to the others nervously. "You ever see a fog roll in so fast before?"

"Not like this, not this thick. Better give him three minutes otherwise we aren't going to be able to see anything up there. You got those flashlights from the kit, right?"

"Yes, sir. The men are breaking them out now; we shouldn't have any problem seeing them."

"Good, let's just hope they don't see us coming first. All right, men, his time is just about up. As second in charge, I'm assuming command of this mission. Saddle up and let's go. We have a virus to find."

"What about the kid and Washington, sir?"

"Standing orders apply. Once we get what we need from them, we

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kill them. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” everyone answered in unison, happy just to be moving again.

“Then let’s move out.”

One by one they filed into a single line and walked up the steep hill, each man disappearing into the swirling fog like a stone being swallowed up by the ocean until none were left.

* * *

Abigail woke up in the back seat of a car; it wasn’t hers that much she knew. But whose it was and where she was going so fast, she didn’t know. From the front seat she could hear a young man’s voice singing along to a Latin pop song on the radio. She didn’t recognize the tune, but she really hadn’t been listening to anything more intense than James Taylor for the past ten years. She tried to move and found that both her arms and legs hurt, mostly her legs though, and they burned with an intense pain. Suddenly it all came rushing back upon her, the gunshots, the blood, the fire, the explosion, the cowboy. It was all so bizarre as to lend itself to a strange dream, but the man in the driver’s seat helped to make it a harsh reality.

From where she lay, she could only see the back of his head. His hair was neatly cut, long, black and oily, with the very back cropped into a tight pony tail. He had two gold hoop earrings dangling from his left ear, swinging back and forth as he bobbed his head to the music. She could see the black collar of the leather jacket he wore; it creaked against the leather of the seats as he moved. He slapped his hands on the steering wheel in time with the music and then leaned forward to turn the volume up a little more, lighting a cigarette with his other hand. The music now was much louder in the back seat, the bass from the speakers thumping loudly against the back of her seat. She could feel the low frequency vibrations shaking her body.

She needed to get out. They had killed that man with the cowboy

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hat on. She remembered seeing his chest erupt from the bullet impact like a rock splashing into the water. She didn't dare move, on the leather seats even the slightest movement might be audible, even with the music up this loud. From the front seat, he stopped singing, lowered the volume and turned on what sounded like a C.B. or two-way radio.

"...two to cleaners, come in. Team two to cleaners, come in. Where the hell are you guys? Team two to cleaners..."

She watched him pick up the radio.

"Somebody call for the cleaners?" he asked in a cocky demeanor that seemed to fit with his appearance.

"Ortiz? Is that you? Where's Darin?"

"Darin had to take care of some police work. I'm handling this part of the..."

"Shut up, Ortiz. Shit, shit, shit!" the voice on the other end yelled.

"Sounds like you need the cleaners yourself," Ortiz replied, laughing to himself.

"Fuck off, Ortiz, this is serious. Meridian's gone and I'm in charge now. Do you know where he is?"

His voice grew serious at the mention of Meridian's disappearance.

"He's gone? What do you mean? What the hell is going on up there? Did you find the kid and that homeless guy yet?"

"No. We know where they are though, and we're on our way up to intercept them. We think they're hiding out in that abandoned house on top of the hill. You know where that is, right?"

"Yeah, yeah," he replied, fumbling around with a map that was sitting on the passenger's seat, while alternately looking at the road. "It's about a half mile or so behind Harrison's house, all the way at the top," he said. Then, with a hint of fear in his voice, "You're sure that place is abandoned?"

"You don't need to worry about that, Ortiz; no one has even been up there in over twenty years with the exception of maybe Tony or

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Washington. You still have the nurse, right?"

She froze as he Ortiz spun his head around quickly to check on her.

"Yeah, she's out cold in the backseat. We stuffed enough ether in her face to keep her that way for about another half-hour, after that she's going to be up though. What do you want me to do with her? You want me to get rid of her?" he asked, and she could hear the sick pleasure in his voice that he got out of even thinking about killing her.

"No, don't kill her. We have already killed more people than we planned to tonight. This was supposed to be simple. Shit." the voice on the other end swore again in frustration. It was clear he didn't particularly want to be in charge. It was his obligation, nothing more.

"So what do you want me to do? I can't keep driving around with a dead body in the trunk and a drugged woman in my backseat."

"Dead body? Who else did you kill?"

"A cowboy, oh and a cop too."

The voice paused for a moment.

"And that's why Darin is out driving around now? Because you knocked off some cop? Ortiz, I'm going to kill you myself when I see you."

"Whatever. Listen, what do you want from me? I have half a mind to skip town right now. This feels wrong, man."

"You skip town, and I'll have your ass. You will be dead before the week is out, and that's a guarantee. I'll have every bounty hunter on the west coast after you within twenty-four hours."

She watched him roll his eyes in the rearview mirror.

"This is what you're going to do. Take her to the Harrison's house and tie her up in the basement. After that I want you to dispose of the body in your trunk. I don't care how or where, just get rid of it. Darin is taking care of the cop I assume?"

"Yeah, he went off in the other direction with him. Then what?"

"At least he hasn't lost his mind yet. After that you'll come over to

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the cove and meet us at the house. Wait there for us. And get in touch with Darin and tell him what's going on."

His eyes narrowed.

"How do I know that you guys aren't just going to get the virus and then leave me? What guarantee do I have you'll even be there when I arrive?"

"You don't, Ortiz. But your only other option is to run and I've already told you what happens if you do that."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. You'll kill me. You're not the first person to threaten me you know?"

"Shut your mouth for a minute, will you? And don't question me, just do it. Get rid of that body and find Darin. We're going to need him. Over and out."

He slammed the radio down on the floor in anger and then began swearing in Spanish. He reached into his coat by his neck and pulled at his tie, struggling to smoke his cigarette while removing it. Once it was off, he tossed it into the back seat where it landed on her right leg. She could feel its coolness against the searing heat of her wounded limb. It was a thin black leather tie about three feet in length, and it seemed relatively sturdy. She thought quickly and saw this was her chance.

He leaned forward again, still mumbling swears under his breath and turned the volume on the radio all the way up so that the entire car felt like it was bouncing along the road from the bass being emitted. She had to make her move now.

Carefully, she reached over and grabbed the tie from off her burnt legs. She felt nauseous from the smell of her charred flesh, but kept her focus. She needed to be strong. She needed to overcome her fear, for her sake, for Gary's sake, and for the boy Alex's sake. Taking the necktie in her hands, she quickly retied it into a loose fitting noose. She had tied Gary's ties many times before and was now thankful he worked in the business sector. From the front seat Ortiz was bent over

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trying to light another cigarette. She had to time it just right, otherwise she would get caught. The cigarette was lit and he was in the middle of singing the second verse of a particularly repetitive song when she sat up and slipped the noose around his neck, pulling it tight and wrapping it around her hands tightly for support.

He yelled in surprise. The car swerved wildly as he took his hands off the wheel, the lit cigarette falling from his lips and landing on his lap where it began burning a slow hole in his pants. She put all her weight behind it and pulled until the noose grew tight around his thick neck. She could see the skin around the tie already beginning to blister and bruise.

“What the hell? I-my neck, I can’t breathe. I...”

“Shut up and dive the car, Ortiz,” she said in a commanding tone, one that she usually reserved for the emergency room. “And turn that music off, my head hurts enough.”

He tried to lean forward, but the tie was too short, and he only managed to make it tighter by moving.

“Can’t-c-can’t breathe,” he muttered as the car swerved again along the desolate road. She had no idea where they were, but it was so isolated that if she didn’t finish him off or find some way to get him out of the car, then he would surely kill her now. She knew she couldn’t strangle him, she just didn’t have it in her, there had to be another way. Looking into the rearview mirror, she could see that his face had turned purple and he was on the verge of passing out. If he lost consciousness, they would crash and both be killed.

“Slow down. Slow the car down, now.”

He immediately applied the brake, slowing the car down significantly. The music pounded in her ears, and she could hear Ortiz choking to death in the front seat. A white foam was spilling out of his mouth, rolling off of his thick lips and down his dark chin. She still thought the music sounded worse than the sound of him choking, but

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slackened the noose slightly as not to kill him while they were still moving.

“Your gun,” she said.

“Que? No hablo ingles, solo español.”

“Cut the shit, Ortiz. I already heard you talking to your boss. Now give me your gun or I’ll see if I can make your head pop off,” she replied, tugging hard on the tie to show him she was serious.

He gasped loudly for air and then reached into his coat and tossed his revolver over his shoulder into the backseat where it bounced off the padded leather and onto the floor underneath the passenger’s seat.

“Okay. Now pull the car over.”

“Where, lady? Where do you want me to pull the car over? There’s nothing out here. Just dirt and trees,” he wheezed, gasping to draw in another breath before she pulled the noose tight again.

“Pull over here. Just do it. Slowly.”

He slowed the car down even more and pulled it off to the shoulder of the road. She leaned down and searched blindly for the gun with her right hand, being sure to keep her eyes on him. After fumbling for what seemed like an eternity, she pulled the gun out from under the seat and pointed it at the back of his head, pressing the barrel against the base of his skull. She watched the muscles in his neck relax as she loosened her pull on the tie at the same time.

“Here. Stop here.”

He stopped the car and killed the engine at an intersection where a faded white wooden street sign named the cross road “Old Route 9”. She could only assume this road either turned into the Route 9 she knew or else ran close by.

“Out. Now get out of the car, slowly.”

“Take it easy, lady, I can hardly even breathe.”

She let go of the tie and he gasped loudly, drawing fresh air into his burning lungs. Both of his hands rested on the steering wheel and he

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was coughing violently, doubled over, spittle dripping from his mouth and tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Get out of the car. NOW!” She drew back the hammer on the gun loud enough so he could hear it.

“Okay, okay, just don’t shoot.”

She was amazed at the way she was able to handle this man. The way that she had instilled fear into him, a man who killed for a living. He opened the door slowly, and she was certain to keep the nose of the gun pressed firmly against his head, just in case he was planning on trying something.

“Now what do you want?” he asked as he stood facing her outside the car.

“Turn around.”

“What?”

“Around. Turn around. I don’t want to see your ugly face looking at me.”

“Whatever,” he responded, turning around so that his back was to her again.

“Hands up over your head.”

He did as she said. While he stood there with a defeated appearance about him, she hopped out of the backseat and into the driver’s seat, swinging her burned legs gingerly over the plush leather interior. The keys were still in the ignition and she turned them, bringing the car back to life as she slammed the door. He turned to face her, but she had already pressed the accelerator to the floor, leaving him behind in a spreading cloud of dust and exhaust. From the rearview mirror she could see him cursing her. His jerky motions indicated that he wasn’t too pleased about being outwitted and abandoned by her. She sighed with relief. She still had no idea what had gotten into her. She had always been a strong woman, being the head nurse in an E.R. was one of the highest stress situations one could be in, it required quick

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thinking and the ability to make decisions on the fly, but she never thought of herself as being this strong. She felt almost as if someone else were guiding her actions, or at least aiding her in making the right decisions. Whatever the case may be, she was now had a fighting chance at least.

The road ahead was just as desolate as the road behind, but the trees along the sides of the road were thinning rapidly, allowing her to at least see more of the landscape around her. If she could see the ocean, she could find her way back into town, but for right now she had to content herself with the fact that she was alive, hurting badly from the waist down, but alive.

I have to get help. That boy and his family are in danger. Christ, I'm in danger! Where can I go? Think Abbey, think.

She came to another intersection of seldom traveled dirt roads. There were no signs this time to aid her, so she stopped and looked at the area, trying desperately to recognize something, anything that might look familiar. She couldn't see anything through the trees yet, and she didn't dare get out of the car, not with Ortiz only a few miles behind her.

Right. Go right and just see if it leads you back to the ocean, if it doesn't then you can turn around. The important thing right now is that you keep moving.

She nodded her head and put her right flasher on, a pointless action, but one that was done unconsciously, like talking to herself or reasoning out a simple decision before acting. This road was in better condition than the one she had just been on, it was still dirt, but without the ruts and holes in it. It almost looked like a farm road, but without the tall stalks of corn growing along either side of it. After five minutes of driving, she finally began to get a sense of where she was geographically. All around her was farmland, and that itself was useful information, as nothing south or east of town had any farms, and to the

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west was the ocean. She had to be somewhere to the north.

After another ten minutes, she recognized an old barn in the distance. She and Gary always went apple picking there in the fall. She was north of town about two miles in an area the locals called the gravel pits. The land here consisted of several old farms, an abandoned gravel mine, numerous piles of unused and badly weathered stone, and several open mine shafts. She was certain this was the location Ortiz was driving to. He was likely going to dispose of the dead cowboy in the trunk there. She didn't even want to think about the poor man.

She rounded a corner and was suddenly distracted by the blinding flash of blue lights, police lights. Her heart nearly leapt in her throat with excitement until she saw the man who was standing outside the car itself. He was dressed in a business suit identical to the one Ortiz had on, only without the leather tie. Even more disturbing than seeing him looking back at her was what he was doing. He was leaning over into the passenger's side and pulling a policeman's body out. He was dragging it along the ground as her headlights came around the bend and shone on him. He apparently recognized the car because he began waving his arms and shouting at her to turn the lights off. Then he suddenly realized it wasn't Ortiz behind the wheel.

She slammed on the brakes just as he drew his gun and began firing at her.

This has to be Darin, Ortiz's partner. She spun the car around and raced back the way she had just come, the sound of gunfire chasing her as she left.

That's it. I've got to find help. I can't do this on my own.

"Ortiz. Two to Ortiz. Where are you guys? We are almost at the house now. Something smells funny up here...almost like a chemical...If you are receiving this respond. Ortiz...come in...Darin...come in...two to Ortiz..." The hand radio on the floor hissed at her.

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She leaned over and turned it off.

Better to let the police handle this. She found her way back to the intersection and turned right. She didn't know where it would come out, but she knew that she was heading north and eventually she would have to arrive in the outskirts of Portland somewhere. Once she got there, the state police could take over. She was already in way over her head, but at least she knew where everyone was. She just had to hope she wouldn't be too late to save Alex.

CHAPTER 31

He was being dragged along the ground by powerful hands, a vice-like grip wrapped around his thin healthy wrist, which was aching almost as much as his broken one. The terrible odor he remembered was still around, but muffled somehow. That's when he realized there was something covering his mouth.

"Where are we?"

"We're getting out of here, Alex," Washington replied, looking back over his shoulder nervously at him. "We just have one stop to make first."

His head was still swimming. He had no strength to ask any more questions of him now; he simply relaxed and allowed himself to be pulled along. He absently tried to feel what was on his face when Washington spoke again.

"Don't touch that. Just leave it there for the time being, okay? Wait until we're out of here at least and I'll explain. There's no telling what

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might happen if you take it off.”

He was puzzled by this response, but he also trusted him. So he took his hand away from his face, away from what felt like a rag wrapped across his mouth.

He slipped away, stuck between the waking world and unconsciousness yet again, dreaming of the strange house and the fog and the old man who lived there. But mostly he dreamed of being safe, being far away from Oceanview, being back in Union or Sarasota, anywhere, just not here. Washington’s voice continued to talk, but it was fading as he fell deeper into sleep.

“Almost there kid, stay with me. We’re getting out of here, just stay with me...”

* * *

Like a platoon marching through the sweaty jungles of Southeast Asia, they moved up the hillside. Not one man had a good feeling about where they were and what they were doing. The fog had made visibility zero, and their commander had disappeared without a trace. That aside, there was also an impending sense of doom that seemed to be following them, hovering just above them, waiting for any type of vulnerability to show itself before it swept in and finished them off. No one made a sound, and no one complained. Soldiers didn’t complain, they followed orders, even if they felt they were leading them into certain death.

They were spread out over a short distance as they searched, weapons armed and ready, eyes peering nervously into the thick mists, ears pricked up listening for anything out of the ordinary. Thus far nothing unusual had been seen or heard, but with each step they took the rank smell around them seemed to be growing stronger. It was a smell that had been with them for a while, but now was becoming more and more pronounced the deeper they went into the grove. Someone coughed.

Since they were under orders of silence, no one mentioned the

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lightness that they were feeling in their heads or the paranoia and anxiety that was beginning to present itself. It could have been part of the mission, tracking and killing people was a stressful occupation, but each man had many years experience doing it. These feelings were something they had been trained to remove, block out, and ignore years ago. No one dared to admit it, but something was terribly wrong. A bird called out, its cry echoing among the trees, and everyone jumped.

* * *

He heard them coming up the hill even though they were moving carefully, slowly and silent. He had lived in these woods for a good part of his life and knew when someone else was in them. He could sense it as easily as if the men approaching were stomping and screaming their way towards him. He moved off the path well before they would reach him, being careful to place Alex's sleeping body next to Jennifer's, whom he had hidden in a thicket of bushes while he went after Alex. He looked down at them closely and saw that they were both still breathing. Her breath was coming slower and shallower than Alex's was, but at least she was still alive. They both needed medical attention, attention he could not provide to them, and they needed it soon.

The soft sounds of the men approaching grew louder as their boots crushed the dry grass beneath their feet. It was a very soft sound, a barely audible noise, but one he knew and recognized. They had abandoned their single file line and had fanned out in a classic maneuver to try and flush him out of his hiding place. He immediately remembered it and dropped to the ground next to the still bodies of Alex and his mother. Just then he heard one of them start coughing, quietly at first, but then more loudly. This was followed by the excited voices of the others, some trying to quiet the coughing man down, others starting in fits of their own, and still others starting to moan in terror.

His eyes widened.

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“The Keeper has returned,” he mumbled, and covered his mouth with his hand and buried his face down onto the ground, being sure to check the rags on Jennifer and Alex before rolling them over as well. The moans above him had turned into screams. The Keeper had returned and was protecting its territory.

CHAPTER 32

Abigail drove hard and fast, the car swerving and fishtailing along the dirt roads. She felt as if she were in a labyrinth of farm roads and dead ends. She knew she must be close to Portland by now, she had been driving for almost twenty minutes, but she still saw no signs of a main highway or even one that was paved for that matter. In the back of her mind she knew there were two men who now knew she was on the run. Ortiz, who she had left on the side of the road, and now his partner, Darin, who she had left in a cloud of dust as she fled.

Her mind was trying to focus on one thing, getting to Portland, but the pain in her legs was beginning to make it hard to think of anything else. She glanced down once to look at them and then quickly returned her gaze to the road. She now had two black legs, legs that might, with years of therapy, be useful once again. It was pure willpower that had allowed her to stand and get into the driver's seat back there, and now it was adrenalin allowing her drive on like this. Adrenalin that was

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rapidly fading.

She came to sudden halt.

Another dead end. No, not a dead end, a crossroad.

Her mind had steadily grown more and more clouded in the past few minutes, to the point where she was now having difficulty seeing and functioning. She needed help, desperately, and she also knew her mind was now fading as well. Without the ability to reason, she was as good as dead.

The crossroad lay before her. Had she already been here? Which way did she go last time? No, this was a new crossroad. No, it was familiar. Wasn't it? She shook her head, took in a deep breath and tried to focus.

"Right. Go right," her mind screamed at her. At least she knew it was still working.

She gunned the engine and turned the wheel to the right, almost slamming into a tree that sat on the corner of the crossroads. She gasped and cut the wheel back the other way and almost slammed into an oncoming car.

Another car? Out here?

Her heart sank as she thought that the only other car out here now was the stolen police car Darin had taken to dispose of that dead officer's body. This area was too remote to be policed by any other law enforcement officials. She had just been caught.

From behind her blue lights began flashing and she panicked. It had to be Darin's car. She pressed down on the accelerator and the car lurched forward, rear tires spinning wildly for a moment before gaining traction on the loose gravel. She darted forward and quickly lost control of the vehicle, cutting the wheel to the right to try and aim herself back towards the road. The back end fishtailed on her again, flying wildly around behind her, sending her into a 360 degree spin. She took her hands off the wheel and closed her eyes. She didn't even have the

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energy to scream any more. She wasn't going to recover from this one.

The car spun off the road, crashing rear end first into a drainage ditch on the side of the road. Half of the car was in the ditch while the other half was still on the main surface of the road, with her weeping in the front seat. She looked up in fear as the flashing lights came closer and she heard the sound of voices calling out urgently to her. Two voices.

Two voices? Maybe Darin picked Ortiz up and now they were going to kill her. Or maybe...

"Miss, are you okay? I didn't even see you coming. Your headlights are off, you know. Miss? Oh my God, don't move," a young sounding voice spoke. A kind voice, not a voice that would hurt her. Not Darin's and not Ortiz's.

"Mikey, send for an ambulance her legs are...they look like they've been burnt by gasoline or something."

"I'm on it right now. Stay with her. Find out what happened," another voice replied, a little older, but still friendly sounding. These men weren't going to hurt her; they were going to help her. Now it was up to her to help them find Alex and his family.

"Do you know your name Miss? Do you know what day it is?"

"Abigail. My name is Abigail Monroe."

"Great. Hold on, Abigail. I'm Dave. We're going to get you some help, okay? Just stay calm."

"Dave?"

"Yes, that's right Lt. David Maxwell, Portland State Police Department."

"You have to go to Oceanview."

"Beg pardon?"

"Oceanview," she whispered again, motioning him closer.

He leaned in with a perplexed look on his face that slowly changed into concern, then anger, and finally a look of fury that scared her as

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she told him her story.

"Are you making this up, Mrs. Monroe? You realize we can verify your story with one call to the Oceanview P.D."

"No, you can't. There is no police station anymore. That's what I'm trying to tell you. They burned it to the ground. That's where I got this from," she said weakly pointing to her legs. "If you don't believe me, check the trunk. There should be a dead body in there. A cowboy."

"A cowboy?"

"Well, I don't know if he was an actual cowboy, but he had a cowboy hat and boots on. Please, if you don't believe me, check for yourself and call the Oceanview Police Department too."

"All right, but I think you may have hit your head when you spun off the road."

He took the keys out of the ignition and walked around to the back of the car. The trunk was open a few seconds later and less than a second after that she saw him running over to his car where his partner was on the radio with someone. She watched them have a short but animated conversation with several hand gestures over in her direction and to the back of the car. She then saw his partner fumble with the radio for a moment; they were trying to contact Oceanview no doubt. Dave pointed at the radio and ran back to her side his hand on his revolver.

"Where did you say these people were heading, Mrs. Monroe?"

* * *

He was covered in mud, face down in it, to be exact, and he had a terrible headache. His mind was almost as slow and thick as the mud in which he sat.

What happened? The rats!" He jumped to his feet and staggered backward, falling again into the moist earth.

He checked his arms and legs for signs of bite marks and scratches. There were none. His head began to clear.

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The virus. First the smell, then the sounds, then the paranoia, then the hallucinations, then death. But there was no death, he was alive.

"It's not real. It wasn't real. The virus." He shook his head and wiped mud away from his nose and mouth, vomiting up great gobs of it from his stomach and lungs.

It took him a minute, but he was slowly realizing how he had survived.

"It can't kill you if you can't breathe." The fact that he had fainted had actually saved his life.

The mud had blocked off his breathing passages, causing him to black out, but also depriving him of breathing in the toxin-laden air. The virus had been created to destroy, but only by driving its victims mad with fear, causing them to see and hear things that weren't there, things that they feared, things they never wanted to experience. For each person it would be different, a different torture before death, a different hell to endure before the inevitable came, cardiac arrest as the heart ruptured and exploded. The virus literally made you scare yourself to death. The more scared you became, the faster your heart beat. That made you breathe quicker, inhaling the toxins into your blood where your already racing heart would speed them into your brain. This caused the victim to grow more scared, to see and hear and experience things that really weren't there but felt so real to them it eventually destroyed them. It truly was a perfect weapon, but one that should never have been created. He didn't have time to dwell on that now though. He needed to find Alex and Jennifer before they stumbled across it.

He stood up and took a step forward, tripping over a lump in front of him, Meridian. His face was frozen into a look of absolute terror, as if he had seen the Devil himself come up from hell to take him. If a fear of rats had been his darkest secret, he wondered what a man like Meridian had feared so much that it eventually consumed him.

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Maybe regret. Regret of all the horrible things he had done in his life.

There was no time to ponder what demise Meridian had come to. There was only time to make things right again and that meant saving his family and destroying forever the virus that was causing all this. The wind picked up again, blowing in from the ocean. The fog still remained thick, but it was only a small part of the problem he now faced. The real problem was what he would do if he was too late to save his family.

He put his head down and started running, using the sound of the ocean on his left as a guide. As long as he could hear it crashing there, he knew he was heading toward the woods. Suddenly he heard the terrified screams of at least a dozen men from a few hundred yards in front of him and knew he was going in the right direction. From the sound of it, they had just encountered his virus for the first, and likely, the last time. He stopped and with some difficulty tore part of his shirtsleeve off and wrapped it over his nose and mouth. He knew it wouldn't help save him if he was exposed to it for more than a few minutes, but a few minutes might be all he needed to find who he was looking for. At least he hoped it would.

CHAPTER 33

It came down upon them faster than the fog did; a swirling mass of darkness that was preempted by that distinct odor which had been following them for the past hour. No one even had time to react to the madness which happened next. They were stretched out over a thirty yard expanse of woodland in a loose fence like formation which they hoped would enable them to find Alex Harrison and the homeless man, Darrell Washington. By spreading themselves so thin, they were taking the chance that one or both of them might be able to slip through unseen, but it seemed unlikely that would happen. With the fog making seeing anything beyond ten feet invisible, the chances of their escape increased substantially. None of that mattered now. Someone or something had laid siege upon them from the sides, from the front, and from the back. Every possible escape route had been systematically removed and whoever, or whatever, had been trailing them, was now attacking.

The first strike was quick and merciless, no one was prepared for it,

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they couldn't have been, no one knew they were being followed. The forest seemed to simply come alive and begin rending the platoon apart, man by man. All throughout the woods screams of absolute horror could be heard. Andy arrived just in time to see through the thinning fog, the platoon shrieking and gyrating as if they were in the throes of the worst conceivable nightmare possible. Each man was in a way, stuck in just that. They were facing for the first time their worst possible fears, their nightmares incarnate.

He couldn't see all of them, although he knew none of them would survive this. He kept his makeshift bandana wrapped tightly over his mouth and nose and even held his breath as he moved past the area they were in. One man raced past him, swinging his arms wildly as if some giant birds were chasing after him before he flung himself down onto the ground, his hands up in a defensive posture. He watched curiously as the man then began shaking violently like he was being attacked by whatever type of bird he imagined was after him. Less than a minute later his eyes rolled back in his head and a thick white foam rolled out of his half-open mouth. He was dead.

Another man was firing his gun sporadically around the area, striking some of his own men in the process, but with a look of such fear on his face that he seemed unaware of anything else but whatever he thought was coming for him. He stopped shooting long enough to look directly at Andy and drop his gun, running off in the opposite direction screaming madly.

Not sure if someone was actually there, Andy whirled around to look behind him, and saw nothing. The man went screaming off into the fog, and continued screaming until he was suddenly cut short. A heart attack, he assumed.

All around him other signs of the virus' effect could be seen. Men tearing each other apart, others using knives the size of machetes to stab and slice at the air, all the while their faces frozen into a look of

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unimaginable personal terror. One man brushed past him quickly and buried his knife to the hilt into the body of another man who was leaning up against a tree sobbing and shaking. After pulling the knife out of his comrade's chest, he then turned toward another group of people and rushed in, knife first.

Things were out of control and were getting more and more dangerous by the second. He needed to get away from here. Although he didn't detect any signs he was becoming infected by the virus, he might be stabbed or shot by someone who had been. He slowly began backing away from the scene, careful not to make any sudden movements or to make any sounds. The last thing he wanted to do was to draw any attention to himself. Suddenly a giant hand appeared on his right shoulder and he gasped in fear, his rag falling away from his mouth and onto the ground.

"Take it easy, Andy. And for God's sake, put that back over your face, unless you want to wind up crazy like them!" a deep voice spoke, one that he recognized.

He turned around to see Darrell Washington standing before him, a dark rag covering his own face. He bent down and picked up Andy's, helping him fasten it over his nose and mouth.

"Darrell? I knew I saw you earlier, but..."

"Save it, Andy. We need to get out of here before these guys come after us," he replied, glancing over at the chaos that was occurring all around them.

"Okay, let's go. But where?"

"Follow me, and try to slow your breathing down if you can. It's very strong in this area now."

"The virus you mean?"

He cocked his eyebrow.

"Virus? Whatever you want to call it I guess. The old timers call it the Keeper of the Cove."

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The Keeper of the Cove? Andy said to himself as they walked down the hill, Washington in the lead. The screaming was still piercing as they left, but the voices that were causing it were slowly killing each other off and soon the woods would be silent once again.

* * *

He was so happy just to see them alive he didn't realize how serious their injuries were until Washington pulled him away from them for a moment. Alex looked like a dirty cherub, his face covered in filth and his arm, the cast barely hanging off of it, battered and broken. He lay there, breathing steadily but slowly. His face was yellow and waxen, and there was a tiny amount of white spittle around his mouth, a sign that he had been exposed to the virus. Next to him lay Jennifer, looking almost exactly the same way. Her beautiful face was streaked with dirt and blood, and a larger amount of the white foam spittle was dribbling from her mouth. He had exposed his family to his worst creation. Had he killed them with a weapon he made so long ago?

Washington grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet.

"There isn't anything either one of us can do right now. We have to get them off this hillside and to the hospital, but I don't want to chance encountering that...thing again. So far I've been lucky, as you have judging by the looks of it. You're still alive anyway."

"Look, I know what's causing this. It's a virus I made a long time ago back in Vietnam. All we have to do is find it and destroy it."

Washington shook his head.

"There's more to it than that, Andy. This place has always had a history with the locals, even before Tony and I came here."

"But that's ridiculous. When I gave Tony the virus to hide, he must have done so up here somewhere. The vial it was in probably cracked, that's why people claim to have seen things or heard things up here. There's nothing more to it than that."

Washington just looked at him with a blank expression on his face.

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“Dammit, Darrell, I’m telling you there is nothing else to this. My virus is causing this, has been causing this, to Oceanview for the past twenty years. The moment the vial broke, the virus became airborne. It must have localized itself in this area, that’s all. All we have to do is find it and burn it.”

“I don’t know, Andy. The stories about this area go back further than the past twenty years, you know. It is possible that...”

“No, Darrell, it’s not! Look, you can either sit here and be spooked by ghost stories, or you can help me get rid of this thing and save my family. It’s up to you. I know you’ve already done more than I could ever hope to pay you back for, but please, forget about these crazy tales and help me find this thing.”

He thought for a moment before finally nodding.

“Okay, Andy, I’ll help you.” He sighed.

“Do you know where it is then?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I think so.”

He bent down and dug into Alex’s pockets until he found the tiny key. He removed it and stared at it for a second before speaking.

“Follow me, but make sure you keep your face covered at all times. It’s not safe up where we’re going.”

“No place is,” Andy mumbled as he fell in behind him.

CHAPTER 34

Washington led and Andy followed closely behind him as they climbed higher and higher up the sloping land, each step bringing them closer and closer to the house, to the virus, to the inevitable. Neither man spoke a word, neither had to, Washington knew what lay ahead, and Andy could guess based on what his experiments had shown and what he had recently seen. Washington still clung strongly to the belief that the virus was not the cause, or at least not the sole cause, of what had happened or of what had been happening in Oceanview for the past several decades. Andy knew better, or at least thought he did. The virus had been manufactured to do exactly what he had seen tonight, to cause paranoia in people and eventually kill the subjects it infected. The symptoms were unmistakable, it took him a while to remember them, but now that he had seen it in action with his own eyes, he was certain that his toxin had somehow broken loose.

The narrow trail slowly began to open up as they finally crested the

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hill. All around them the fog still hung heavy in the air and no wind dared to blow it away. He focused hard with his eyes, straining to peer through the white wall of vapor while Washington walked along in front of him, head hung low like a man marching to the gallows. The ocean pounded the rocks below them like a boxer firing a steady flurry of punches, knowing that he could keep punching forever if he had to. Eventually, the sea would reclaim the land and take them with it back to its undersea catacombs. It was inevitable. A dark form loomed ahead of them, and Washington stopped to point at it.

“This is it,” he said solemnly, sweeping his hand across the fog covered landscape. “This is where I believe the source of all we have seen to be. The dwelling of the keeper.”

He took another breath, careful to adjust the rag over his face before doing so and moved forward, pulling the key out of his pocket.

“We have to go inside.”

Andy looked at the key in Washington’s hand and walked up alongside him. The trail was now behind them, ahead was a broad clearing and at the end of that clearing was the outline of a small structure, ominous yet inviting at the same time. He reflected on how it made him feel, the same way, he guessed, he initially felt when he realized his virus was alive. He was thrilled with excitement, yet filled with a dark terror at the same time. They paced forward carefully, their feet moving like they were in quicksand, their steps slow and thick. Although both men could smell, even taste the bitter metallic odor present, they chose not to mention it. Better not to say you see the devil in case he doesn’t see you. As an eternity passed between steps, Andy’s thoughts dwelled on his family. Slower and slower their steps came, and slower and slower their breaths came too, until they felt like they were trying to run through water while in a dream. Finally they reached the front door, a hulking wooden frame supporting a thick wooden door. Although both should have been in a terrible state of repair,

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neither showed it, instead both looked relatively new, other than some slight warping that bowed the door outward. Andy thought it looked as if some great weight had been pressed upon it from the inside, or something equally as large were trying to get out.

“Hold your breath. I don’t know what’s in there, but we should be careful,” Washington spoke, his words coming slowly, pouring out like crude oil from a faucet. He lifted the key and inserted it into the tiny black keyhole in the door. There was no latch, no knob, nor any other way to open the door, just a keyhole.

Andy knew the virus was causing everything around him to swim, not some supernatural force. It was simple biochemistry, not a poltergeist or demon. The door appeared strange, but once his head cleared he was sure the door would appear as it should, broken down and splintered. If there was even a door there to begin with. The toxin may have already reached his brain, and if that had happened, he couldn’t be sure anything he was seeing was real, everything could be a hallucination.

...then the hallucinations, then death...

The key fit perfectly into the lock, and Washington easily turned it clockwise. It clicked loudly, echoing like thunder in their ears and then slowly swung open by itself. They both stepped back as it creaked inwards, from inside the house the smell was overwhelming.

This is it. This is where Tony hid the virus. Pretty clever. He knew no one ever came up here because of the stories so he hid it here. Genius.

He looked over at Washington, who was beginning to look pale. Most of the color in his face had fled to other parts of his body, leaving his dark skin a chalky white. Andy watched him sway drunkenly on his feet and fall against the doorway. He held out one arm to prevent himself from falling, but he was on the verge of passing out and he knew it.

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“Go back,” he said, his own voice sounding as foreign to him as if he were speaking for the first time.

Washington shook his head.

Damn soldier’s pride. Andy didn’t have time for this.

“Get out of here. I can’t help you if you pass out. I can’t carry you down the hill. You know that. Don’t be a fool. You’ve been exposed to the virus more than once tonight. You’re lucky you’re even alive. Now get out of here and let me finish this.”

He started to shake his head again to argue with him, but stopped and nodded instead. He knew he had reached his limits and was now pushing himself beyond what he could reasonably expect from his body. Andy watched him use the wall for a brace to push off from and stagger wildly away at a light trot, zigzagging back and forth toward the safety of the woods. He looked like he was going to make it, he was going to be all right, but now Andy was on his own. Whether the virus had started affecting his auditory senses as well, he couldn’t be sure, but from somewhere out to sea, covered up by the fog, he thought he heard the distinct chatter of a helicopter. He covered his ears with his hands and, using his shoulder as a battering ram, he pushed his way through the partially open door and into the emptiness beyond.

* * *

“Coast Guard to base. Coast Guard to base. Come in.”

“We read you Rescue Five, over.”

“Base we don’t have a visual on anything yet, but there is definitely something happening down there. Sounded like gunfire earlier, over.”

“Repeat Rescue Five repeat. Did you say gunfire?”

“Affirmative base. Popping sounds that could have been gunfire. We’re going to circle the cove for signs of movement, but this weather has visibility down to twenty feet up here. Please advise, over.”

“Keep searching for them, Rescue Five. Mrs. Monroe said there were about eight of them that attacked and demolished the police

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station downtown, so they're out there somewhere. We're at the site now and she's telling the truth. There's nothing but ash here. Also be on the lookout for the Andy and Alex Harrison. We're sending in ground personnel now as well as a National Guard unit. Repeat, continue searching and report anything out of the ordinary immediately. Base out."

"Copy base. Over and out."

* * *

The inside of the house was barren, almost completely empty with the exception of some scattered furniture that was tipped over and broken, lying in different corners of the room. He felt his legs start to wobble on him as well as a slight throbbing in his head. It took him a minute to realize it was his heartbeat hammering away that caused the throbbing in his ears. He wiped his face with the back of his hand and took another look at the room he was in.

The entire structure contained but two rooms and a pantry area. The main room, which he was now in, had a giant stone fireplace off to his right side. There was a stone mantle above, upon which rested several decades worth of dust and debris. Inside the fireplace sat what looked like a petrified log on an iron grate. To the right side of the hearth a steel poker leaned against the wall, its tip was rounded and blunt, worn with use. There was a wooden chair facing the fireplace, tipped slightly forward as one of its front legs was broken. Past the chair was a kitchen area with a tiny wooden table and two more chairs neatly tucked in underneath it, both seats faced out a broken picture window that overlooked the ocean. The view must have been breathtaking when the weather allowed it, but now all Andy could see was a heavy white mist.

To his left was an open doorway that led to what he assumed must have been the master bedroom. It was in that direction he walked, or rather, was drawn. As if in a trance, he paced slowly over to the bedroom door, experiencing a strange feeling of calm overtake him and

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pull him closer and closer. The virus had to be in that room somewhere; that would be the only way to explain the incredible lightheadedness and confusion that he was feeling.

The bedroom was small but cozy. In its center was a dark oak bed frame but no bed. There was a small roll top desk in the far corner of the room and a dresser that rested directly next to it on the left side. He brushed past the barren bed frame and approached the desk, the feeling of having his actions directed to him still strong. It was an old desk of the late Colonial period and judging from the looks of it, likely an actual Colonial era piece of furniture, as indeed most of the pieces appeared to be. He reached down and grabbed a small wooden handle centered on the roll down part of the desk. It crumbled in his hand. Exposure to the relentless rains Oregon endured had rotted it out completely. He coughed and felt his lungs sear with pain as he tried to draw another breath. He was running out of time. He needed to find the virus and destroy it quickly or he was going to die here.

Ignoring any nostalgia brought on by the Colonial desk, he took his right hand, balled it into a fist, and smashed it against the desk top, splintering it easily. His fist passed through the fragile wood and the rest of the covering quickly disintegrated into dust before him. What was left was nothing more than an empty table top. His ears were ringing and his head had gone from throbbing to being almost nonexistent atop his shoulders.

Where could it be?

"Think, Andy, think," he muttered to himself and pulled open one of the three drawers on the side of the desk.

Empty.

He slammed it shut and watched it break into pieces before opening the second one.

Nothing.

He closed the second one without breaking it and moved on to the

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third and final drawer, his last hope. Regardless of whether he found it, he would have to get out of the house after opening it anyway as he was on the verge of passing out.

He tugged on the drawer, but it refused to give.

“Come on, dammit, open up!” He tugged on the handle of the bottom drawer, his bandana falling away from his mouth.

He stopped suddenly and looked down at it, realizing it was in much better condition than the first two had been and was locked. A tiny keyhole stared out at him from the front of the drawer. He bent down for a closer inspection and saw the drawer was actually made of metal, painted brown to look like wood. If he hadn’t been exposed to the toxins in the air, he surely would have seen it immediately. But because of the virus he had a difficult time seeing things, let alone sorting them out in his mind. There was no doubt the virus had to be inside that drawer. There was no other explanation for it being there. He kicked at it weakly before stumbling backwards, coughing violently. He had to let it go for now. He needed to get outside and into the clean air before it was too late.

He turned around and the entire room had somehow changed. The bed frame was now covered by a mattress and thick, comfortable looking sheets. The frame itself was now a four post frame, elegant and well polished. How he longed to go lie down on it and sleep, just sleep. There was even a tiny window at the far end of the room overlooking the water. It was open and he thought he saw shutters dressing it on the outside. In the main room he could see a fire burning in the hearth and a large black cauldron with some type of stew simmering inside. He could almost smell the meat cooking.

Not real. It’s not real, Andy. Hallucinations, the virus. It’s the virus.

He shook his head and most of the vision disappeared in front of him. The burning fire, however, remained as did a patient voice that was speaking. He walked out of the bedroom and saw the blaze burning

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in the fireplace. Seated in the chair before it was an old man dressed in what looked like a soldier's uniform. A uniform from the late 1800's. The man was muttering a phrase to himself, barely audible but distinguishable nonetheless. He moved closer to hear him better.

"...the cove...there's something in the cove. Something in the cove...there's something in the cove..." he said, over and over again as Andy approached him from behind.

He could feel his heart beating madly and his lungs burning with an unhealthy heat.

They must be bleeding by now from exposure. Always trying to rationalize things.

He continued walking until he was directly behind the old man. He was still continuing with his mutterings, each verse growing louder and louder than the previous one.

He moved another step closer and the man's ears pricked up. Slowly he turned around and looked him directly in the eye. His face was stern and angry, but also scared, deathly scared. He spoke to him.

"There's something in the cove, Andrew Harrison, and it's alive!"

He recoiled in shock and took a quick step back. The old man also stood up, knocking the chair over in the process. He had an old cavalry sword on his belt and a navy blue jacket lined with brass buttons. He was a Civil War soldier. A Union soldier to be exact.

"There is something in this cove, Andrew Harrison, and it's alive!" he screamed, moving closer to him by one step.

"There is something in this cove, Andrew Harrison, and it's alive!" He laughed horribly as Andy stumbled backwards.

He turned and ran toward the front door, which stood open only a few paces away. The old man's voice had reached a fever pitch.

"...and it's alive! Run away, Andrew, run away! There's something here..."

He fell out of the front doorway and onto the ground where he

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struck his head on one of the flagstones that marked the walkway up to the house. He could feel blood streaming down his face, his rapid heart rate pumping it out of the fresh gash like a sailor bailing water from his flooded vessel. He struggled to his feet and fell again. He wasn't going to make it. He was going to die right here, at the hands of his own monster.

“...and it is alive, Andrew Harrison...”

He turned around and looked back at the doorway and saw rats, hundreds of them, thousands of them, swarming over each other as they clawed their way toward him. He blinked his eye and looked again. They were gone and there was no longer a fire burning, nor was there anyone or anything inside the house. He started to turn away, but a shrill voice called out to him from somewhere within the stone structure's walls.

“...there is something alive in this cove, Andrew Harrison. Remember that,” it finished and the giant rat he imagined ruled the marshland appeared before him, standing on its hind legs and hissing loudly at him.

He opened his mouth and tried to scream, but it only hung open stupidly as he closed his eyes and let a heavy sleep wash over him. He was sure he was going to be judged harshly by the Almighty for his creation. He only wished he could have said goodbye to Alex and Jennifer one last time. To sit by Alex's bedside and tell him a story at night or to calm him down after a nightmare or bad dream. He was going to miss the feel of Jennifer's full lips pressed firmly against his, or the way she always knew what he was thinking or feeling. He was going to miss a lot of things. There was something alive in the cove, but soon it wouldn't be him.

CHAPTER 35

Andy blinked his eyes twice before they adjusted to the harsh white lights above him. His mouth was dry and his stomach felt as if he had been throwing up for three days straight. He went to move his left arm and quickly found out he had never felt so weak in his life.

“Hey, he’s awake. Get the doctor. He’s up!” a voice said and he felt a slight pressure on his right hand. It was a pleasant feeling, and he was almost upset when it abruptly disappeared.

“Honey? Andy can you hear us?” a soft voice spoke into his left ear. It was a beautiful voice, a perfect voice, it was Jennifer’s voice. She was alive.

He struggled to reply that he could hear her, that he was okay, that he was alive, but couldn’t find the strength. She kissed his forehead and he smiled. He still was unable to see anything due to the harsh lighting, but being able to feel her presence there made him feel better nonetheless. How he longed to see her angelic face, to hold her in his

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arms, to feel her skin against his. How he wished to look upon the face of his only son, and hear his voice, to see him sleeping peacefully.

"Dad? I'm here too," Alex's voice suddenly piped in quietly as if on cue, and he fought back tears of joy. His family was alive. They were okay. They were all going to be okay.

After a few minutes his eyes finally managed to adjust to the lights and he was able to look upon them once again.

Jennifer stood at his bedside crying. She looked thin and pale in a hospital gurney, but otherwise all right.

Alex sat in a chair on his right side. He looked bad, a fresh cast on his arm and multiple stitches on his face and body, but he also seemed otherwise undamaged by the ordeal.

Then he saw Washington's huge figure looming over him. The giant black man was dressed in a pair of jeans and a white button down shirt with the collar sticking up. He looked relieved to be alive and appeared even more so when he saw Andy recognized him. They had all been through a lot together, a strange experience that made them realize how crazy the world could sometimes be.

"We thought we lost you, Andy." Jennifer leaned in to kiss him again on the forehead, then slowly she moved down to his lips. "We didn't know what happened to you. Where you were, we didn't know anything."

He smiled weakly and looked over at Alex. He was unusually quiet and appeared lost in thought by his bedside. Then Washington spoke.

"Andy, we're all glad to have you back, but there is something we need to discuss...in private," he said, staring down at him with a look that indicated he was serious.

"Okay." He cleared his throat. "Okay, honey, can you and Alex give me a minute with Darrell?"

"Of course, but only a minute, the doctor still needs to see you."

He watched her walk over, take Alex's hand and lead him out into

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the hallway, glancing back at him before she closed the door behind her. Everything was back to normal.

“What is it, Darrell?”

“Do you remember anything that happened to you, Andy?”

He thought for a moment and tried to focus on what the last few events were he remembered. His mind was coming up blank.

“You can’t, can you?”

He shook his head. “No, I can’t. But that’s one of the things the virus was designed to do, Darrell. It was supposed to kill you, but if it didn’t, it would certainly do a lot of brain damage. If the worst thing I got out of this was short term memory loss...”

“They didn’t find a virus up there,” he cut in.

His mouth dropped open in surprise.

“What are you talking about? It was up there in that house myself. There was a metal box, I remember that. It had to be up there. I saw...”

“I’m sure you saw a lot of things. I did too, as well as Alex. The only thing they found up there was you. You were lying outside the front door covered in blood, mumbling that there was something alive up there. Something was alive, Andy...” he trailed off.

“But the virus, it had to be in there,” he insisted, reaching his hand up absently to his face, feeling the rough scar that now and forever would line his forehead.

The door opened and they both stopped talking as a tall man entered with a business-like look on his face. He peered down at Washington and then over at him.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” he said, looking at Washington. “Mr. Harrison needs his rest. Whatever you were discussing can be finished at a later time.”

“Doctor, we only need a minute more,” Washington started before being cut off.

“I’ll thank you to shut the door on your way out, sir,” he replied

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without looking up at him.

"We'll talk later, Darrell," he said. "Tell Jenny and Alex I'll see them in a little while."

"Of course. We can talk later then?"

"Without a doubt. I'll be good as new in no time. Right, doc?" Andy smiled, peering up at the doctor who looked down contemptuously at him.

"I'm sure in time you will be just fine, Andy."

There was something in the tone of his voice that didn't sit well with him. Something about the way he seemed distant from him, not in the room yet still visible, there but not entirely concerned with making Andy feel any better. He was checking his I.V. drip and inspecting one of the many silver machines he was attached to, but didn't really appear to know what they were designed to do. Suddenly Abigail Monroe burst in through the door in a wheelchair, startling both him and the doctor, who dropped his face to his shoes the moment she entered.

"Mr. Harrison! How are you? I never thought I'd see you alive again, especially after what happened in the police station," she said as she smiled broadly entering the room. Her eyes suddenly shifted from him up to the doctor where they remained fixated for a long moment.

"Hello, doctor. I'm Abigail..."

"Monroe. Yes, I know. I was just leaving, Mrs. Monroe. Please pardon me. Andy, you are a very lucky man to have such good friends surrounding you. I wish you the best."

He spun on his heel and walked briskly past her and out the door, leaving them both to wonder to themselves what had just happened. Moments later another doctor appeared, this one with a wide smile and small, rounded teeth that he either religiously brushed or had whitened recently as they shone as bright as the iridescent lights in the room did.

"Hello, Andy. I'm Doctor Oliver Low," he said, reaching over and shaking his hand. "I trust you know our nurse Mrs. Monroe? It seems

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you two had quite an adventure together!” He laughed, but neither he nor Abigail were laughing. They both knew that the man who just left the room was no doctor. In fact, there was a small part of Andy that questioned whether he would ever be safe again. Andy needed his rest. Indeed, everyone needed some rest.

CHAPTER 36

The sun broke through the clouds, allowing Alex to see the cove clearly. He hadn't slept well since his experiences up in the grove, and he hoped deep down inside that with time, and distance, he might be able to sleep through the night. His nightmares were always the same. The old man's hands reaching out for him, clutching and grabbing with his bony hands. Cooing for him with his scratchy old voice. He feared he would never stop dreaming of the old man who dwelt in that ancient stone house atop the hillside.

As for the incident itself, any reservations his dad or Jennifer might have had about what had happened were quickly brought to light one day by Washington. In the days following the whole incident, Washington had become almost like an uncle to Alex. He took care of him while his parents were recovering from their injuries and had been spending more and more time with the family weekly. He would sit around with Andy for hours and they would tell crazy tales about what

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they used to do back in the Army, or funny stories about how what they would make the new guy in the platoon do to earn the trust and respect of the others. It was always a good time and though Alex would never say so because he loved his father, Washington's stories were always better.

One subject was taboo though, and that was the cove. They only discussed it and what happened there once, as far as he knew anyway, and it was brief. It was the only time he had actually seen his father at a loss for words, and the fear hidden behind his eyes from what Washington had said had him shifting nervously in his seat.

He had been sleeping, or so he lead them to believe, in Jennifer's lap, when the topic of conversation rapidly changed from whether Washington or Andy would have been a better pilot, to what Andy believed occurred that night. He still could remember the quiver of fear in his father's voice as he spoke.

"I'm not entirely sure, Darrell. I know that the damn virus must have been up there causing all the hallucinations and whatnot, but I'll be damned if I can explain how it was able to stay alive for so long in a real world environment. It doesn't make sense to me."

"Andy," he said, leaning in close to him. "You really believe that, don't you? You both do?"

"Well, of course, it's what makes sense, Darrell," Jennifer spoke, her voice a little scratchy because she was tired.

"Makes sense. Sometimes nothing makes sense too. Sometimes everything makes sense, and then sometimes you get shit on for no reason at all."

"What are talking about, Darrell?" Andy interrupted.

"I told you, both of you. They never found your virus. They never found anything up there, Andy. Anything. And that includes the dead bodies of some dozen or more soldiers. You saw them yourself, we both did."

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“Brought on, Darrell, by the toxins in the virus, the same ones that had me thinking I was talking to some old man up there on the hillside.”

Alex tensed up when he heard this part. The same thing happened to him, it couldn't be a coincidence.

“Listen, Andy, I don't want to argue with you on this because we are both far too stubborn to back down to each other, but I do want you to at least listen to me. Will you do that?”

He heard his dad sip loudly on his beer and mumble an agreement to listen.

“Thank you. I told you about what I believe it to be. Not your virus.”

“Yeah, a force of some kind. Some sort of magical power that...”

“...that nearly killed you, me, Jennifer, and your son. And did kill the very people who were coming after us. That isn't the first time the cove has claimed lives, Andy. And it likely won't be the last either, that I can assure you.”

“Fine. Fine, assume there is some force up there protecting the cove, then why did it spare us and kill the others?”

“You really want to know what my guess is?”

“Oh, please enlighten us with your wisdom, Darrell,” he mocked.

“Andy, please,” Jennifer cut in.

“It's okay, Jennifer, I was skeptical for a long time, a very long time. My reasoning is this, Andy. We were familiar to it.”

“Familiar? How?”

“Well, I've lived up in those woods for most of my life, so it knew me. And Alex wandered off and got lost there a few days before all this started happening, and you two both live within its reach. My guess is that it felt comfortable with us.”

“Comfortable with us? I don't know, Darrell, it sounds like science fiction to me. It doesn't make sense.”

THE KEEPER OF THE COVE

“But creating an airborne virus that kills people by making them face their darkest fears does? Andy, it’s all in how we perceive things. I don’t doubt that what you created could have caused those things up there, but I think you can feel it as much as I do that there was something more to it, something stronger.”

He heard his dad sigh and finish off the remainder of his beer.

“I think it sounds crazy, Darrell, but after the war everything’s been a little bit different for us.”

“So by the subject change I take it we agree to disagree then?”

“I’ll drink to that,” Jennifer piped in and they clinked their beer cans together.

“How’s he been doing?” Washington asked suddenly, and Alex could feel all eyes shift onto him.

“He’s just tired that’s all. In fact, it’s way past his bedtime as it is. I’m going to take him up. I’ll see you inside, Andy?”

“Yeah, honey, I’ll be right up.”

The two men stood up and stretched, Washington extinguished a cigarette in his can and walked with Andy over to the driveway.

“Well, I guess we’ll see you tomorrow then?” Andy asked as Washington lit another cigarette and stared off at the fog shrouded hillside.

“Yeah. I’ll be around later. I have a few things I need to take care of early tomorrow, but I should be back in time to help you guys finish packing up.”

“I really wish you would reconsider my offer, Darrell.”

“Believe me, I have, but my home is here with the woods, the air and the cove all around me.”

“The same cove that tried to kill you, right?”

He smiled. “The same one that saved us, yeah.”

“Okay then, old man, I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon. You sure you want to sleep up there again tonight? We do have a few couches

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you could spend the night on.”

“Nah, I can’t sleep inside anymore. I haven’t for years and doing so now would ruin me for life.” He laughed.

“You are a strange man, Darrell, a very strange man, but we love you anyway.”

“Thanks, Andy. I love you guys too.”

He took a drag and exhaled slowly, thoughtfully, still peering up at the hillside where a faint light was shining from somewhere on top. A tiny beacon signaling him to come home.

“Well, I have to go, Andy.”

“Till tomorrow then.”

“Till tomorrow.”

Andy watched him walk down into the cove and back toward the shanty camp he and Tony had spent so many years together in. He guessed Darrell would die up there someday; it was the only way he thought the man might die, if he could die at all. The heavy clouds and misting fog broke for a single moment allowing the moon to shine down through the hole that was made. Andy nearly lost his breath as, for one brief second, he thought he saw a light shining from on top of the hill. The moment passed rapidly though and the light vanished as quickly as it had appeared. He thought for a minute about what Washington had said, about some force out there that had been looking after them, and he smiled. Maybe there was a force out there, right in his own backyard, a presence that had been watching over them all that night. Maybe he was wrong, maybe his virus would never be found up there, maybe there was nothing else up there but “The Keeper of the Cove” as they called it. One thing was certain, you never could tell what depths the mind would go to in order to make the unreal seem real, especially in Oceanview.

EPILOGUE

No one ever mentioned the story again after it happened. The Harrison family moved away from Oceanview, leaving behind them a beautiful house that was quickly purchased by the town and torn down. They watched them pack up their belongings into a moving truck and then disappear down Route 9 heading south, toward California. Someone said that Andy had been offered a job working for a division of NASA that was looking into interstellar bacteria. Science fiction as far as the locals were concerned. You weren't going to find anything as strange in outer space as you would right here in Oceanview.

As the years rolled past, people would still claim to see strange lights or hear strange sounds coming from the cove, but no one paid it much mind any more. The real old timers had been dying off from old age almost weekly now, and when the last one finally went, he claimed the force was gone, that it had gone back to sleep.

Later that same week Darrell Washington's body was discovered

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washed up on the shore of the cove, a tiny key clutched tightly in his hands. Although he appeared to be in perfect health, the autopsy revealed that his heart had ruptured on him, like he had experienced a frightful shock. The Harrisons paid to have his body cremated and his ashes spread over the cove, but they refused to return to Oceanview for the ceremony.

That night more than one person reported seeing a small camp fire burning on the hillside and the sound of two men laughing as the fog rolled in across the cove.

M. J. KONEVICH

M. J. Konevich began his writing career at a young age by scribbling his thoughts into a journal he kept by his bedside after reading the stories of Poe and Lovecraft. Those tiny scraps of dementia eventually led him to begin writing his own short stories, which later developed into his first novels. Today his writing has been featured both on-line and in print, including several short stories and four novel-length books. Additionally, his novel *The Woods Around Carter's Lake* became a finalist for Best Horror Novel in the EPPIE Awards, 2004.

Born in Salem, Massachusetts in the mid-1970s, M. J. found himself in the center of a hotbed of supernatural activity. The town itself is literally crawling with history—from the infamous witch trials of 1692, to the mysterious Cabot House by the waterfront—which planted a seed in M. J.'s mind. Given time, and many, many hours of M. J. reading the masters of horror and the macabre, the seed began to germinate.

After an uneventful college career left him struggling to find his place in the world, he turned back to reading and writing for solace and, in them, he discovered a strange new side to himself. A move to New York City followed soon after, and before long, the rejection letters he had been amassing over the years were replaced with acceptances. A return to his roots in Massachusetts sparked a new novel, and a myriad of new ideas. A new phase of life had truly begun—one which M. J. continues to enjoy.

* * *

***Don't miss The Woods Around Carter's Lake, by M. J. Konevich,
available now from Amber Quill Press, LLC***

Eppie 2004 Finalist—Best Horror Fiction!

Father Randall has enjoyed quiet walks around Carter's Lake for nearly twenty years—blissfully unaware of the turmoil brewing just beneath the lake's cool surface—a turmoil that threatens to engulf him and the town.

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