

The Purple Heart Mystery



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The Purple Heart Mystery

Chapter One

The weather on Sunday morning of Labor Day weekend in 2011 was ideal for the Chakrabarti family to take a bike ride down the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath from their home in Glen Echo, Maryland into Washington, to attend a free noon concert in the Grand Foyer of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The rains from Hurricane Irene had drenched the region the week before, clearing all traces of pollution from the air. The sky was a bright blue color, dotted with only a few small, puffy white clouds.

As the family pedaled past High Island, a long but narrow spit of land in the Potomac River, they could not have imagined the grisly sight they would come upon, just beyond Canal Lock 6 and the boundary line between Maryland and the District of Columbia. Rushing ahead of his parents and little sister, eleven year old Rajit was the first to spot what appeared to be a pile of burnt clothes lying between the towpath and the canal.

"Mommy, daddy, look!" Rajit called out to his parents. "Someone has burned their trash here."

"It smells funny," little Mina said, as she arrived at the still smoldering heap, "like someone was having a barbecue."

By the time the parents caught up with their children, Rajit had already jumped from his bicycle, grabbed a stick lying nearby, and begun to poke the pile of charred debris.

"Look, I found a necklace with metal tags on it," Rajit cried out. Mr. Chakrabarti recognized them immediately as the sort of identification tags issued to members of the military.

"That looks like a skull, mommy," said Mina, pointing to the burnt heap.

"Get away from there now," Mrs. Chakrabarti instructed the children, jumping from her bike.

"There is printing on the tags, mommy," Rajit said, as he inspected the blackened metal rectangles. "Vasquez comma Roberto, and the letters C-P-L," he read aloud.

"Put those down, Rajit," his mother commanded.

Mr. Chakrabarti had already dialed 9-1-1 on his cell phone, to inform the police of the discovery of human remains on the C&O Canal towpath.

"Sir, are the remains in the District of Columbia?" asked the male 9-1-1 operator.

"I don't know," Mr. Chakrabarti replied. "Yes, yes, I think so."

"Then you will have to call the Metropolitan Police Department, sir" the operator stated. "Montgomery County Police cannot respond to an incident in the District of Columbia." And with that, the operator hung up on Mr. Chakrabarti.

Since his mobile phone was registered to his home address in Maryland, Mr. Chakrabarti's call to 9-1-1 had been directed to the Montgomery County police. It took three tries before he finally explained the situation to a County operator and had his call forwarded to the police in Washington, D.C.

By twelve-fifteen that Sunday afternoon, two D.C. Metropolitan Police officers had arrived on the scene along the Canal towpath

and were in the process of taking statements from all four members of the Chakrabarti family.

The responding technician from the Medical Examiner's Office told the police that the charred condition of the victim prevented an immediate finding of cause of death, as well as making a positive identification through fingerprint records. Identification would not be possible through dental records either because the victim had no teeth, although no dentures were found among the remains. The ME would need to run a DNA analysis to try and identify the victim, and the backlog of work at the testing lab would most assuredly delay the police investigation of the case.

By one o'clock that afternoon, the corpse had been placed in a body bag, loaded into the black ME's van, and driven away. Clearly, attending a noon concert at the Kennedy Center was not in the cards for the Chakrabarti family that Sunday. But, on the positive side, when the children went back to school the following week they would both have quite a story to tell their classmates.

The following afternoon, some twenty miles northwest of the gruesome discovery along the C&O Canal, Jacob Michael Flynn and Sean Fitzpatrick were cleaning out the barn behind Holman Hall, just up the road from the home they shared in Germantown.

The men were helping their neighbor, Greta Holman, to prepare the Hall and the surrounding outbuildings for the planned opening of the Holman Hall Farm Museum and Wildlife Center the next spring. Sean was sorting through the farm tools and machinery on the main floor of the barn, while Jake set about cleaning out the hay loft.

"Hey, Sean, I found a box up here," Jake yelled down to Sean. "There's some kind of an award in it...a ribbon with a medal attached. It looks like the profile of George Washington on the medal."

"Is he on a purple background?" Sean asked.

"Yeah," Jake yelled.

"And is the medal in the shape of a heart?" Sean asked.

"Yeah, it is," Jake replied, now climbing down the ladder from the hay loft.

"That's a Purple Heart," said Sean. "They're awarded to members of the military who are wounded in service."

"I wonder who it was awarded to," said Jake, removing the medal from the box and handing it to Sean. "I don't think any of the Holmans served in the military. Maybe it belonged to one of the men they hired to work the farm."

"Let's see. There should be a name engraved on the back," said Sean. "Yes, here it is--Corporal Roberto Vasquez."

"That doesn't sound like any farmhand the Holmans would have hired," said Jake.

"No, it isn't," said Sean. "It's dated 'January 12, 2011'. Whoever Corporal Vasquez is, he was probably wounded in service sometime last year."

"I'm about done for the day, plus I think I'm getting a headache," said Jake.

"Well, let's get you home and pour some coffee in you," said Sean. They had been working in the barn for several hours without a break, and Sean knew a headache was one of the signs that Jake needed an infusion of caffeine.

On their walk home down Holman Road, the two men spotted seventy-two year old Greta Holman working in the vegetable garden the three shared. She was wearing a white peasant blouse and mustard colored ankle-length cotton skirt, with a beige scarf wrapped turban style around her head. Greta was bent over, cutting and bundling bunches of herbs--oregano, thyme, sage, and rosemary--which she would hang from the rafters in her attic to dry for use in cooking over the coming winter months.

Jake stopped walking, putting out a hand to halt Sean, and remarked "With the dried corn stalks in the field out back behind her, Greta looks like one of the peasant women in Millet's oil painting of 'The Gleaners'."

"Yeah, you're right," Sean agreed. "Except this particular peasant woman owns most of the land surrounding our meager homestead."

"She is a real character," said Jake.

"That's the understatement of the year," said Sean, as he started walking again.

"Bonjour, mademoiselle," Jake called out to Greta in French. "Comment vas-tu?"

"Je vais bien," Greta replied, standing straight up, hands on her hips, and arching her back. "Are you boys done cleaning out the barn?"

"Pretty close," said Jake. "I found something interesting in the hay loft. It's a Purple Heart medal that was awarded this year to some fellow in the military named Vasquez. You don't know how that got up there, do you?"

"Roberto Vasquez? Corporal Roberto Vasquez?" Greta asked.

"Yes," Sean replied. "Do you know him?"

"No, I never met the man. But I think I just read about him in this morning's *Washington Post*," Greta said, removing her gardening gloves and walking toward her side porch where she had left the newspaper, after reading it while sipping tea that morning.

"Here's the article, on the front page of the *Metro* section." Greta said, picking up the paper and reading aloud to Jake and Sean.

"Body found on C&O Canal towpath. On Sunday morning, a family bicycling on the towpath alongside the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal discovered the burned remains of a deceased man. Pending the outcome of a formal autopsy, police believe the body to be that

of 28 year old Marine Corps Corporal Roberto Vasquez, based on military identification tags found near the body.

"Vasquez was undergoing inpatient treatment at National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda for wounds he received while stationed in Afghanistan. At the time of his death, he had been visiting with his fiancée, Annette Vanderlind, at her townhome in the unit block of Bluebird Court in Germantown. Vasquez is not survived by any immediate family members and his fiancée could not be reached for comment."

Sean shook his head. "That's terrible," he said, "to have lived through being wounded in Afghanistan only to meet such a horrific end here in the States."

"Greta, do you know where Bluebird Court is?" Jake asked.

"Sure, it's right next door," Greta replied as she walked toward the rear of her house and pointed out over the fields, past the pond near Holman Hall. "It's on the old Bluebird Farm...the Mueller family owned it when we were kids. They sold it in the 1980s and somebody built townhouses on part of the land."

"Oh, I remember the Muellers. They had that really mean dog," Jake said.

"That's right. They owned all that land north of Holman Farm," Greta said, pointing. "You can just make out the townhouses a little over a mile away, through that stand of trees beyond the parking lot in Willow Branch Park."

"How did somebody get to build townhouses on farmland out here in the 1980s?" Jake asked.

"It's a little complicated. Jakey," Greta replied. "When the Muellers were ready to sell, a realtor told them they'd get more money if they divided the farm into twenty-five acre home lots. But the Planning Board convinced a developer to build all the homes as townhouses on just a few acres, and keep the rest of the farm in agricultural use."

"Who lives in the Mueller's farm house now?" Sean asked Greta.

"Oh, I don't know them. They're grass farmers; they bought the place just so they could live in the country," Greta replied. "They tore down most of the outbuildings and rented out the land. Somebody keeps horses on part of it, and the rest is cropland."

"Well, you are a fount of information, Miss Greta," Sean said.

"Why thank you, Mr. Sean," Greta said, curtsying like a Southern belle.

"We should go visit Miss Vanderlind, Sean," Jake said, "to pay our respects, and return her fiancé's medal to her."

"I suppose it's the neighborly thing to do. But right now we're going home, JM, so that you can have a cup of coffee and I can eat something," Sean said. "My stomach's starting to growl and dinner is hours away."

"Thanks for the information, Greta," Jake said.

The two men headed across Greta's yard, past the vegetable garden where she had been bundling herbs, and onto the side porch of their own home.

"After your snack, we better get washed up and change clothes," Jake said, as he entered the house and walked to the kitchen to pour himself a mug of cold coffee. "Miss Vanderlind has enough sorrow in her life without having two old men stinking up her townhouse. And don't cut into the coffee cake. We'll take that with us when we go calling."

"Dang it," Sean exclaimed, following Jake into the kitchen. "Do we have to? I've had my mouth set on a piece of that coffee cake all afternoon."

"I'll make another one this evening, after dinner," Jake said, to appease Sean. "Just grab some cheese and crackers, and then come upstairs and get cleaned up."

"Okay, JM," Sean replied, eyeing the coffee cake longingly. "I'll be up in a minute."

After Jake had added milk and sugar to his mug of cold coffee, and taken several swigs of the brew, he went upstairs to shower and put on clean clothes. By the time Sean finished his snack and went upstairs, Jake had already showered and was standing in front of his computer in the office, wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist.

"What are you doing on the computer, JM?" Sean asked from the hallway, as he disrobed to shower. "I thought we were in a hurry."

"It's a trick I learned from Marni," Jake replied. "I'm going on the Maryland Department of Assessments and Taxation database of county properties, to search the names of the townhouse owners on Bluebird Court."

After Sean removed all of his clothes and dropped them in a heap in the hallway, he entered the office to view the internet search Jake was performing.

"If Vanderlind rents her townhouse then I'll have to try another approach, like checking telephone listings," Jake said.

"Wow, I didn't know you were so internet savvy, JM," Sean said, standing slightly behind Jake and looking over his shoulder at the computer screen.

"One of my many hidden talents," Jake replied. Just then the knot in the towel around Jake's waist loosened, and the towel fell to the floor.

"Look, another of your hidden talents exposed!" Sean said, as he encircled Jake's waist with his arms.

"Whoa, simmer down, stud," Jake said. "No time for fun right now. We've got to get moving if we're going to hike over to Bluebird Court and back before it gets dark."

"Walk!" Sean groaned. "Why don't we take my car?"

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"You're in the country now, city boy. The walk will do you good," Jake said, focusing on the computer screen, "Okay, here we go...14 Bluebird Court, A. Vanderlind, owner. Go on, jump in the shower and get dressed, Sean, we're burning daylight."

Chapter Two

At five-thirty in the afternoon, Jake Flynn and Sean Fitzpatrick set out to hike to the townhouse on Bluebird Court owned by Annette Vanderlind. They walked around the pond at Holman Hall and cut across the fields to the road in Willow Branch Park. When they reached the parking area at the end of the road, the men headed into the adjacent woods along a foot path that led to the nearby cluster of townhouses.

As they made their way through the trees, the throbbing whir of hundreds of cicadas almost deafened the two men. The sweet perfume of flowering clematis vines scented the breeze that blew in from the east. And the approaching clouds of Tropical Storm Lee, heading toward the area from the south, had steadily raised the humidity level throughout the day, belying the fact that crisp autumn days were just weeks away.

By six o'clock the two middle-aged men arrived at the front door of 14 Bluebird Court, a bit winded from their hike but none the worse for wear. Sean knocked on the door, as Jake held the coffee cake in both his hands. There was no answer. Sean knocked again, and again there was no answer.

"It would seem that Miss Vanderlind isn't home from work yet," Jake said.

"I don't know. It's Labor Day; it's a national holiday," Sean said. "Let's check around back. Maybe she's on the back deck and can't hear us."

"Yes, well a lot of people have to work on Labor Day, Mister 'I worked in public schools my whole life'," Jake fired back. "Even though it's a holiday, there are a lot of folks who don't get the day off."

The men walked around the end unit next door to number 14 and down a gentle slope to the rear of the stick of eight townhouses. There was no one on the rear deck of the Vanderlind home.

"That's odd," Sean said. "It looks like the sliding screen door to the living room has been knocked out of the track, and is lying on the deck."

"Let's go back out front and knock again," Jake said.

As the two men again approached the front door of the townhome, a young brown haired woman wearing sunglasses called out to them from the parking lot.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"We're looking for Annette Vanderlind," Sean said.

"We read about her fiancé in the newspaper," Jake said, "and are calling to offer our condolences."

"Who are you?" the woman asked.

"I'm sorry," Jake said. "My name is Jake Flynn and this is my partner, Sean Fitzpatrick. We have a home on Holman Road, across the fields out back of here."

"Wait, I know you," the woman said, finally approaching closer to Jake and Sean. "I've seen you in the news. You're the man who blew up the Planning Board Chairman last spring."

"Well, there was a little more to it than..." Jake stammered. "Yes, that was me."

"How do you know Annette?" the woman asked.

"We don't," Sean offered. "We were cleaning out the barn at Holman Hall today, and found an item that belonged to her fiancé. I'm sorry; we didn't catch your name."

"Excuse me. I am Sandy Becker, Annette's housemate. We both work at the National Institute of Standards and Technology," the young woman replied. "Please, let's go inside."

Sandy Becker unlocked the front door of 14 Bluebird Court, and invited Jake and Sean in.

"I'm sorry the place is such a mess," Sandy said, putting the chain on the door after the three were inside.

It looked like a tornado had whirled through the living room--artwork hung crookedly on the walls, an armchair lay on its side, shades on lamps sat askew, and the throw rug on the floor was bunched in a heap.

"Good heavens," Jake said, still holding the coffee cake in both hands. "What went on in here?"

"Something bad has happened," Sandy said, ushering the men into the dining room. "Please have a seat."

"Oh, we brought a coffee cake. Here," Jake said, placing the cake on the table.

"Well, that's nice. Thank you," Sandy said.

"You were saying something bad has taken place," Sean said. "Can you tell us what occurred?"

"This weekend I went home to Frederick to see my parents, like I do most weekends," Sandy said. "Since today is Labor Day, I took off work on Thursday so I could have a four day weekend. I left for my parents' home on Wednesday evening, to try and beat the rush of holiday traffic on Interstate 270. That's the reason I drove home early this afternoon, but I've been sitting in my car out front too scared to stay inside."

"So, what went on here at the townhouse?" Jake gently questioned.

"I got a text message from Annette on my phone early yesterday morning, while I was still sleeping," Sandy told the men. "She

said someone broke into the house on Friday night. Oh...I don't know if I should be telling you this."

"It's all right, Miss Becker," Sean said. "We'll try and help you all out, if we can. It's okay to tell us. Go on."

"Well, I guess. Annette said, 'Bobbie thinks they were looking for him' or something like that," Sandy said, retrieving her phone from her purse. "Here's the message. 'Someone broke in house. Don't call police. Think they're after B. House should be safe now he's gone. We're in L. Sorry. A.' That's the message. I've texted her twice since then with no reply."

"Don't call police," Jake mumbled to himself aloud. "I wonder why she doesn't want the police to be called."

"So they're both okay," Sean said to Jake. "And that's not the body of Roberto Vasquez that was found on the canal towpath."

"My God, what body?" Sandy asked.

"Right, you probably haven't seen this morning's *Washington Post*," Sean said to Sandy. "There's a story in the paper about a family finding burned remains on the C&O Canal towpath yesterday morning. Police tentatively identified the victim as Corporal Roberto Vasquez because his military id tags were found near the body."

"That's gross. Who would do that? Oh, that gives me the creeps," Sandy said. "And how did they get Bobbie's id tags? Do you think it was the burglar that broke in here? Did he kill that man on the canal? I'm sorry...I have a million questions. Boy, I sure don't feel safe staying here tonight. I should go to a hotel."

"I have a better idea that would save you money, if you're interested," Jake said. "You could pack a few outfits for work, and your pajamas and toiletries, and stay with our sweet elderly neighbor, Greta Holman. Sean and I can try to get this thing sorted out, and you'll probably be back here at home by week's end."

"I don't know...that's a big imposition. Are you sure it would be okay with Ms. Holman?" Sandy asked.

"Trust me, she'll like having the company," Jake said. "Can you cook?"

"Yeah," Sandy said. "I'm a pretty good cook, if I do say so myself."

"Then she will love having you come visit," Jake said. "And you'll like her, too. She's quirky. Nice, but quirky. You'll like her. Now you go and pack, and we'll ride with you to her house."

"And while you're packing, Jake and I will try and get the screen door back on its track," Sean said. "Try not to worry. Everything will turn out just fine."

"Okay," Sandy said. "Thank you. I don't even know you, and you two are being so kind to me."

Sandy Becker ran up the stairs of the townhouse to her bedroom to pack.

"Sweet elderly neighbor, huh? Nice, but quirky. Greta would kill you if she ever heard you talk about her like that," Sean said, opening the sliding glass door in the living room.

"Yep, you're right," Jake said, "so I trust you to keep your mouth shut."

"No problem," Sean replied. "Now get over here and help me get this screen back on its track."

As the frame had not been bent, it was fairly easy for the two men to reseat the door into its track. As they stood the screen in place they noticed that it had a long vertical cut down the middle, as if it had been sliced through with a very sharp object.

"You're six feet tall, right?" Jake asked Sean.

"Yes."

"Okay, say the screen door is locked. The fastest way for the intruder to get into the house would be to use a knife and cut a slit

he could walk through," Jake said to Sean. "Pretend you're making that cut."

Sean went through the motions that Jake was requesting.

"Well, I have to reach up pretty high to start slicing where this slit begins," Sean said, and then walked back into the living room.

"And you wouldn't need an opening that tall to get through," Jake said, joining Sean and closing the screen and sliding glass door behind them

"No, that's right," Sean replied. "So what does that mean?"

"I guess the intruder was a taller man than you," Jake said.

In less than five minutes, the young woman descended the stairs with her suitcase and toiletry case in hand.

"Oh, the screen's back up," Sandy said. "But look, it's been cut."

"That can be repaired later," Jake said. "If you've got everything you need, we should get going."

"Yeah," Sean said quietly, as they all three walked toward the front door. "We get to ride home in a car, like city folks."

"Pansy," Jake shot back.

"Oops," Sean said, making a quick u-turn and heading for the dining room. "Let's not forget the coffee cake."

"Again with the coffee cake," Jake mumbled.

"Well, now we're going to be having company for dinner this evening," Sean said, rejoining the two at the front door. "It's only proper to offer guests dessert."

"Okay, Jeeves, get out the door," Jake said.

Sandy Becker locked the front door of the townhouse at 14 Bluebird Court behind her as she left, and the three piled into her car for the drive to Holman Road.

Jake and Sean prepared dinner for four that Labor Day evening. Sean grilled chicken breasts on the outdoor barbecue while Jake made corn bread and tossed a salad, made of greens and tomatoes

from the garden, with a homemade vinaigrette dressing. Greta had brought a bottle of zinfandel wine from home. And, of course, there was the coffee cake for dessert.

During the meal, Jake asked Sandy questions about the text message she had received Sunday morning from her housemate, Annette, who was now on the lam.

"Why do you suppose Annette thinks the person who broke into the house was after Corporal Vasquez?" Jake asked.

"Apparently there was an incident overseas, when Bobbie was at a base in Japan, being treated for the wounds he got in Afghanistan," said Sandy. "Bobbie only mentioned it once to me. He said he had witnessed something bad taking place, but that he wasn't personally involved. He seemed really upset about whatever had happened, but said he didn't think it would follow him back to the States."

"So now he thinks the person who did 'something bad' in Japan has found out where he lives and has come after him?" Jake asked.

"I guess so," said Sandy.

"In her text message, Annette also said 'We're in L'. Do you know where L is?" Jake asked.

"Lewes, Delaware. 'L' is how Annette refers to her family's estate in Lewes," said Sandy, pronouncing the name of the town like the antonym of the word 'win'. "Her father died when she was in high school and her mother got remarried not long after to a man Annette really dislikes, Sturgis Willburn. Ever since the wedding she jokingly refers to going home for a visit as 'being in L'."

"Do you know the address of the home?" Jake asked.

"Sure. I've visited there with Annette a few times since I started rooming with her here in Germantown. We stayed in the pool house so we wouldn't have to spend time around her stepfather," said Sandy. "I have the address in the directory on my phone."

"Great. I'll need you to write that down for me," said Jake, fetching a piece of note paper and a pencil from next to the phone in the kitchen.

Although a dark cloud hung at the core of the reason the four diners had been brought together, the remainder of the meal was spent in relatively pleasant conversation. By the time coffee and cake was served, Greta and Sandy had gotten comfortable with one another and were prepared to spend the next several days as roomies.

"Sean and I are going to be gone for a few days," Jake announced. "I hope by the time we get back we'll have this all sorted out. I'll give you Sean's cell phone number where you can reach us or leave a message while we're away. Call and let me know if you get any more texts from Annette. Okay, Sandy?"

"Sure," she replied.

At quarter to nine in the evening, with just enough light to see their way across the side yard, the two women walked next door to Greta's home so Sandy could get settled in for the night.

"So, we're going on a road trip, huh?" Sean asked, as he placed the leftover chicken from dinner in a thick, clear plastic sandwich bag and put it in the freezer.

"I think we better go see these kids in Lewes and find out what's going on," said Jake, washing the dirty dishes and serving utensils as Sean brought them from the dining room table to the kitchen sink.

"Remind me again, why aren't we calling the police?" Sean asked.

"First of all, Annette asked they not be called," said Jake. "And secondly, whoever broke into the townhouse on Bluebird Court is almost certainly responsible for the murder of the victim found on the C&O Canal towpath. At the very least, they're responsible for burning a dead body and placing Corporal Vasquez' military id next to it."

"Yes. And wouldn't you think the police would want to know that?" Sean asked.

"I'm sure they would," said Jake, "but the culprit knows Annette and her boyfriend have gone to ground, and I think he's staged Vasquez' death to draw them out of hiding."

"Boy, that is devious, JM," said Sean. "Are you sure we should get involved in this? What are we going to be able to do?"

"I don't have a good plan yet. For now, I think we should go to Lewes and see these two young people who are in trouble," said Jake. "If nothing else, we can reunite the Corporal with his Purple Heart medal and ask how it came to be in the barn at Holman Farm."

"I can guess how that happened," said Sean. "After Vasquez beat off the attacker who broke in, Annette and he struck out on foot across the fields...probably the reverse of the route we took to go to the townhouse today. After staying overnight at the barn on Friday, they walked back to the townhouse parking lot to get a car and head to Lewes on Saturday morning."

"And why did Vasquez have his Purple Heart with him?" Jake asked Sean.

"Military men carry everything in their duffel bag. They never go anywhere without it" said Sean. "I learned that from my time in the army during 'Nam. Vasquez would not have left the townhouse on Friday night without it."

"And the medal slipped out of his bag while he was in the barn," said Jake.

"Right," said Sean.

"You see, Sherlock, you're good at figuring things out, too," said Jake. "Between us, we two old guys have one pretty good brain."

Before Jake and Sean retired to bed, they listened to the weather report on the radio in the kitchen. The remnants of Hurricane Lee,

now downgraded to tropical storm status, were moving up the Appalachian Mountains from the south. The storm was dumping torrential rains as it meandered, and leaving terrible flooding in its wake.

"All right, partner," said Sean, "what's our next move?"

"We better go pack. We need to leave for Lewes early in the morning if we want to get out of town before these tropical rains start," said Jake. "We'll need casual clothes for at least a couple of days. And pack your boardshorts. I'm not going down the ocean without getting in the water."

"Aye, aye, cap'n," said Sean. "Do you have any idea where we're going to stay?"

"I have contacts in Rehoboth Beach," said Jake. "I know where we can stay."

"Do you want to tell me about these contacts?" Sean asked.

"They're just some friends I know," said Jake. "I think you'll like them."

Chapter Three

At six-thirty on Tuesday morning, Jake and Sean set off for Rehoboth Beach in Sean's eight year old Volvo sedan. Dark bands of threatening storm clouds swept over the Washington region as the men traveled down I-270 and around the Beltway.

Traffic was surprising light for the morning after a three-day holiday weekend, and by seven-fifteen Sean was exiting the Beltway onto Route 50 east toward Annapolis. At this rate, Jake calculated that they would cross the Chesapeake Bay Bridge onto the Delmarva Peninsula by eight. But as the Volvo crossed the bridge over South River near the U.S. Naval Academy, Jake spotted the first heavy rain band moving its way up the Bay, spun off from Tropical Storm Lee which had stalled over the central Appalachian Mountains far to the west.

The skies noticeably darkened as Sean brought the Volvo to a stop at the foot of the Bay Bridge to pay the tollbooth operator the four dollar fee. Then the heavens opened and rain teemed down as he drove the car onto the southern of the twin spans that arced side-by-side across the wide saltwater estuary, high enough for the oceangoing vessels heading to and from the Port of Baltimore to pass beneath. Even with the headlights and wipers on, Sean had difficulty seeing the striped line that separated the two lanes of the eastbound bridge.

"Stay in the right lane," Jake directed. "I'll stick my head out of the window and keep my eye on the curb to let you know if you're getting too close or far away from it."

Sean kept driving at twenty-five to thirty miles an hour, afraid to go much slower for fear they would be rear-ended by another vehicle. Jake removed his seat belt and leaned out of the opened passenger window, occasionally directing Sean to steer a bit to the left to follow the gentle curve of the bridge as it rises toward the central span.

"I can see the trestle section in the middle of the bridge," Sean said. "I can steer by that."

Jake pulled his head back into the car and refastened his seat belt. His head and the top of his shirt were drenched with rainwater. He reached back and retrieved the roll of paper towels Sean kept on the floor behind the passenger seat, tearing off four sheets to try and dry his hair and wick away some of the water from his soaking wet shirt.

"Now, when you're on the trestle there's a metal grating running down the middle of the right lane," Jake said in a calming voice. "You'll hear it if you wander toward the other lane and ride onto it. I'll keep watching to make sure you're not too close to the curb."

Jake noticed Sean was sitting bolt upright, squinting to focus intently on the road ahead and gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles were white.

"Relax, babe, you're doing great," Jake said. He reached over and gave Sean a reassuring pat on the thigh.

The rain eased up and skies brightened a bit as the Volvo exited the trestle portion of the four-and-one-half mile long bridge. The windshield wipers could now cope with the rain sufficiently for Sean to see the lane markers. And the vehicle began the prolonged descent down the eastern side of the bridge toward Kent Island.

"Now it's a straight shot from here to the shore," Jake said.

"Wow, that was pretty scary," Sean said, the tension beginning to leave his body.

At the eastern terminus of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge there is a stormwater treatment pond the size of a football field, to filter road oil and pollutants from the rainwater that runs off the dual spans before it percolates back into the bay. As they drove past it, Sean and Jake noticed a pair of white swans paddling in unison on the choppy water of the pond.

"They mate for life, you know," Sean said.

"Don't go all mushy on me, big guy," Jake chuckled.

"I'm just saying...there are some things in life that are easier to get through with a partner," Sean said. "I don't know if I could have driven that bridge alone."

"Well, right now, partner, I need you to step on the gas and get me to the restroom at the Burger King up ahead," said Jake. "I have to piss so bad my eyeballs are yellow."

"Okay, way to break the mood," Sean replied. "Burger King it is."

After both men had used the facilities at the fast food franchise, they ordered coffees and sat sipping them in a booth.

"My family always went to Ocean City when we vacationed at the shore," Sean said. "You should take over the driving since I don't know the route to Rehoboth. Plus, I wouldn't mind taking a break after 'white-knuckling' it across the Bay Bridge."

"Deal," said Jake.

"See, there are some things that are easier with a partner."

"Yeah, sure, easy breezy," Jake sarcastically replied. "We still have to figure out what we're going to do when we meet up with Annette Vanderlind and her fiancé."

"All right, let's put a cap on the coffees so we can take them with us and get back underway," said Sean. "I'm dying to get there and meet these contacts you know in Rehoboth."

The pair set off in the Volvo once again, this time with Sean in the passenger seat. The adrenalin that coursed through his body as

he'd driven across the Bay Bridge had now dissipated, leaving him exhausted. He fell asleep almost before they crossed the Kent Narrows Bridge onto the mainland of the Delmarva Peninsula. Jake continued on Route 50 past the Chesapeake Pottery Factory outlet mall, and then turned east on Route 404 continuing into Delaware, to Route 18 and Interstate 9.

Sean awoke as they finally approached Route 1, the road that parallels the shore of the Delaware Bay from Milford to Rehoboth Beach, and then turns south to the state line and the Maryland beach resort of Ocean City beyond.

"Welcome back, sleepy head," Jake said. "Feeling better?"

"Little bit," Sean said groggily, taking a swig of cold coffee he'd brought from Burger King. "Where are we?"

"We're on Interstate 9 coming up to Route 1. If we continued straight, this road would take us right into Lewes," Jake said. "But we're going to turn south on 1, which will take us to Rehoboth."

"All right, now we're getting to the good part," said Sean, as Jake steered the Volvo onto Route 1. "You want to tell me where are we going to be staying, JM?"

"We're almost there," Jake stalled, "you'll see."

A little over three miles down the road Jake made a right turn off of Route 1 onto Seagull Lane. He drove the Volvo past several dozen single family homes to the entrance of the Seabreeze Mobile Home Park at the end of the road.

Once inside the subdivision, Jake made a right turn onto Sandpiper Lane and steered past a small wooden building that housed the management office and a small hall for social gatherings. Beside the office was a fenced in area with a fair-sized in-ground swimming pool for the use of the Park's residents and guests. He continued down Sandpiper Lane then turned left onto Osprey Lane, finally pulling into the driveway of a single-wide

where the road came to a dead end near the north shore of Rehoboth Bay.

"Now do you want to tell me whose house this is?" Sean queried.

"It's mine," Jake said, unbuckling his seat belt and hopping out of the car.

A middle-aged African American man in work clothes emerged from behind a house across the street and called out to Jake.

"Mr. Blue, good to see you," he said. "What's for dessert?"

"Hey, Delvin," Jake replied to the man who was now walking toward him and Sean. "I don't even know what's for dinner, let alone dessert. Sean, this is Delvin. He's the maintenance man here at Seabreeze, the go-to guy if you need anything fixed. Delvin, I'd like you to meet Sean, my partner. We'll be here for a few days."

"Oh, you're here on business, huh? Well, I hope you have a successful trip. Now I better get to gettin'," Delvin said, "Maisy Dashiell's hot water heater is on the blink. I'm gonna try and get it workin' good for her. Nice to meet you, Mr. Sean. Any friend of Mr. Blue's is a friend of mine."

"You're a good guy, Delvin. Take care," Sean shouted to him.

Delvin walked back across the street, got in the golf cart he used to travel around the mobile home park, and exited Osprey Lane.

"Why did he call you Mr. Blue?" Sean asked Jake.

"I kind of go incognito when I'm down here," Jake said.

"And we're business partners, huh?" Sean said.

"Well, Delvin doesn't need to know the true nature of our relationship," Jake said. "In fact, he'd probably rather not know."

"Okay," Sean said, hesitantly.

"Let's get in the house and get cleaned up," Jake said. "There's somebody in town I want you to meet."

"Oh, good, more surprises," Sean said sarcastically.

Once inside, Sean explored the small two-bedroom mobile home while Jake did a cursory inspection to make sure the sink and

shower faucets, stove, and refrigerator were still in good working condition.

"I rent out this place by the week during the summer," Jake explained to Sean. "I have a great rental agency that looks after the property, but you never know what surprises these tourists can leave behind."

"Uh huh, so you have a vacation home I knew nothing about," Sean said. "By the way, why did Delvin ask you what was for dessert? Is that code for something?"

"No, no. We had a conversation years ago about which foods we like," Jake said. "I told Delvin that I didn't think a dinner was complete unless I had dessert. Ever since then he has asked me 'what's for dessert' every time he sees me."

"Quaint," Sean replied. "Somehow I don't feel like I know you at all. It's like I'm meeting a stranger. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me, Mr. Blue?"

"Not right now. Get cleaned up, if you want. I want to try and drive to town while we're between rain squalls," Jake said. "I opened the owner's closet in the hallway. There are washcloths, soap and deodorant, if you want to wash your pits. I think you've got a little stress sweat going on, from driving across the Bay Bridge in the storm."

"Yeah, something smells a little funny about you, too," Sean said.

Chapter Four

Just before noon, Jake backed the Volvo into a parking space in front of a strip of shops on Baltimore Street in Rehoboth Beach.

"Prints of Whales art gallery? That name is a little kitschy even for a tourist town," Sean said.

"Don't judge. That's where we're going," Jake said, getting out of the car and dashing through the rain toward the door to the shop.

The two men entered the small storefront gallery accompanied by the clanging from a string of brass bells tacked to the front door.

"Donnie?" Jake called out.

"Oh, shit," Sean thought to himself. "This is where I meet the other man in Jake's life."

"Donnie, are you here?" Jake called.

Sean held his breath as an elderly woman, who looked to be in her early seventies, descended the banistered stairway located along the side wall of the shop.

The woman was dressed in a calf-length peasant skirt with brightly colored vertical panels, a well-fitting sleeveless beige linen blouse, and a full head of jet black hair that was kept in neat curls and the same color by a weekly perm and dye touch up at a nearby salon. A set of miniature brass bells that hung around her neck tinkled as she walked.

"It's my little Beau Blue the artist," she said, giving Jake a hug.

"Donnie, this is Sean, my life partner," Jake said. "Sean, I'd like you to meet the owner of Prints of Whales, the Contessa Donatella Maletti."

"Oh," Sean said in relief, letting the utterance escape his lips.

"Ah, so you are the secreting partner I've heard so much about," Donnie said.

"I think you mean 'secret'," Sean said.

"Don't bother," Jake leaned in to whisper. "English is not her strong suit."

"Let me look at you," Donnie said, softly touching Sean's face then pinching his cheek between her thumb and forefinger. "My, aren't you a tall glass of water!"

"You mean 'drink of...'," Sean started to say, but Jake shook his head and stopped him mid-sentence.

"This calls for vino, the fruit of the gods," Donnie said, clapping her hands together like cymbals. "Come!"

With that, she whirled about in her black cloth slippers and headed back up the stairs, followed by her two visitors.

The upstairs space was laid out like a studio apartment, with a living room area overlooking the street out front, a dining table with four chairs in the middle, and a kitchen area with sink, stove and refrigerator spanning the back wall next to the bathroom.

From a small window over the sink one could see down onto the flagstone patio of a courtyard behind the gallery, which was filled with flowers and herbs in large terra cotta pots, and a wrought iron table and chairs painted white.

"Is there a Mister Maletti?" Sean inquired of Donnie.

"Who, Flavio the mobster...the idiot!" she practically spat out the words. "He's wearing the free shoes."

"Do you mean 'cement shoes'?" Sean asked. "Did the mob kill him?"

"No. He's in the penitentiary in New Jersey, where they give them the free shoes," she said. "I took him his nice loafers, but they wouldn't let him keep them."

Sean looked at Jake for help in understanding, but got only a shrug in reply.

"I married Flavio Sabotini in 1960 in the little Sicilian town where we grew up. We came to America the next year to live in Brooklyn. You had a Catholic President so we thought how bad could it be?" she continued, as she opened a bottle of Chianti and poured the wine into three small juice glasses. "Then the bum joins the mob so I kicked him in the curb...threw him out. And without me to help him manage, he gets arrested doing a hit in Hackensack and they throw him in jail for forty years to life."

"How did you end up running an art gallery in Rehoboth?" Sean asked her, as she joined the men in the living room area.

"Sit. Take your feet off," she commanded, passing out the wine and kicking off her shoes. "Here's to our lives."

The three clinked glasses and sipped the pink colored spirits.

"When the idiot goes to prison I sell everything we own, I change my name, and I drive south to escape the mob," Donnie explained. "I like the beach here. It reminds me of Sicily--not here in town with the boardwalk, but south where the houses are next to the beach. So I stay and open a gallery. I call myself 'Contessa' so the rich people think I'm royalty and pay the high prices for the art."

"Back in the '60s and early '70s this place used to be a gay bar called The Renegade," Jake said.

Jake thought he better jump in to hurry along the explanation of how Donnie and he were connected.

"I came to Rehoboth in 1968, the year I graduated high school, and got involved with one of the regulars, a biker and painter who knew the bar's owner. He introduced me to Donnie, who was then running the Seaside Gallery on the next street over."

"Ah, Dirk, Dirk...too sad," Donnie remarked. "He was so talented. He painted the mural on that wall."

A six by twelve foot mural was centered on the wall opposite the stairwell. It was a rendering of the now-altered facade of The Renegade, peopled with the images of two dozen or so regulars who had frequented the bar. Most were rough looking men with mustaches or beards and dressed in black leather outfits, or vests with denim jeans, and heavy biker boots. Several figures were accompanied by phrases in caption balloons, like the characters in a newspaper comic strip.

The clanking of bells emanating from downstairs signaled that Donnie had a customer, so she excused herself and went to work. Sean stood to examine the mural more closely.

"What were you doing in Rehoboth for the summer as a high school graduate?" Sean asked Jake. "You were...what, eighteen years old?"

"I got a job as a busboy at the Dinner Bell restaurant in town," Jake said. "A lot of kids come to the beach on their own for the summer, and work jobs to earn money for college."

"So, you've known Donnie for more than forty years," Sean said.

"Yeah. When this was The Renegade, the owner used this upstairs area to host gatherings of a more intimate, personal nature after closing time," Jake said, standing to join Sean in examining the painted figures. "That's the bar owner. And there's Donnie."

Sure enough, off on the left side of the mural was the image of Donatella Maletti in her early thirties. Sean thought that she had been a strikingly beautiful woman in her prime.

"Which one is Dirk?" Sean asked Jake.

"That's him. Dirk Collier," Jake said, pointing to a figure wearing an open vest over his hairy muscled chest, with a head of long wavy brown hair, coal black eyes, and a thick mustache that drooped past the sides of his mouth to his square jaw line.

"Wow, he was a hunk," Sean said. "What happened to him?"

"He was killed in a motorcycle accident on the coast road in 1974."

"The same year your dad died."

"Yeah. He crashed into a truck making a turn in front of him," Jake replied, flatly. "When I came back to Rehoboth the following summer, I found out he had died and left me his house."

"Oh, that's where the mobile home came from," Sean said.

"Yeah."

"You must have been an important person in Dirk's life. Why didn't you stay with him after high school?"

"When I met him, I thought he was everything I wanted to be. He was a real, masculine man who happened to be gay...and he wasn't hiding it...he was an artist, which is what I wanted to be...and he was attracted to me...invited me to move in with him," Jake said, stutteringly. "As a kid just out of school, I thought I had died and gone to heaven."

Jake had known from earliest childhood that he was more interested in other boys than in girls. By the time he entered high school following puberty, Jake was attracted to rugged men who had a sensitive, vulnerable streak, like the movie characters played by actors Gary Cooper or William Holden. By the time he graduated high school, Jake had admitted to himself that his parent's, society's, and even his own prior expectation that he would marry a woman and sire a family would, in all likelihood, never be realized.

"What stopped you two from making a go of it?" Sean asked.

"God...I...I guess I was looking for an equal partner, you know, in everything," Jake slowly replied. "And Dirk was looking for someone to support him...urge him on in his work, keep the house running and be subservient to him...in everything. "

It was obvious to Sean that reliving these memories was painful to Jake, so he decided to cut the conversation short. Then he noticed the face on a figure in a corner of the mural that looked like a young Jake.

"Is that you?" Sean asked, pointing to the image of a young man dressed as Queen Victoria, in the lacy black head covering and mourning clothes she wore following the death of her beloved Albert. Above the figure was a caption balloon that read 'We are not a muse.'

"Oh, man. Dirk painted that after we'd had a huge fight near the end of the summer," Jake explained. "I told him I was leaving to go to college on the west coast. And he told me I couldn't go, that I was his inspiration, his muse, and he would be lost as a painter without me. I told him that I was going to be an artist in my own right, and then I screamed 'I am not a muse'."

"So this is how Dirk portrayed you," Sean said, studying the caricature of young Jake Flynn, "as a diminutive Queen Victoria spouting a send-up of her famous line 'We are not amused'."

"Yeah, that Dirk...he was a funny guy. Ha ha," Jake said, with more than a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"It looks as if he was a pretty good artist," Sean said.

"Oh, yeah. As Donnie said, 'too sad...he was so talented'," Jake said, hoping to bring this conversation to a close, at least for the time being. "Say, where is our hostess? Let's go downstairs. I'll show you my corner of the gallery."

Sean followed Jake downstairs to the front section of the gallery that was visible through the shop's plate glass window, over which hung a sign announcing 'WHALE PRINTS by Beau Blue'. Jake explained to Sean that Donnie and he had concocted a scheme for him to come to Rehoboth each spring and produce one new painting depicting a location somewhere in or near the resort town.

He had been at it now for three and half decades, producing a total of thirty-five unique works of art.

The original designs were always done in acrylic paints on canvas, with each containing the image of at least one whale somewhere in it. In one a crowd of sunbathers on the beach pointed to a pod of pilot whales skimming in and out of the waves offshore. In another the sign for a bar called 'The Blue Whale' could be seen behind a group of tourists walking down the boardwalk, attired in brightly colored vacation garb. A third print showed the bleached white jawbone of a large whale hanging above the diners in one of the resort town's seafood restaurants. And in the lower right corner of each print appeared the number of the year it was produced and the signature of the artist.

Jake and Donnie then had a local silkscreen company produce matted prints in two sizes, 5 by 7 inches and 10 by 14, and also had them print up several gross of tee shirts with the design emblazoned on the front. In about the tenth year of the series, Donnie enlarged the annual inventory of Beau Blue merchandise to include coffee mugs with the year's whale print on them.

Two books were displayed on a small table in the front area of the gallery. *Religious Iconography of Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages*, by Jacob Michael Flynn was a photographic study he had compiled while traveling abroad after graduating from college. Jake still received royalties from the book, as it remained a popular coffee table book and was also used as a text book for art appreciation classes in several colleges and universities across the country.

The other book on display was entitled *35 Years of Whale Prints: 1975 through 2009*, by Beau Blue. In the spring of last year, when Jake was preoccupied with caring for his dying mother, Donnie had eased his mind by telling him to forget creating a new design

that year. Instead, she compiled all of the whale prints Jake had done to that point and published them as a special anniversary edition book, which was snapped up by regular and first-time customers alike. And during the 2010 summer season Donnie also cleared out most of the old inventory, selling prints, tee shirts and mugs left over from previous years.

"Thank you a lot for coming. Stop by again soon," Donnie called out to her customers as they opened and exited through the front door, accompanied by the clanking of the string of bells.

"Good sale, Donnie?" Jake asked.

"Eh, one small print," she replied. "The tourists start out the summer with so much hope...and cash. But by Labor Day they're all pinching their money."

Donnie clapped her hands together like cymbals again.

"So, you will stay for lunch with an old lady?" she asked. "I have left-behind lasagna from a hurricane party we had at the gallery yesterday, plus salad and good bread. And we haven't begun to drink that bottle of Chianti."

"That sounds wonderful," Sean said. "I'm starved."

"Good," Donnie replied, locking the front door of the gallery and turning the sign to read 'closed' to passersby. "Ah...the rain has let up, so let's go upstairs and get the food and eat *al fresco* in the garden."

Within ten minutes Jake and Sean were ensconced in wrought iron chairs on the patio courtyard behind the gallery and enjoying a bountiful spread of Italian food arrayed on the table before them, most prepared by their hostess.

The rewarmed lasagna, with its layers of cheese and thick, rich meat sauce alternated between velvety soft homemade noodles, shared the table with the abundant remains of a garden salad Donnie had assembled for the party the previous evening. There

was also a plate of paper thin slices of prosciutto, jars of ripe olives and pickled peppers, freshly made mozzarella balls packed in olive oil and basil leaves, and a fabulous loaf of bread from an Italian bakery in Dewey Beach that Donnie frequented.

"We wonder if you can help us out with some information, Donnie. Do know of a family in Lewes named Vanderlind?" Jake questioned Donnie as they ate. "The father died some years ago and the mother got remarried, to a man named Sturgis Willburn."

"Yes, Mrs. Vanderlind, she has rolling dough," Donnie said.

"Rolling in dough?" Sean asked Jake in a whisper.

Jake nodded yes.

"She was big on the social scenery until her first husband died," Donnie continued. "I think she bought one of your paintings, Jake. Which one? Ah, it's the old timer's disease. I think it was *Dunes in Cape Henlopen State Park*...yes, you paint it in 2003."

"Well, at least she has good taste," Jake chuckled.

"In art, maybe. In men, not so good," Donnie said. "Her first husband slept around her, and the second one...well, for a banker he's a cheap bastard."

"Did you ever meet the daughter, Annette Vanderlind?" Sean asked Donnie.

"Such a nice girl, and so smart," she said. "Too bad she moved away and left her mother alone with that stingy husband."

"You don't seem to care much for Mr. Willburn," Sean said.

"Each time they come to the gallery, he convinces her not to buy," Donnie said, "and she leaves unhappy."

"Well, we should probably help you clean up this spread and get going," Jake said, as the meal and the conversation wound down. "If we eat or drink any more I'll have to stay here and take a nap."

"You're welcome to, my beautiful Beau Blue," Donnie said, beaming at Jake. "You two must come back while you're in town. We'll have a party to introduce Sean. It will be good for sales."

The Purple Heart Mystery

"Let's not mix business with pleasure," Jake said, standing with Sean and gathering dishes to carry back to the tiny kitchen above the gallery.

"At least I give you some cannoli to take with you, for your dessert tonight. Have a cup of coffee while I pack them," Donnie insisted, knowing Jake would not pass up the offer of cup of coffee. Rain began to fall again as the trio cleared the table.

The counterfeit Contessa packed up four of the tubular confections while Jake downed a cup of her strong Italian roast coffee, and they all said their goodbyes. Then the two men returned to Sean's Volvo parked on Baltimore Street and drove west out of Rehoboth, up Route One toward Seagull Lane.

Chapter Five

In the car on the way back to Seabreeze Mobile Home Park, Sean drove along in stony silence. Jake knew that there were only three usual reasons that Sean grew quiet while traveling in the car: he needed to focus on driving, he was hungry, or he was angry. Jake could see that traffic on Route One was light, and there was no need for Sean to unduly concentrate on his driving. The two men had just eaten a large Italian meal served them by Donatella Maletti, so Jake knew Sean was not hungry. Jake reasoned that Sean must be angry.

"Donnie's a sweet woman, don't you think?" Jake asked him. "I'm glad you got to meet her."

"I just want to get something straight," Sean said, firmly. "You're the guy who was ready to call it quits on our twelve year relationship last year when you learned I had a bartender bowling buddy I hadn't told you about. But you have a whole second life under a fake name, and a secret home here in Rehoboth Beach that I'm just finding out about, and that's supposed to be okay?"

"Oh, boy," was Jake's worried reply.

The two rode the rest of the way in silence. The heavy rain squall that buffeted the area had passed off to the north and the skies had brightened temporarily.

Once back at the mobile home, Sean decided that he needed to cool off before saying anything more about the day's revelations. He opted to go for a swim, hoping the exercise might rid his body of some of the anger he was feeling and help him sort his thoughts.

He changed into his floral print board shorts and black rubber Reef sandals, and retrieved one of the beach towels he had spotted in the owner's storage closet that morning.

"I'm going to the pool by the office for a swim," Sean called out to Jake, who was putting sheets on the double bed in the bigger of the two bedrooms in the mobile home.

"You need to register on the clipboard on the table just inside the pool area. Sign in using the house address--24 Osprey Lane," Jake instructed.

While Sean was off swimming laps at the community pool, Jake pulled the 'kitchen box' from his owner's closet and unpacked the salt and pepper shakers and sugar bowl for the dining table, and the ever-important French press coffee maker, along with the sponges, dishwashing liquid, tea towels and food staples he kept stashed--flour, baking powder, vegetable oil, vinegar, and the like--so that he did not have to restock the kitchen each time he stayed in his mobile home.

After perhaps a half an hour, Jake heard the sound of the water being turned on in the outdoor shower. Sean had returned from the pool and was washing the chlorine off his body, and rinsing out his bathing trunks and hanging them on the outside line to dry. Minutes later the front door opened and Sean entered the house, with the beach towel wrapped around his torso.

"Did you have a good swim?" Jake inquired.

"Yes."

"Whatcha got on under that beach towel, big boy?" Jake asked.

"Don't get cute," Sean said. "I did some thinking while I was swimming. We came down to the beach for a reason. I think we need to get on with seeing what kind of trouble these two young people are in, and whether or not we can help them. Once we've finished what we came for there will be plenty of time for us to

sort out our relationship. And trust me when I say that it will take plenty of time. We'll have the whole ride back to Germantown to talk this out."

"Oh, good," Jake said, "something to look forward to."

"Look, right now I'm not finding anything funny about this whole fucking affair," Sean said. "So knock off the humor. Okay?"

"Sure," Jake said. Sean did not swear often, and his use of a curse word indicated the gravity of the situation.

"Now I'm going to get changed and then we'll head up the coast to meet with Miss Vanderlind and her companion," Sean said. "You just make sure you've got the directions to the house that Miss Becker gave us."

"Will do, boss," Jake replied, saluting Sean.

"Again, don't get cute," Sean said.

"Okay," Jake said, apologetically. "Sorry."

Within five minutes the two men were once again seated in the Volvo sedan, with Sean driving west on Route One toward the town of Lewes. With directions from Jake, he steered the car north down King's Highway to Savannah Road, and then west onto Front Street until it turned into Pilottown Road. Sean turned off onto the service road that ran in front of a row of homes on the south side of Pilottown Road, and parked several yards down the road from the sidewalk of the residence with the house number noted in Sandy Becker's directions.

The home was a Dutch colonial that had stood on the site for more than three hundred years. Sitting atop the ridge line of the roof was an open-air widow's walk--a platform surrounded by a white wooden railing, designed as a perch from which a sailor's wife could watch and wait for her husband's ship to return from voyages at sea.

"Why didn't you park in the driveway of the house?" Jake asked.

"Miss Vanderlind and Corporal Vasquez may or may not still have someone pursuing them," Sean reasoned. "If so, let's not make it easy for that person to identify us and our vehicle, too."

"Smart," Jake said, exiting the Volvo. "Paranoid but smart."

"Let's hope I'm being overly cautious," Sean said.

The two men walked across the yard and to the front door of the home and knocked. There was no answer. Just as Jake stepped off the porch to look through one of the front windows, a Latino man in work clothes appeared on the driveway that ran alongside the house.

"May I help you?" he said.

"We're here to see Miss Vanderlind," Jake said.

"Is she expecting you?" the Latino man asked.

"Yes," Jake replied.

"What are your names?"

"I am Mr. Flynn and this is Mr. Fitzpatrick," Jake said. "And you are...?"

"I am taking you to Miss Vanderlind. Follow me," the Latino man said, exiting up the driveway toward the back of the house.

The man led Jake and Sean up the driveway and through the gate of a six-foot tall stockade fence that enclosed much of the back yard, down the center of which was a large in-ground swimming pool surrounded by a wide concrete apron on all sides. The Latino man walked up the apron alongside the pool toward a one-story structure at the opposite end.

"Wait here," he said. He then entered the structure.

He returned shortly and walked past Jake and Sean toward the gate they had just entered, saying "She's coming."

An attractive blond woman in her late twenties stepped from the structure and approached the two waiting men.

"Hello, I'm Annette Vanderlind. You must be my neighbors from Germantown," Annette said. "Sandy texted me you were coming."

"Yes, I am Jake Flynn," Jake said to her. "And this is my partner Sean Fitzpatrick."

"You've already met Enrique, my mother's gardener. My boyfriend, Roberto, and I are staying here in the pool house," Annette said. "Please join us."

"Thank you," Jake said, following the young woman into the building.

"Oh, wow," Sean exclaimed, upon entering the structure, "this is beautiful."

The pool house was an exquisitely decorated, full functioning one-bedroom bungalow, built by Annette's father and mother in happier times. It provided overnight guests a greater level of privacy than if they stayed with the family in the main house.

"Mr. Flynn, Mr. Fitzpatrick, this is Corporal Roberto Vasquez," Annette said, introducing her fiancé, a muscular Latino of perhaps five feet ten inches in height, wearing camouflage pants, military issue black boots and a crisp white vee neck tee shirt. "Bobbie, these are our Germantown neighbors."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sirs," Bobbie said, standing and walking forward to shake hands with both of the guests.

Jake noticed that the young Marine had an odd gait when he walked, as if he was rotating his hips to swing his right leg forward rather than lifting the foot and placing it ahead for each step. Whatever the problem, it looked to Jake as if he was working hard to hide it.

"We're not in the military here," Sean said. "Please, call me Sean. And my partner's name is Jake."

"Will do," Bobbie said. "And you call me Bobbie."

"Please, have a seat," Annette said, gesturing to the sofa upholstered in a pastel peach and seafoam green bamboo print

fabric typical of the decorating style currently in vogue for beach homes. She and Bobbie seated themselves in similarly upholstered armchairs which flanked the sofa.

The seating was arranged around a circular, open fireplace that stood on a heavy concrete pedestal two feet high. The three hundred and sixty degree fire screen surrounding the burning pit was topped with a shiny black hood and flue pipe that carried the smoke up through the roof of the pool house. The sofa also faced a wall of floor to ceiling windows beyond the fireplace, which provided a view of the pool and rear of the main house from the living room of the pool house.

A round, walnut dining table and four chairs sat off to one side of the living room. Beyond the dining area was a galley kitchen, visible through a six foot wide pass-through complete with a counter for snacking, in front of which stood four stools topped with black leather cushions.

A pair of large colorful Turkish kilim rugs carpeted the living space. On the opposite side of the living room was a hallway that led to the bedroom and bath. A washer and dryer, water heater, and a small furnace were contained in a utility room, beyond a closed door toward the rear of that side of the living room.

The level of luxury provided in the pool house indicated to Jake that the Vanderlind family possessed financial wealth the likes of which he and Sean had never known. If this was how they treated their guests, he could hardly imagine what grand amenities the main house had to offer.

"Well, where to begin, Annette?" Jake began. "I understand there was a break-in at your townhome in Germantown last Friday evening. And you two managed to scare off the intruder. Then, in an abundance of caution, you and Bobbie left home, fearing the intruder might come back. So you spent the night in the loft of the

barn at Holman Hall, just up the road from the home that Sean and I share. And we got involved after discovering your Purple Heart medal, Bobbie, which must have dropped out of your duffel bag as you were leaving the barn the next morning."

"I didn't even know I'd lost it," Bobbie said. "That's great. Do you have it with you?"

"No, we didn't bring it with us," Jake said. "It's safe back home in Germantown. So, how am I doing recapping the events so far?"

"That's the gist of it," Annette said. "We went back to the townhouse parking lot the next morning to get my car and drive here. When we arrived here on Saturday I could barely eat, I was so scared. We slept most of that day and then I texted my housemate, Sandy, the next morning to tell her what had happened. I've been worried about her; afraid the attacker might return and hurt her."

"Sandy is safe," Jake said. "She is staying with a friend and neighbor of ours, Greta. The barn in which you hid belonged to her grandparents. She grew up on Holman Farm."

"Oh, good," Annette said. "That makes me feel a little better."

"Now about this attack...exactly what happened?" Jake asked.

"Well, Bobbie and I were sitting in the living room, watching a movie," Annette began.

"And I had gotten up to microwave some popcorn," Bobbie continued. "Then I heard a noise like a really long zipper being unzipped, and Annette starting screaming. I ran into the living room and saw this guy grabbing Annette and I fought him off until he busted out the screen door as he ran out."

"So Annette is the first person he encounters, and he attacks her first. Now, Miss Becker said that you believe it might be a fellow you met in the military, Bobbie," Sean said. "Why do you think they might want to harm you?"

"It's personal, sir," Bobbie said, stumbling over his words. "I haven't even told Annette about everything that happened."

"Come on, Bobbie," Annette countered. "We're engaged to be married. I've told you that if I find out you're keeping any secrets from me, it's a deal breaker."

"Well, honesty is always desirable in a long term relationship," Sean said, glaring at Jake when he said it. "And, Bobbie, whatever took place overseas might now be placing you both in danger."

"I don't know," Bobbie said. "I want to tell you, but I made a promise to some fellow Marines. 'Semper fi'...you know? 'Always faithful.' I don't know, man. I need to think."

And with that, Bobbie stood and walked out the guest house door, and strode down the length of the concrete apron beside the pool.

"Sean, you were in the service. You might understand this bond between buddies that Bobbie's wrestling with," Jake said. "Why don't you go talk to him. I'll stay here with Annette. She can show me where the bathroom is, and then maybe we can get some drinks for us all."

"Yes, okay," Sean replied, rising and exiting the guest house to try and help the conflicted Marine Corporal sort out his dilemma.

Chapter Six

Annette rose from the upholstered armchair in which she had been ensconced and stood, watching Sean walk the length of the concrete pool deck to talk with her troubled fiancé. The two began a conversation and then walked over and sat down on two nearby deck chairs, where the talk continued.

"How long have you known Corporal Vasquez?" Jake asked Annette.

"We met just over a year ago, at a government task force meeting in Crystal City, Virginia. That's near the Pentagon, which is where Bobbie was stationed at the time," she replied.

"So, you share a work-related interest?" Jake asked.

"I really can't discuss the details of the group's work," Annette replied, "for security reasons."

"Of course," Jake replied.

"I can tell you that my division at the National Institute of Standards and Technology was called in to consult on a military hardware problem," Annette continued. "Bobbie was one of the Pentagon reps. We were attracted to each other right away, and started spending our breaks and meal times with each other during the four days that the task force met. He was shipped out to Afghanistan fairly soon after the conclusion of our meetings, but we kept in touch with each other by email almost every day...until he was injured."

"That must have been difficult for you," Jake consoled her, "being so far away from him."

"I was distraught," Annette said, her voice trailing off in remembrance of that painful period.

"Speaking of panic," Jake said, breaking the mood, "I really do need you to show me where the bathroom is. Old person's bladder...you'll understand, one day."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've been a poor host," Annette said, ushering Jake toward the hallway that led back to the guest house's bedroom and adjacent bath.

"Perfectly understandable."

"Let me get you a guest towel," Annette said, retrieving a hand towel from the linen closet in the hallway and handing it to Jake.

"Thank you," Jake said. "Do you have any loose tea or tea bags in the kitchen?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Why don't you go put some water on to boil, and we'll make iced tea," Jake said.

"I'm sorry. I never even offered you anything to drink," Annette said. "We also have some beers that Bobbie bought. And I'm drinking ice water. So you have a choice."

"Sweet tea would be great," Jake said, entering the bathroom. "I'll be out in a jiffy."

After Jake had answered the call of nature, he left the bathroom to join Annette in the kitchen, but paused to inspect the dozens of framed photographs that hung on the wall of the hallway.

"This is quite a collection of photos," Jake called out to Annette.

"We call that the guest wall," she responded from the kitchen. "Those are pictures of most of the people who have ever stayed in this guest house."

Jake's eyes were caught by a picture of Annette taken perhaps eight or ten years ago. She was sitting on the side of the pool next to a man noticeably older than she, both in swim suits with their

legs dangling in the water. In the background, an older woman reclined on a chaise lounge, wearing sunglasses and a wide brim straw hat with a fabric band of a color that matched her swimsuit.

"Is this you in your swim suit, in one of them?" Jake asked.

"Yes," Annette replied. "I was in high school when that was taken."

"And who is the man next to you?" Jake inquired, staring at the balding, pale skinned forty year old man seated next to Annette.

"That is Sturgis Willburn, my mother's second husband."

"And the woman lounging behind you," Jake asked, "is that your mother?"

"Yes," she said. "She and Mr. Willburn had just begun dating that summer."

"That's a nicely coordinated outfit she has on," Jake said.

He noticed that Willburn's hand was placed on Annette's thigh. Jake thought the action rather inappropriate for a man who was dating the young lady's mother. But he said nothing, and went to join Annette in the kitchen.

"Where are your mother and Mr. Willburn now?" Jake asked.

"They cruised north along the coast this summer," Annette said, wrapping the strings of six tea bags around the handle of the pitcher in which she'd chosen to make iced tea. "They were supposed to have returned today. But Ronnie, their captain, thought the offshore waves were too big to risk making the run for home port, so they've dropped anchor in a sheltered cove along the New Jersey coast. I called mother early this morning to tell her that Bobbie and I are here. I expect them to arrive tomorrow."

"I'm assuming your mother and Mr. Willburn are on a boat," Jake said.

"Yes, I'm sorry," Annette said. "Our family has had a boat for most of my life. Since we own a motorized vessel, a 'stink pot' as

the sailing purists call them, we were discouraged from keeping her at the Lewes Yacht Club."

"Well, I'm sure there are many others in Lewes who are similarly shunned for owning powerboats," Jake said.

"Yes, but it's a matter of significant annoyance to mother that she is prevented from attending Yacht Club social functions, except as a guest," Annette said. "Still, mother loves her current boat, the Dutch Treat."

"The two of them took off for the entire summer on a boat, with their captain on board," Jake wondered aloud. "It must get a little crowded."

"Oh, no," Annette said, pouring the water, which had now boiled, over the tea bags in the pitcher. "The boat has two staterooms, each with its own head. There is a good sized salon with adjacent galley and dining area. When the weather is nice, one can lounge on the aft deck. And if one goes stir crazy on inclement days, you can join the captain at the helm on the enclosed flybridge."

"So, they've got a luxury yacht," Jake stated more than inquired.

"Not really," Annette said. "It's nothing like the behemoths moored at Brazilian Dock in Palm Beach, near where they tie up when they go south for the winter. Some of those are like floating hotels, with ten or twelve cabins and onboard swimming pools."

"Well, I'd love to meet your mother and her husband," Jake said.

"Perhaps we can all get together for dinner tomorrow, in the main house," Annette said.

"That would be wonderful," Jake said, "but check with your mother when she returns to see if it's all right, then call and let us know."

"Of course, I will. But right now I'm worried about Bobbie," Annette said, walking from the kitchen to one of the large living room windows overlooking the pool area. "He's explained to me

how he was injured, in Afghanistan. But he's kept secret the incident that happened during his medical treatment which has him so upset."

"Sean's a retired school teacher and principal," Jake said, "so he's pretty good at helping young people sort through their problems."

"I hope so," Annette said.

At that moment, a small cloud passing overhead released a steady, persistent light rain that caused the two men talking on the pool deck to run for shelter in the guest house. Jake could see Enrique, with tools in hand, run up the driveway into the garage to keep dry during the shower.

Chapter Seven

"Sean, why don't you come get some iced tea?" Jake asked.

"Sure," Sean replied, walking to the kitchen and leaving the young Marine Corporal to begin the needed conversation with his fiancée.

"I see now that I need to tell you what happened when I was on Okinawa," Bobbie began.

"I'm glad you have decided to share it. You know that there isn't anything we can't deal with together," Annette replied, embracing and kissing him.

"Ah, the optimism of young love," Jake thought to himself, wondering whether the secrets he had shared with Sean today might have caused more strain than their relationship could bear.

"Well, you know, I was pretty torn up...physically and emotionally, after the incident in Afghanistan," Bobbie said, as the couple moved to the sofa and sat, side by side.

"I know, sweetie," Annette said. "I know."

The two kissed again, sharing another embrace. By now, Sean and Jake had poured themselves glasses of iced tea and walked into the living room area of the guest house.

"All right, you love birds, break it up," Jake said, sitting in one of the armchairs flanking the sofa, leaving Sean to take the one on the other side of the sofa. "Annette has told me that you two met early last year while working on a military task force. As I understand it, shortly after that you were sent to Afghanistan, Bobbie. Why don't you start by telling me how you got wounded?"

"Well, without going into too much detail, in August of last year I was sent to hold informal talks with some of the Afghan tribal leaders, to discuss the issue on which the task force had met," Bobbie said. "The day that I was injured I was attending a secret meeting in a private home in Anbar Province, on the outskirts of the town of Rimadi, accompanied by four fellow Marines who knew the locals. Unfortunately, CIA intelligence analysts weren't aware of our meeting, and they had tracked Al Qaida operatives to a location near ours. They ordered a drone strike that took out the Al Qaida target and also severely damaged the home where we were meeting."

"God, what an incredible lack of coordination," Sean remarked.

"It happens in war," Bobbie said. "The right hand doesn't know what the left is doing."

"But you could have been killed, the victim of collateral damage."

"Yeah. The explosion blew out the windows and leveled two walls of the home. I was hit by some metal shrapnel," Bobbie said. "One small piece was imbedded in my skull, behind my right ear, another sliced through the muscles on the outside of my right leg below the buttock, and one tore a pretty good hole in the left side of my torso. I was knocked out by the hit to the head, and the next thing I knew I was being triaged in a field medical unit. After that I was flown out of Kandahar to an aircraft carrier in the Indian Ocean, and then on to Futenma Marine Air Station on Okinawa for further surgery and initial rehabilitation."

"After a few weeks the Pentagon was anxious to get me back to debrief me on my mission in Afghanistan, and arranged to transfer me back to the Naval Medical Hospital in Bethesda to continue my rehab," Bobbie continued. "I had made friends with a couple guys while I was at Futenma...one was a supply clerk and the other was a physical therapist. They convinced me that I should visit one of

the local girls before I came home, to...how do I put this politely? To make sure everything was in still in good working order."

"Oh, Bobbie! You went to a prostitute?" Annette asked.

"No, I didn't. I couldn't," Bobbie replied. "The day before I was to leave, the three of us got passes and rented a hotel room in Ginowan. We went out to dinner and drank some sake, and on the way back to the room my two buds bought a bottle of bourbon and picked up a girl working the street near the hotel. When we got to the room, I told them I'd changed my mind. It hit me how cheap and dirty the whole thing was. All I wanted was to be back home with you."

Bobbie grasped Annette's hand and squeezed.

"Thank goodness," she said.

"So I left the hotel and found a theater close by where I went in and saw the latest Transformers film. Afterwards I really didn't want to go back to the room. I just wanted to head back to base, but I had to go back to retrieve my gear. When I entered the room, the two guys were standing in their skivvies slapping the face of this naked Japanese girl and yelling "wake up, bitch, wake up". She must have passed out from the booze."

"Oh, man," Jake groaned.

"They asked me to help them. But I told them I didn't want to get involved. I was just going to grab my gear and go," Bobbie continued. "Then one of them got in my face, yelling that I'd better keep my mouth shut. I told them that I wouldn't say anything. He said, 'you'd better not, 'cause if you get us busted, we will hunt you down and take you out.' I told them I had their backs, that I hadn't seen anything...Marines gotta stick together, you know? Then I got my stuff and left, and I went back to base to wait until my flight left the next evening."

"So what happened?" Jake asked. "Why do you think these guys are after you now?"

"My flight hopscotched home," Bobbie replied. "By the time we got to Oahu, the 'Stars and Stripes,' our military newspaper, had reported the incident. A Japanese girl had been found dead on Okinawa near the Marine Air Station, and the Military Police had been called in to help with the local police investigation. By the time I landed in San Diego, the MPs were waiting to interview me about where I'd gone on leave the day before I left Futenma. I told them I'd gone to dinner with some buddies and left them to catch a movie by myself, and then headed back to base afterwards. I didn't lie to them, you understand; I just didn't tell them the whole truth."

"An Irish white lie," Jake said. "I'm familiar with them."

"Anyway, by the time I got back to Bethesda and had settled in at Navy Med, the 'Stars and Stripes' was reporting that MPs from the Air Station had located the two Marines who'd last been seen with the dead girl, and had grabbed the investigation away from the local police to be dealt with by the military."

"The Japanese authorities must hate that," Sean said.

"It's one of the main reasons for them wanting to get the facility off of Okinawa," Bobbie said. "A lot of those Marines are just a bundle of hate and hormones, and they take it out on the locals. It upsets me 'cause I wasn't raised that way. I was taught to respect."

"So, what happened to these two Marines?" Jake asked.

"JAG tried them for the girl's murder, but found insufficient evidence to convict," Bobbie said. "Then they were dishonorably discharged for 'conduct unbecoming'."

"And you think these guys believe it was you who ratted them out?" Jake asked.

"Yeah, I think they might."

"And one of them has come after you?" Jake asked.

"Right. That's what I'm guessing."

"Okay, I need to take a break," Jake said. "Too much iced tea. Sean, you want to join me? I'll show you where the bathroom is."

"Right," Sean replied, rising to join Jake on his way to the hallway. As the two men left the living room, Bobbie and Annette were leaned in close to one another on the sofa, deep in whispered conversation.

The rain that sent Bobbie and Sean running into the guest house had stopped for now, and the rays of the nearly setting sun flickered through the dark clouds that roiled across the western sky, casting shifting runways of golden light across the pool and yard.

Chapter Eight

When Jake and Sean returned to the guest house living room they were newly focused, having caucused regarding their next move while in the bathroom.

"All right, let's assess where we are," Jake said to Annette and Bobbie, crossing the room to retake his seat in the armchair next to the sofa. "First, let me fill you in on what you don't know. The morning after the break-in at your townhouse, a man's badly burned corpse was discovered along the C&O Canal with your id tags next to it, Bobbie."

"The attacker ripped them off my neck during the fight," Bobbie said.

"Oh, that's terrible," Annette said. "I wonder who the poor man was."

"Well, we guess that your assailant murdered and torched this guy's body, and left it in a place it was sure to be found along with your id, in order to draw you out of hiding," Sean said.

"Your attacker is smart," Jake continued. "He must have found some homeless guy with dentures for his victim, and then removed them from the guy before he burned the body. That makes it harder for police because they can't use dental records to verify the victim's identity."

"He's not smart," Bobbie said. "Those two guys on Okinawa were around me for weeks while I was in the hospital. They knew that I wear dentures."

"A man your age?" Sean queried. "Why is that?"

"I was raised in the barrio by a single mother with four kids," Bobbie replied. "Dental care was not high on our list of priorities. When I signed up, the Marines sent me to a dentist who fit me with a nice pair of choppers."

"Well, it's going to be a while before the DC Medical Examiner gets the results of the DNA testing and they find out that the body found by the Canal is not you. But, obviously, you two are going to have to return home at some point and contact the police to clear up the confusion," Jake said. "In the meantime, I guess you want to stick around here until your mother and stepfather get home tomorrow. Right, Annette?"

"We do have some important matters to talk over with them," Annette said.

"Annette and I are going to get married," Bobbie said.

"And I've told Mr. Willburn that we need to discuss the matter of my trust fund," Annette added.

"What's that about?" Jake asked.

"When my father passed away eight years ago, mother and I discovered he had set up a trust fund for me in his will," Annette explained. "I receive annual payments equal to the amount of child support my mother had been receiving from him while he lived. My father set it up so that I get access to the entire fund either when I turn thirty years of age or get married."

"Crafty father," Sean said.

"Yes," Annette continued. "Even though his relationship with my mother had soured over time, he made sure that I would be well taken care of following his death. When my mother married Mr. Willburn, who is a Vice President of First Delaware Trust bank, he took over as custodian of my trust fund."

"So, you need to discuss wedding plans with your family, and getting access to the fund," Jake said.

"That's right," Annette said. "Bobbie and I will be able to use the money to pay off the mortgage on my townhouse. And then we can decide on our next move, free and clear from any financial encumbrance."

"It sounds like you have a lot to sort through, when your mother and Sturgis get home," Jake said. "Are you sure you want Sean and me to come to dinner tomorrow evening?"

"Of course," Annette said. "I want to introduce you to my mother."

"Okay, then let us give you Sean's cell phone number," Jake said, "and you can call us tomorrow after your folks return, and confirm that we're still on for dinner. Meantime, I think we two are going to hit the road back to my place and grab some dinner. I'm starting to get hungry."

"Oh, I'm a terrible hostess," Annette said. "Please stay and dine with us."

"Annette and I went to the market this morning and got some steamed, spiced shrimp and tossed salad," Bobbie said. "It would be great if you could stay."

"Thank you, but no," Sean said. "I'm sure you didn't get enough to feed four, and we don't want to intrude."

"Don't be silly. You two have come all this way to try and help us," Annette said. "Let us feed you; it's the least we can do. We'll stretch the food...I'll run into the main house and get some rice, and maybe some beans. There will be plenty of food for a good meal."

"Well, if it's not a bother," Jake said, "that sounds great."

"It's no bother at all, Mr. Flynn...uh, Jake," Annette said. "Why don't you accompany me to the main kitchen and we'll see what we can find in mother's pantry."

"Sounds like a plan. Are you two boys going to be okay here on your own?" Jake asked Sean and Bobbie.

"Sure, we'll grab some beers and set the table," Sean said. "Right, Bobbie?"

"You bet," Bobbie chimed in.

"Sounds like a good plan," Jake said.

Annette and Jake rose and exited the guest house door, and walked up the concrete apron past the pool and in the kitchen door at the rear of the main house.

"Do you mind if I take a tour of the first floor while you look through the cupboards?" Jake asked.

"No," Annette replied, "go right ahead."

The first floor of the house Annette had grown up in had twelve foot high ceilings, with matte white walls topped by crown moldings. Jake walked through the swinging kitchen door into the formal dining room. Its two large-pane eight-over-eight windows, which faced north toward Pilottown Road and the canal beyond, flooded the room with light. He could tell that the furnishings, though sparse, were of the finest quality.

An eight foot long mahogany dining table was surrounded by six matching chairs with upholstered seat cushions, and another two chairs flanked the matching sideboard set against one wall of the room. A small mahogany buffet was positioned against the opposite wall. It had glass front doors through which crystal stemware could be seen: water goblets, wine glasses, brandy snifters, and champagne flutes. Jake imagined that this served as a wine station and liquor bar for Mrs. Vanderlind's dinner parties.

Jake walked from the dining room into the large center hall, with its wide banistered stairway that led to the upstairs. The living room was situated on the opposite side of the reception hall from the dining area and, like the dining room, had a matching pair of large eight-over-eight windows facing north toward the canal.

A grand piano with gleaming ebony finish filled the front area of the living room. In mid-room, an elegant, carved back Victorian sofa upholstered with expensive yet conservative print fabric, flanked by two high back armchairs with matching upholstery, faced a large colonial fireplace that was topped by a long wooden mantel shelf and surround with a glossy white enamel finish. The plush eight-by-twelve foot Persian carpet that covered the center of the wide-plank oak floor had an intricate colored design that echoed the hues in the upholstered furniture.

Another less formal seating area at the rear of the room faced a wall mounted flat screen television, the tableau framed by the french doors that led to the pool beyond. And there, over the fireplace mantel, hung Jake's painting *Dunes in Henlopen State Park*, which Annette's mother had purchased in 2003 from the Prints of Whales Gallery in Rehoboth run by Donatella Maletti. He felt a strange sense of pride at seeing his artwork displayed in such an exquisitely furnished home.

Jake then completed his circular tour of the first floor by walking through the doorway at the rear of the living room which led to a combined breakfast nook and office area situated at the rear center of the home, adjacent to the kitchen. Jake paused to peruse a gallery of framed photographs that hung over the desk in the office area.

"Your home is beautiful," Jake called out to Annette, who was still rummaging around in the kitchen.

"Thank you," Annette said, "but it's no longer my home. My mother added the informal seating area and some new artwork in the living room after my father died, in an attempt to soften the starkness of the Vanderlind legacy. Most of the furnishings have been in the family for generations. Mother and Sturgis Willburn's money are entirely responsible for any of the more modern decor. But, thank you anyway."

During her response, Jake had been shocked at who he saw in one of the framed photos in the office.

"Is this Vice President Biden in this picture?" he asked.

"Yes, but he was a U.S. Senator from Delaware at the time," she replied. "That was taken at a benefit event held for a charity that Mr. Willburn helped found."

"So that's your mother and Sturgis seated with Senator Biden?" Jake asked.

"Yes, that's right," Annette said, joining Jake in the office area.

"And who are the four men standing behind them?" Jake asked.

"The charity is called New Path," she said. "It provides drug and employment counseling, and transitional housing to assist the formerly incarcerated in beginning new lives. Those four men were the first to complete the program and find steady employment on the outside."

"Isn't that Enrique, your mother's gardener," Jake queried.

"Yes, that's right," Annette said. "The blond one is Ronnie, the man my mother and Sturgis have hired to captain their boat. I don't know the two African American men. I believe the taller one is named Otis. And the other went back to prison for committing an armed robbery in the parking lot of Dover Downs racetrack."

"Sturgis must be pleased at the level of support the program seems to have gotten," Jake said.

"Well, government officials and politicians love to associate themselves with any program they think will help reduce the recidivism rate," Annette said, seemingly unimpressed by her mother's hobnobbing with the now-Vice President of the United States.

"I don't see any pictures of your father," Jake said, "your birth father, I mean. What did he do for a living?"

"Father was a top research chemist with DuPont," Annette said. "It was he who inspired my interest in science. Mother would have preferred me to marry young and join in her social activities. She has served on the Board of the Rehoboth Art League for years, coordinating the Annual Cottage Art Tour."

"You mentioned that his relationship with your mother had soured near the end," Jake said.

"Yes, years before he died he decided it was too far to commute from our home to his job every day," Annette said. "So he rented a small apartment in Wilmington where he stayed weeknights. At the start he always came home on weekends, to spend time with us. Then he began missing some weekends and even holidays, opting to stay in Wilmington. When he died quite suddenly of a heart attack some eight years ago, mother and I went to Wilmington to clean out his things and discovered that he had shared his apartment with a mistress for years."

"I don't mean to open old wounds," Jake said.

"That's fine," Annette said. "I still have fond memories of my father from my childhood. But my mother's memories of him are slightly tainted, as you can imagine. At any rate, that is the reason there are no photos of him on display."

"Well, what have you found in the kitchen?" Jake asked, changing the subject. "We'd better get back out to the guest house. The boys will wonder what we've been up to."

"I found some instant rice. It's less nutritious than brown rice, but will take less time to prepare," Annette said. "And we have canned black beans to top it with, for a complete protein."

"That plus the shrimp and salad sound like a great meal. Shall we?" Jake said, gesturing with his arm toward the back door of the kitchen.

The sun had now set below a horizon mottled with black clouds, and gray tones of dusk had begun to settle on the backyard pool area. Rice and beans in hand, Annette preceded Jake walking up the right side of the pool, on the landscaped side of the backyard, opposite the driveway. Halfway up the length of the pool, the dark figure of a man rushed at Annette from the bushes, grabbing her upper right arm with his left hand and brandishing a knife in his right. As he raised the blade to strike, Jake snapped to attention and realized he must act.

In an instant, Jake jumped forward and grabbed the attacker's upraised hand, using it to spin him around Annette and push him backwards into the water. At the same time, Annette screamed and dropped the box of rice and canned beans. Jake took hold of her and together they rushed toward the door of the guest house, while the attacker sloshed across the pool to the far side, hauled himself out of the water, and ran out the wooden gate onto the driveway.

Annette's fiancé was the first out the guest house door.

"What's the matter?" Bobbie asked, rushing to Annette. "Are you okay?"

"Who was that?" Sean asked, following after Bobbie. "Should we run after them?"

"No, Sean," Jake said, "he's got a knife."

"Are you okay, JM?" Sean asked Jake.

"Yeah."

"My God, you saved my life," Annette said to Jake. "That was the same man who broke into our townhouse...same height, same black clothes, with a black ski mask hiding his face."

"How did he know where we were? He must have followed you two here from Germantown," Bobbie said accusatorily to Jake and Sean.

"Now hold on. We don't know that. We don't know anything," Jake said. "Maybe he followed you two here."

"Could we please go inside?" Annette asked. "I need to sit down."

"Sure, honey, I'm sorry," Bobbie said, putting an arm around Annette and leading her to the sofa in the guest house living room.

Jake and Sean stayed outside by the pool to talk.

"Shit. However he's done it, their attacker knows that Bobbie and Annette are staying here at her family home in Lewes," Jake said.

"Don't you think the police should be called now?" Sean asked. "They can keep an eye on the house, in case this guy returns."

"Oh, God," Jake said, still shaken, "I guess you're right."

"You guess? We cannot handle this on our own anymore, JM," Sean said. "We need to call in the police before someone gets seriously hurt."

Jake nodded in agreement, and headed in the pool house entrance.

"We think this has gone too far," Jake said, entering the living room with Sean. "The police have got to be called."

"Hold on," Bobbie said. "What do we tell them? We think some ex-Marine buddy of mine is after me because I know he killed a prostitute in a hotel in Futenma, and he thinks I reported him? I know I didn't squeal, but if that gets back to the Marines I'd be drummed out of the Corps for having obstructed the investigation."

"Oh, geez, that's right. Well, I still think the police need to be called. At least they would patrol the house tonight, in case he returns," Jake said, thinking fast on his feet. "But we don't need to tell them the entire story. We'll say there was an attempted break-in during which Annette was assaulted but managed to escape unharmed. And the intruder ran off."

"I don't want to be around for that," Bobbie said. "Anytime military personnel on leave are involved in an incident, the civilian

force is required to inform the military police. I would prefer to be left out of this, for now."

"Then why don't you drive Bobbie to the mobile home, Sean, and get some more info on these two Marines he knew on Okinawa?" Jake said. "Maybe he can pin down which one he thinks has come after him...get a name, home address, maybe even what kind of car he might be driving."

"How am I supposed to do that?" Sean asked.

"I don't know," Jake said. "You're the computer savvy one. Can't you do an internet search?"

"Sure, no problem, I'll just download the list of psychopathic ex-Marines from the internet," Sean said sarcastically.

"Look...just see what you can do," Jake said. "Annette and I will stay here and file a report with the police. And then after they've left, you can come back and join us. Okay, Annette?"

"There's no way that I would feel safe spending another night alone here," Annette said, "even with a trained Marine sleeping next to me."

"Well, I guess you two could come spend the night in my mobile home. It's not as nice as this place, but it's got two bedrooms," Jake said. "You'll be safe there, and you can come back here after your mother and stepfather get home tomorrow."

"What do you think, Bobbie?" Annette asked. "I think I would feel better staying with them."

"It makes sense," he replied. "I mean, we're sure the attacker knows about this place, but he may not know where Jake and Sean are staying."

"All right, that's settled. Now we need to call the police. Why don't you and Sean head over to Seabreeze in his car," Jake said to Bobbie, "while Annette and I deal with the police. We'll drive over in her car and join you later."

"That sounds okay to me," Bobbie replied.

"Good. Grab your duffel bag, and let's head out," Sean said.

"Will do."

"Let me give you the house key, Sean. And why don't you take the shrimp and salad with you, and pick up the beans and rice Annette dropped by the pool on your way out," Jake said. "You two can start dinner while you're waiting for us to arrive."

"Okay dokey," Sean said, taking the key from Jake and heading to the kitchen of the guest house to retrieve the food from the refrigerator.

"Are you sure you're going to be all right, Annette?" Bobbie asked, returning from the bedroom with his gear.

"I'll be fine, Bobbie. We'll be fine," she said. "Jake's already shown that he's capable of protecting me."

"Then we're off," Sean said. And the two men left the guest house, walked the length of the pool deck, picking up the rice and beans on the way, and exited the wood gate to the driveway.

"So we'll tell the police that I'm a neighbor of yours from Germantown who has a vacation home nearby, and I stopped by to visit with you today," Jake said, joining Annette on the sofa to plan what they would say to the police.

Then he noticed Sean and Bobbie re-entering the backyard through the wooden gate, and heading back into the guest house.

"What's the matter, guys?" Jake asked.

"We've got bad news. I'm sorry to have to tell you, Annette, but we just found Enrique's body in the front yard," Bobbie said. "He must have heard you scream and tried to stop the attacker, and been stabbed to death."

"Oh, no," Annette moaned. "That's terrible. Oh, he's such a sweet man."

"Oh, God, are you sure he's dead?" Jake asked.

The Purple Heart Mystery

"Yeah, I checked but there's no pulse," Bobbie said.

"Okay...let's rethink," Jake said. "Well, this doesn't change anything. You two should still head over to Seabreeze, and Annette and I will tell the police that we were the ones who found Enrique."

"Okay," Sean and Bobbie said simultaneously, before exiting the guest house once again on their way to Sean's car.

Chapter Nine

"Wow, sweet," Bobbie said admiringly, as Sean and he drove into the driveway of Jake's house at the Seabreeze Mobile Home Park.

"How long have you two owned this place?"

Sean wanted to say "since this morning," which was the time that he found out about its existence.

"Jake has owned it since the mid-seventies," Sean said, instead. "He inherited it from a friend who passed away."

"It must be nice, owning a home and a vacation place," Bobbie said, walking up the four steps to the front door of the home.

"Yeah, I'll bet it is," Sean thought to himself.

Walking behind Bobbie, Sean observed that the young Marine only stepped up using his left leg. The damaged muscles in his right thigh rendered him incapable of raising his right foot to the six inch height of each step.

Inside, Sean placed the shrimp and green salad in the refrigerator, and then guessed at which of the cupboards might contain a pan in which to begin heating the beans on the stove. He didn't want to fumble at finding things and have to explain to Bobbie that he'd never been there before today. As the kitchen was tiny and had only one set of below-counter cabinets, he succeeded on his first try at locating a sauce pan and lid. He met similar success in finding a can opener in the drawer nearest the kitchen sink.

"While we wait for Annette and Jake to get here, why don't you and I do a little research into these two Marines you think might be out to get you," Sean said to Bobbie, who had taken a quick tour of

the entire house and then seated himself in one of the booth seats flanking the dinette table.

"Sure."

"I'll grab my laptop computer, after I get these beans on the stove to warm," Sean said.

"Sean, can I ask you something?" Bobbie queried.

"Sure."

"It's kind of personal, though," Bobbie said.

"Okay. Shoot," Sean said, as he located a spoon from another kitchen drawer, with which to stir the beans.

"You guys are gay, aren't you?" Bobbie asked.

"Yes, we are a couple," Sean said.

"I kind of figured that out since there are only sheets on one bed."

Smart military analysis, Sean thought. The man had already done reconnaissance on the place and figured out Jake's and his relationship from the bed linen.

"So, how does that work? I mean, since you're both guys," Bobbie asked.

"How does what work?" Sean asked Bobbie, sure that he was steering the conversation toward the topic of the pair's sexual proclivities. It was a fair discussion, Sean thought, considering Bobbie and his fiancée would be sharing a small two-bedroom mobile home with possibly the first gay couple he had ever met.

"You know, who decides who does what?" Bobbie asked.

"You mean, who pitches and who catches in bed?" Sean asked.

"Oh, jeez, no," Bobbie quickly blurted. "I mean does one of you work while the other one stays home and takes care of the house?"

"I see. No, we're both sort of semi-retired, at the moment," Sean said. "Jake was an artist, and I was a teacher and school principal for decades."

"Then how do you decide who does what chores?" Bobbie asked.

"Jake likes to cook, so I usually clean up after meals," Sean said, retrieving his laptop from the bedroom. "And I like doing laundry, so he trades off by dusting and vacuuming the house. Then there are some things we do together, like grocery shopping, maintaining our vehicles, and yard work."

"Annette and I are still figuring out a lot of that stuff," Bobbie said, his voice trailing off temporarily. "And, well, since you brought it up, which one of you is the husband and which is...I mean, you both seem so masculine."

Here it was: the talk. Sean felt oddly like he was back counseling a student in school, although this particular topic would have been deemed taboo by Montgomery County school officials.

"Well, there are some gay couples in which one partner plays a more feminine role than the other. But Jake and I are both men who like other manly men. And we're lucky enough to have found each other to love," Sean explained. "We are what is referred to as 'versatile'. We both enjoy engaging in a variety of sexual activities with the other. The French have a term for it which, loosely translated, means 'able to go by steam or by sail'."

"Wow," Bobbie said. "That must be confusing."

Sean thought he might have gone too far in his explanation.

"It's not confusing," Sean said, thoughtfully. "We just have to keep communicating, talking with one another. I mean, with you and Annette, aren't there nights when you want to be a tiger and take an active role, and other times that you want to just lay back and let her go wild. How do you decide? You talk about it, right?"

"We're still figuring a lot of that out, too," Bobbie said.

"Of course you are. And with luck you'll have a lifetime of fun, working on it together," Sean said. "But let me assure you that while you and Annette are staying with us, Jake and I will not be engaging in any nighttime gymnastics, if you catch my meaning."

"That's cool," Bobbie said. "I'm cool. Whatever."

Sean did not want to explain to the young man that it might be some time before he again felt amorously enough toward Jake to engage in physical intimacy, given the blow up they'd had that day.

"Now, why don't you tell me the names of those two Marines you knew on Okinawa," Sean said. "I've got an Army buddy I served with in Viet Nam who now heads a division of the Military Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. I'm going to email him and see if he can't give us some info on where they might have gone after they were drummed out of the service."

"Oh, man, we should have brought those brewskis with us," Bobbie said, referring to the beers he and Sean had opened back at the pool house.

"I'm sure there's a good bottle of wine here that we can have with dinner," Sean said. "We just have to wait until Jake gets here. He's got the key to the owner's closet."

Back at the house on Pilottown Road, a Lieutenant Andrew Stern of the Lewes Police Department had responded to the emergency call and was filling out a report on the attack by the pool and Enrique's murder. And an ambulance crew had arrived to remove the body of the hapless gardener from the front yard of the residence.

Lieutenant Stern was a man in his early forties, with a slim, wiry frame that made it look as if his uniform was too big for him. His narrow, wrinkled face was topped by a wide brim police hat which also looked too big for him. All in all, Jake thought, the officer looked like a child who had dressed up as a cop to go trick-or-treating on Halloween.

"So now that I've got a description of the intruder from you, Miss Vanderlind, you say you own a townhouse in Germantown. Why are you here in Lewes, staying in the pool house at your parent's home?" Lieutenant Stern questioned Annette as she sat beside Jake on the sofa in the living room of the pool house.

As he tossed out questions, the policeman wandered about the guest house, noting the various drinking glasses and beer bottles placed around the living area.

"My mother and stepfather are returning from their summer cruise tomorrow, and I thought it would be nice if I were here to welcome them home," Annette replied.

"Do you have any enemies?" the officer asked. "Is there any reason someone would want to personally attack you?"

"Not that I can think of," she replied.

"So, you think this was a random break-in?" Lieutenant Stern asked, walking into the kitchen area.

"I guess so," Annette said.

"And Mr. Flynn, Jacob Michael Flynn, why are you here with Miss Vanderlind today?" the policeman continued, now walking into the bedroom of the guest house.

"She and I are neighbors in Germantown," Jake told the officer. "I'm down here checking on a rental property I own, and decided to pop in and visit with Annette."

"And what's the nature of your relationship with Miss Vanderlind?" Lieutenant Stern asked from the bedroom, noting that there were impressions in both pillows on the bed from where a sleeper had rested their head.

"If you're asking whether we have an intimate relationship, that's flattering," Jake responded. "But she's in her twenties and I'm in my sixties. I'm old enough to be her grandfather."

"Stranger things have happened," Stern said, returning to the living room area. "Was there anyone else with you at the time of the attack, Miss Vanderlind?"

"No, it was just Mr. Flynn and myself," Annette answered, reasoning that she was not lying since Bobbie and Sean were inside the guest house at the time of the attack on the pool patio.

"Well, I had to ask," Stern said. "Now, Miss Vanderlind, can you think of any reason someone would want to harm your parents' gardener?"

"Again, not that I can think of," Annette replied. "I know that Enrique had served time in prison, but as far as we knew he had turned his life around since getting out."

"Well, that's all the questions I have for now," Lieutenant Stern concluded, handing his business cards to Annette and Jake. "If you think of anything else that might help, please give me a call."

Jake explained to Stern that he would be taking Annette back to his mobile home in Seabreeze to stay the night. And she gave the Lieutenant her cell phone number, so that she could be called in to the station to make an id in case police were lucky enough to apprehend the perpetrator.

In a little over an hour since Sean and Bobbie had left them, Jake and Annette were preparing to drive to Seabreeze and rejoin them. Annette threw her pajamas, an outfit for the next day, and her cosmetics case in a bag, and the two locked up the pool house and drove out of the driveway in her yellow Volkswagen Beetle, heading east on Pilottown Road toward Route 9 and the coast road.

On the way, Annette had Jake take her cell phone from her purse and dial the number for her mother, who was still aboard the Dutch Treat moored somewhere along the New Jersey coast. He handed her the phone as the number began ringing. When her mother answered, Annette related the terrible incidents that took place at their family home that afternoon.

Annette told her mother that the police were going to keep a close eye on the house. And she asked her mother to call when Sturgis and she arrived home to Lewes the next day, so Bobbie and she could come to the marina to drive them home. Meanwhile, Annette concluded, Bobbie and she would be spending the night

with neighbors from back in Germantown who owned a place in a mobile home park on Rehoboth Bay.

As the Volkswagen rolled into Seabreeze, Jake told Annette to turn onto Sandpiper Lane and pull into the parking area at the community building. He spotted a golf cart outside, and knew Delvin must still be on duty. Telling Annette to turn off her headlights, Jake jumped from the car and ran into the management office.

"What's for dessert, Mr. Blue?" Delvin said when he saw Jake.

"Oh, I don't know," Jake said. "Wait, I do know...cannoli. It's an Italian pastry in the shape of a tube, stuffed with a rich creamy filling that has chocolate chips in it."

"Sounds delicious," Delvin said. "No meal is complete without dessert, right?"

"Yep. Delvin, I need to ask a favor," Jake said. "Is there room in the maintenance garage to park a little car, like a Volkswagen?"

"Sure, Mr. Blue," Delvin said.

"Would it be okay if I parked a friend's car in there tonight?" Jake asked.

"You go right ahead," Delvin said. "The doors are unlocked."

"Thanks a lot, Delvin. You're a pal."

Jake rushed out to Annette's car, directing her to the maintenance garage, while he ran ahead and opened the double doors. With the car parked inside, and the doors once again closed, Annette and Jake walked out down Osprey Lane to the house with the number 24 next to the front door. But before entering the front door, Jake pulled Sean's swim trunks from the outside clothesline.

"Knock, knock," Jake said, entering without knocking. "I brought in your boardshorts for you, Sean, otherwise they'd be wet with dew again by morning."

"Thanks, Jake."

The Purple Heart Mystery

After the retelling of the police investigation and the removal of Enrique's body, and after Jake had gotten sheets and towels for the visitors from the owner's closet, and after he had fetched a bottle of white wine from his personal stash, the two couples finally sat down to the dinner they had begun planning hours before at another home.

By eleven o'clock, Jake had retired to bed facing away from Sean, mildly miffed that he had gone without a cup of coffee or dessert after dinner for the first time in years. Sean was trying to calm his mind for sleep, unable to stop it rerunning the revelations of the day. In the bedroom at the end of the hallway, the young Marine Corporal lay spooning his fiancée, his muscular arms wrapped around her soft body as if to envelop and protect her from the uncertainties that swirled around them. What the four did not know, as they drifted off to sleep, was that a car was cruising slowly up and down the streets of the Seabreeze Mobile Home Park, the driver looking for a yellow Volkswagen.

Chapter Ten

By seven-thirty Wednesday morning, Jake's hip joints had begun to bother him. Ever since he had hit sixty years of age, Jake was troubled by a dull ache in his right thigh if he slept too long on that side of his body. At first, he would simply turn on his left side and continue sleeping. Then he found that his left hip would also begin to ache after a short time, at which point he found it impossible to continue sleeping comfortably and knew that he might as well get up. Thankfully, his joints didn't bother him during the day.

When he turned on the shower Jake must have awakened Sean, since their bedroom was next to the bathroom. Annette and Bobbie continued sleeping undisturbed, in the bedroom at the end of the hallway. Sean dressed and went quietly to the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee, while Jake dried himself, dressed, and then joined him.

After gulping down a cup of black coffee with sugar but no milk--not his preferred morning drink--Jake left a note telling the two sleeping houseguests where they had gone, then Sean and he set off on foot to walk to the nearby Food Lion grocery store. On the way, the two men exchanged theories on the matter in which they now found themselves embroiled.

While Jake and Sean were at the store, Lieutenant Andrew Stern of the Lewes Police Department drove into the Seabreeze subdivision in his police car, stopping beside a golf cart he spotted parked on Plover Court.

"Delvin, how are you doing, buddy?" Stern asked the maintenance man.

"Oh, Officer Stern, I'm good thanks," Delvin replied. "It's been a while...how are you?"

"Good, thanks," Stern said. "Delvin, do you know if a fellow named Jacob Flynn owns a house here?"

"I never heard that name," Delvin answered honestly, since he knew Jake only as Beau Blue. "Did he do something wrong?"

"No. I'm just checking the facts on a case I'm working on," the policeman responded. "Well, thank you. Take it easy, buddy."

As Lieutenant Stern slowly cruised the streets of the Seabreeze subdivision looking for Annette Vanderlind's yellow VW, he accessed the Delaware state property tax database on his onboard computer and searched on the name "Jacob Michael Flynn."

The results of the computer search showed a J. Flynn was the owner of a property at 24 Osprey Lane. When Lieutenant Stern investigated that address he found only Sean's car in the driveway. He quietly walked around the perimeter of the home. And through curtained windows he could just make out the shapes of two figures lying beside one another in bed in one of the bedrooms.

"So they are sleeping together," Stern thought to himself, as he returned to his cruiser and drove off. "Why would they lie about that? Could somebody be trying to get at this guy Flynn by attacking his girlfriend?"

Finally, a bit after nine o'clock, Annette and Bobbie awoke to the smell of frying bacon. It must be nice to be young and still able to sleep soundly for eight or nine hours, Jake thought while cooking. After exchanging morning pleasantries, the four sat around the dinette table and tucked into a breakfast frittata made with chopped onion and bell pepper, accompanied by bacon, toast and, of course, coffee.

The sun had broken through the clouds out over the ocean that morning, and a gentle breeze began to dry the land that was saturated from the rains of the waning tropical depression. Seagulls could be heard squawking in the distance, across Rehoboth Bay, and a group of Canada geese were nibbling bugs on the front lawn of Jake's mobile home. It would have seemed like a perfect vacation morning, had the two couples not been in the midst of a deadly serious game of cat-and-mouse with a killer.

At twenty minutes after ten, while Annette was in the bathroom taking a shower, Sean received an email reply from his Army buddy at the Military Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. He flopped down on the couch in the living room and read it aloud to Bobbie and Jake, who were still seated at the dinette table.

"Sean- Followed up on the whereabouts of the two discharged Marines you asked about. Lance Hightower is currently in jail in Portland, Oregon following a bar fight--charged with drunk-and-disorderly and assault with a deadly weapon. Rafael Moreno was killed in a drive-by shooting in East LA more than a month ago.

"Hope all's well with you and yours. Looking forward to the unit's fortieth anniversary of pulling out of Nam, in a few years. Good to hear from you. Take care."

The three men sat silent for a minute or two, taking in the import of what they had just learned.

"So, it's not either of the Marines from Okinawa who is coming after you," Sean said, stating the obvious.

"I guess not," Bobbie said. "I suppose they could have hired somebody...well, Lance could have hired somebody. But it looks like he's made new troubles for himself."

"Anybody else you can think of?" Sean asked.

"Look, something's been bugging me for a while," Jake said, cocking an ear to make sure Annette was still running the water in the shower. "In both attacks, this guy didn't go after you, Bobbie. He went for Annette."

"What are you saying? You think somebody's trying to kill Annette?" Bobbie asked a little too loudly.

"Quiet down! There's no need to upset her," Jake replied. "But it's a very real possibility that we need to consider."

"But, why? Why would anybody want to hurt her?" Bobbie asked, as the three heard Annette turn off the shower.

"I don't know yet, but I think it's obvious that they do," Jake said. "Now let's change the subject."

Annette emerged from the bathroom with a large bath towel wrapped around her torso and another fashioned into a turban holding her wet hair.

"What are you all talking about in here?" she asked.

"We were wondering what you and Bobbie might want to do while you're waiting for your mother to arrive back in Lewes," Jake lied. "The community association here keeps a couple of two-man sailboats tied up at our dock on the bay. They are the kind used for training at the Naval Academy in Annapolis. Why don't you two take one of them out for a sail?"

"I haven't been in a two-man since I was a kid," Annette said. "But mother's probably due in around noon."

"That's almost two hours from now. You've got plenty of time to go for a spin around the area, and it looks like the rain has moved off for now," Sean encouraged her.

"I've never been sailing," Bobbie said. "It could be fun, Annette."

"All right," she agreed. "Let me get changed."

"You'll need to wear life jackets," Jake said. "I have two out in the storage shed. I'll get them."

In less than fifteen minutes, Sean and Jake had walked the young couple down to the community dock, and seen them off on a sailing jaunt around upper Rehoboth Bay.

"I hope Annette remembers how to tack, or they'll never get back," Jake said, watching the small craft be swept eastward by the breezes kicked up by the passing tropical depression.

"So, what do you think is going on?" Sean asked Jake, as they turned to walk back to the mobile home. "Who is after them, or after Annette?"

"I don't know. If it's personal, I'd have to put my money on either the stepfather or the mother, if I were a betting man," Jake said. "And if it has to do with the Pentagon task force they served on, then we're way out of our depth. If that's what it's about, I wouldn't be surprised if we were all blown up by a CIA drone any minute now."

"Well, that's comforting," Sean said. "At least you think we've got this under control."

They both laughed, putting their arms around one another as they walked, in the first display of intimacy they had shared since their drive down from Germantown. Back at the house, Jake lay on the living room couch to rest for a just moment, or so he thought. Sean woke him from his nap an hour later, when he spotted the sailboat manned by Bobbie and Annette heading back in toward the dock at the end of Osprey Lane. The men ambled down to the bay to meet the returning sailors.

"That was wonderful," Annette said, jumping from the boat and grabbing the rope from Bobbie to tie it up to its mooring post.

"How did you do, landlubber?" Sean asked Bobbie.

"It was incredible. It felt like flying," he said. "I'm so proud of Annette for knowing how to sail like that."

Jake teared up, unexpectedly. "These two are going to be just fine," he thought to himself, wiping his eyes before anyone noticed.

"Your cell phone starting buzzing just before we came down here," Sean said. "I brought it with us, so you could check the message."

"Oh, good, it must be mother," Annette said, taking her phone from Sean and pushing a button. "They're heading in the canal toward a slip in the marina. You and I should leave now for Lewes, Bobbie. I said we'd meet mother and Sturgis and give them a ride home."

"Stop back to the house and get your belongings, and then I'll walk you to your car," Jake said.

While they were at the house, Jake went to the kitchen and removed two of the cannoli from the refrigerator and put them in a plastic sandwich bag. And after retrieving the Volkswagen from the maintenance garage and seeing off Bobbie and Annette, Jake told Sean he needed to make another stop. He went into the management office, where he found Delvin.

"Delvin, here's what's for dessert," Jake said, handing him the bag containing the cannoli. "It's that Italian pastry I told you about. We had leftovers, and I knew that you would like to try them."

"Cannoli, right?" Delvin asked.

"Yep."

"Now that is about the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me," Delvin said, beaming.

"You take care now. And thanks again for letting us park in the garage last night," Jake said, turning and exiting the office.

"You are an old softie, you know that?" Sean said, having stood outside the office and heard the whole conversation.

"It's why you love me," Jake said.

"Yeah, we'll see about that."

Chapter Eleven

At six o'clock Wednesday evening, Sean and Jake were again parking on the service road in front of Annette's childhood home in Lewes. Jake had insisted they stop on the way and purchase a small floral arrangement from a shop in town. His mother had taught him at an early age that one should always take a hostess gift, when invited to someone's home for dinner.

As he and Sean climbed out of the Volvo, they both noticed a police cruiser parked across Pilottown Road. When they knocked on the front door of the home, a young African American woman wearing a cook's apron opened it.

"We're friends of Annette, here for dinner," Jake said.

"They're all around back," the woman said.

"Thank you."

Once again the two men walked a now familiar path around the side of the house and up the driveway. An older model red Toyota Corolla was parked in the driveway. The car's matte finish betrayed a lack of maintenance on the owner's part, all vestiges of shine having been removed by exposure to sun and salty sea air.

"This car certainly doesn't belong to anyone in the family," Jake thought. "They must already have company."

Jake and Sean entered the backyard through the wooden gate in the stockade fence which surrounded the pool area. The tanned figures of a man and woman, both clad in swimwear, lay on chaise lounges on the far side of the pool. Bobbie and Annette were dressed as they had been that morning and seated on chairs near

the other couple, under an umbrella that covered a circular teak table. She stood and walked toward Jake and Sean to welcome them.

"It's good to see you both again. Let me introduce you to my mother," Annette said, gesturing them to follow her to the opposite side of the pool from which she'd just come.

"Great," Sean said.

"Aren't they lovely," she remarked on the flowers that Jake carried. "Jake, Sean, this is my mother, Janet Vanderlind."

"Nice to meet you," Jake said.

"Hello," Sean added.

The two men each reached forward and briefly held Mrs. Vanderlind's outstretched hand.

Sean shifted his attention to the thirty year old man stretched out on the adjacent chaise lounge. His square-jawed face was framed by a mane of shoulder length, gently tousled golden hair, and he had bushy eyebrows and a walrus mustache of matching color. Sean's eyes wandered down the man's taut, tanned torso to his yellow Speedo bikini, which barely encased what looked to be a rather impressive endowment.

"And this is the man that captains my mother's boat, Ronnie Hardwick," Annette said.

"I'll bet he does," Sean whispered toward Jake.

"Keep it in your pants, horndog," Jake quietly replied.

"Don't tell me, tell him," Sean whispered back, stepping forward to shake the hand of the reclining young man. "It's a definite pleasure to meet you."

"Mother, Ronnie, this is Jake Flynn and Sean Fitzpatrick," Annette said, finishing the introductions. "They're a couple who live near me in Germantown."

"A couple fags," Ronnie mumbled, loud enough to be heard.

The young man's attractiveness instantly evaporated for Sean, and he quickly decided that this was just one more in a long line of redneck bigots he had met in his life...an ex-con, no less.

"Thank you for the invitation to dinner, Mrs. Vanderlind. We've brought a little something for you," Jake said, handing her the flowers he'd brought.

"Aren't they sweet? And, please, call me Janet," she remarked, taking the arrangement and immediately placing it on the deck beside her, next to a cut crystal tumbler containing ice cubes and a light brown clear liquid...probably scotch or bourbon and soda, Jake guessed.

"And where is your husband, Mr. Willburn?" Sean asked his hostess.

"Sturgis said he had some things to clear up at work," Janet replied. "He should be home any time now."

"You have a beautifully furnished home, Janet," Jake said. "Annette showed me around yesterday."

"Oh, it's mostly antiques that have been passed down in the family," she said.

A car could be heard pulling up the gravel driveway to the garage.

"That must be Sturgis now," Janet said.

"I better split," Ronnie said, quickly rising, and slipping into his Topsiders rubber-soled deck shoes. "Catch you later, Jan."

He grabbed up his beach towel and hurried out the backyard gate.

"Ronnie, is that you?" a man's voice could be heard asking.

"Hey, boss," Ronnie was heard replying. "See ya later."

As Sturgis Willburn entered the backyard, dressed in business attire, Jake noted that he was a slightly balder, still pale complexioned version of the man he had seen in photos yesterday.

"Welcome home, darling," Janet said, rising and walking to greet her husband with a kiss on the cheek. "I'm going in to dress for dinner. Go meet Annette's friends. And bring those flowers with you, when you come in. I don't know where I'll put them."

And then Janet disappeared through the French doors to the living room of the main house. Her husband walked around the pool toward the two remaining couples, wearing an expensive, crisply tailored suit which somehow still managed to look ruffled.

"You must be Jake and Sean," Sturgis said, extending his hand for both men to shake. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Jake said. "I'm Jake, and that's my partner Sean."

"Bobbie," Sturgis said, acknowledging the young Marine who was still seated at the circular teak table.

"Sir."

"How are you feeling, Nettie?" Sturgis asked his stepdaughter.

"Sturgis is the only one who calls me Nettie," she announced.

"It was a terrible thing that happened here yesterday," Sturgis said to Jake, "a damned terrible thing. I'm just glad you were here to look after our girl."

"All of us were shaken up by Enrique's death," Jake said.

"Who do you think this fellow is that attacked Nettie and...?" Sturgis asked.

"We're still trying to figure that out," Jake replied.

There was an awkward pause in the conversation which, in reality, only lasted three or four seconds.

"Well, I better get in the house and see if I can help out with anything," Sturgis said, picking up the flowers and leaving.

"Wow, we didn't know this was a formal occasion," Sean said to Annette. "I think Jake and I are underdressed."

"It's all for show," Annette sighed, rolling her eyes. "Mother normally only hires Corinne to come in and cook for parties or

special dinners. I guess mother decided to have her cook this evening rather than treat you to carry-out from a local restaurant."

The African American woman who had met Jake and Sean now appeared in the French doors of the main house.

"Dinner is ready, Miss Annette," she said.

"Thank you, Corinne," Annette said. "We'll come right in."

The two couples were greeted by Janet Vanderlind as they entered the living room of the house. She now wore a simple but elegant beige shift dress, cinched at the waist by a gold metallic rope belt, a pair of beige leather high heel shoes, and a short single strand of pearls about her neck.

"Who wants a little drink before dinner? Fix them drinks, Sturgis, and freshen my bourbon and soda," she ordered her husband, holding out her half-empty glass toward him.

"Corinne said that dinner's ready, dear," Sturgis said. "Why don't we go to the dining room?"

"We'll eat when I say we eat," she barked. "Now, fix our guests some drinks."

"I'll have club soda on ice with a twist, if you've got it," Jake said, and then turned to Sean. "Go ahead and have something to drink. I'll drive us home tonight."

"I'll wait and have something with dinner," Sean said, guessing there would be wine, given their hostess' proclivity for drink.

"Nothing for us," Annette said.

Corinne appeared in the doorway to the central hallway.

"Ms. Vanderlind, dinner is ready," she said.

"Oh, for God's sake, all right," Janet sighed dramatically. "Let's eat. Corinne wants us to eat, so I guess we all have to go eat now."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Corinne said.

"No, you're right. A good meal should be consumed when it's ready," Janet said apologetically, her high heels click-clacking on

the oak floor as she walked toward the cook. She then swiveled back toward the group and said "Ladies and gentlemen, shall we dine?"

The dining table looked as if it were set for an official state dinner. Each of the six place settings boasted a white bone china dinner plate topped by a silver charger, a cut crystal wine glass and water goblet, a crisp white linen napkin, and ornate handled sterling silver flatware consisting of a knife, fork, spoon and soup spoon.

Down the center of the table, a pair of heavy sterling silver candelabras, each holding five ivory colored tapers, flanked an arrangement of long-stemmed white roses and freesia that exploded like fireworks from a square crystal vase filled with plum sized green apples in the water.

"You set a beautiful table, Janet," Jake said.

"Thank you," she replied. "Now, Sturgis and I will sit on the ends. Annette, you sit next to Sturgis, with Bobbie between us. Jake and Sean, you can sit next to one another, across from the kids."

Everyone moved to take their assigned seats.

"I would have seated us boy-girl-boy-girl," Janet said to Jake as he took the seat next to her, "but then you're both...you understand."

"That was tactful, mother," Annette gently sniped.

The dinner proceeded, accompanied by fairly effortless conversation. Corinne served an appetizer of lobster bisque, with homemade seasoned croutons, followed by a chef's quality main course. Each plate held two substantially sized crab cakes, each with a large lacy wafer of fried grated potatoes sticking up from it like fan coral. The entree was paired with pan-sautéed lightly

caramelized Belgian endive drizzled with a bit of aged Balsamic vinegar. And the food was complemented by a slightly chilled white wine.

"It's a German Riesling I picked up when we were in Montauk, in the Hamptons. I think you'll like this vintage," Sturgis said, standing to pour wine for everyone but Jake. "It's a crisp white wine with an elegant but playful bouquet of orange blossoms dancing off of the fruity flavors of fresh apple and tangy lemon."

"My God, Sturgis, you sound like *Wine Connoisseur* magazine. Don't be so pretentious," Janet said. "It's just wine."

For dessert, Corinne served slender stemmed fluted glasses filled with a feather-light vanilla mousse swirled with a raspberry sauce sweetened with honey, topped with fresh berries and whipped cream.

"My Lord, that was delicious," Sean said. "If I ate like that every night, I'd weigh three hundred pounds."

"If we ate like that every night, I'd go bankrupt," Sturgis said laughingly, his feeble attempt at humor falling flat.

Ronnie Hardwick burst through the swinging door from the kitchen, now changed into a pair of chino slacks and baby blue polo shirt, but still shod in his Topsiders with no socks.

"Our intrepid sea captain returns," Janet said.

"Boss, sorry to interrupt your dinner, but I checked with the boat yard and they've got an open slot to do maintenance on your vessel, so she'll be ready in case you want to head south for the winter," Ronnie said. "If you stop over to the marina this evening and get your personal gear and clear out the refrigerator, I can shut down the generator and have her pulled from the water in the morning. I've got a poker game with some of the other captains tonight."

"Don't rush off. Stay and have something to eat. I'm sure Corinne has some extra food," Janet said, standing and walking into the kitchen with Ronnie.

"Well, we're leaderless, for the moment," Sturgis remarked.

The sound of Janet and Ronnie, laughing together in the kitchen, could be heard by all in the dining room.

"Why don't we retire to the other room?" Sturgis asked while standing. Then he called out, "Corinne, I think we'll have coffee in the living room."

"Yes, sir," she replied through the swinging door.

"Please join me, when you're ready," Sturgis said, walking briskly toward the center hall and living room beyond.

"So ends the dinner portion of the evening," Annette said.

"It was a good meal," Bobbie said.

"Yes, and we all survived relatively unscathed," Annette countered, "all except poor Sturgis, that is. But he's a big boy."

Bobbie mildly chastised her. "Be nice, babe."

"I'm trying."

"I know you are," said Bobbie. "I'm here with you. We'll get through this."

"How is that your mother and Sturgis ended up marrying, do you think?" Jake inquired.

"Sturgis met mother when he helped manage my late father's estate. The Vanderlinds are one of the original Dutch families that settled Lewes as a trading post in the sixteen thirties. I suspect Sturgis hoped by marrying into the family he would attain a degree of respectability that would help his career," Annette explained.

"Of course, my mother is only a Vanderlind by marriage. Her family, the Harpers, is working class. Her father was a mechanic in a gas station in Dewey Beach."

"So, why did your mother marry Sturgis?" Jake asked.

"Afraid to live alone?" Annette surmised. "Sturgis originally set his sights on me, but when he found that I wasn't interested in a relationship with a man fifteen years my senior he switched his focus to my mother."

Jake realized this explained the picture hanging on the wall of the guest house that was taken by the pool eight years ago, in which Sturgis had his hand on Annette's knee.

"I believe she hoped marrying a bank executive would provide her financial security for the rest of her life," Annette continued. "And then the near collapse of the world banking system happened three years ago. But that hasn't put a crimp in my mother's extravagant spending."

"I'll say," Sean said. "From all appearances, she's running through money like bacon grease through a bloodhound."

The all four laughed.

"What a colorful backwoods simile, Bubba," Jake said, taking a mild gibe at Sean.

"All right, let's head in for the second act," Annette said, rising from her chair. And the two couples walked across the hallway to join her stepfather in the living room.

Chapter Twelve

"Who would like a brandy?" Sturgis asked the two younger couples, as they joined him in the living room. "I have a bottle of *Remy Martin VSOP*, if anyone is interested."

He removed the stopper from the bottle of cognac, and poured some into a snifter for himself.

"None for me, sir," Bobbie said.

"No, thank you," Annette said, taking Bobbie by the hand and leading him to the cushioned love seat in the informal seating area.

"I think I'll have coffee," Jake said, moving to the silver tray holding the coffee service which Corrine had placed on a side table.

"I think I'll join you, Jake," Sean said, moving to the table to pour coffee for himself and Jake.

"Nettie tells us you fellows own a vacation place down here, a mobile home on the bay," Sturgis said.

"That's right," Jake said.

"I used to own a little cabin up in the Poconos, in Pennsylvania," Sturgis said. "But I had to get rid of it. Janet thought the summer evenings were too cold. She likes the heat."

Again there was a four or five second lull in the conversation similar to the one that happened earlier on the patio.

"Did you get in much fishing on your trip this summer, Sturgis?" Jake asked.

"Not much. Janet doesn't like it," Sturgis said somewhat dejectedly. "The boat has a fish cleaning station, but she says it stinks up the whole aft deck where she likes to sunbathe."

"I did land a North Atlantic albacore off the coast of Cape Cod," Sturgis continued. "It was so heavy I needed Captain Ronnie to use the gaffing pole and hook the fish to get it onboard. We had some excellent tuna steaks for dinner that night. And Ronnie sold the rest to a local restaurant for a fair amount of money that we put toward fuel for the boat. Good thing...damned expensive."

Another lull in the conversation drove Jake to the conclusion that Sturgis was good at creating awkward silences in social situations.

Janet entered the room through the doorway that led to the kitchen, asking "What's our little group up to now? It's so quiet in here I thought someone had died."

"We're having after dinner drinks, dear," Sturgis said to her.

"Well, then get me a bourbon and soda," she said.

"You know the saying: Liquor then wine and you'll be fine, but wine and then liquor and you'll never be sicker," Sturgis said.

"But you're having a brandy," Janet brayed back at him. "Isn't brandy liquor?"

"I guess so," he said, sheepishly. "I don't know..."

"There's a lot you don't know, isn't there?" she sniped.

"I'll bet there is," Sean mumbled under his breath to Jake.

"Stop it," Jake mumbled back.

"Janet, you have exquisite taste," Sean said, walking over to look at the picture hanging over the fireplace.

"Oh, that," she said, snatching the bourbon and soda Sturgis had poured for her from his hand and joining Sean. "I bought it at a gallery in Rehoboth a few years back...that's Henlopen State Park. When I was in high school, we used to drive up there after class and park, to smoke cigarettes and make out."

"Classy," Annette remarked.

"That's right, Priscilla Prude, your mother had a sex life when she was young," Janet said.

"But we don't need to share the details with our guests."

"I'll tell you a secret," Janet said, leaning in toward Sean. "There's a whale somewhere in every picture this guy paints."

"Like the way Al Hirschfeld hid the name of his daughter, Nina, in all of the celebrity caricatures that he drew," Sean said.

"Yeah, sure...just like that," Janet said, now slurring her words.

"There's a whale design on the sweatshirt of one of the hikers, by the dune on the left," Jake said.

"Bingo," Janet said, pivoting and pointing at Jake. "How did you know?"

"I remember when I painted that picture," Jake said.

"You're Beau Blue?" she asked in astonishment.

"I am," he replied.

"Oh, everyone, we have an *artiste* in our midst," Janet announced. "Well, you're not the only one. We have talent in our family, too. Annette, play something for us on the piano."

"Oh, mother, no," Annette balked.

"Come on. We didn't pay for all those lessons when you were young for nothing. Play something," Janet insisted.

"All right," Annette said, resigned to the likelihood that her mother wouldn't shut up until she agreed to play.

"Oh, goodie," Janet said, flopping down on the Victorian sofa.

Sturgis had witnessed Janet in the past forcing her daughter to perform for guests like some trained animal in a circus, and found it difficult to stomach.

"I think I'll head over to the boat, now," Sturgis said.

"Leaving us? You're good at leaving, aren't you?" Janet hurled the words at Sturgis like pebbles. "He was always taking off this

summer, coming back to Lewes for work and leaving me alone on the boat with Ronnie."

"Well, Ronnie said that I need to retrieve our personal belongings from the boat, so he can have it pulled out of the water tomorrow for maintenance," Sturgis said.

"That Cap'n Ronnie, he's a hard worker," Janet said.

"I'll bet..." Sean started to mumble to Jake.

"Don't...", Jake said, cutting him off.

"But Bobbie and I have to talk with you, Sturgis," Annette said. "We need to discuss me getting access to my trust, now that he and I are getting married."

"This is not the right time to talk about it, Nettie," Sturgis countered. "Not while we have guests. Maybe you could come see me at the office."

"We could do that, Annette," Bobbie said.

At eight-thirty, the grandfather clock which stood in a front corner of the living room chimed the half hour.

"I've got to get over to the boat now," Sturgis repeated. "Jake, Sean, if I don't get back before you leave, it was nice to meet you."

"Same here, Sturgis," Jake said.

"Thank you for having us to dinner," Sean added.

Sturgis walked out the French doors of the living room and across the back patio and through the wooden gate, started his car, and drove down the gravel drive. In a few minutes, Jake heard the sound of another car being started and driven down the drive. Meanwhile, Annette had seated herself on the piano bench and begun to play the second movement of Mozart's *Piano Sonata Number Eleven in A Major*.

"Ah, Mozart...discipline blended with passion," Sean remarked.

"I love the structure of this movement," Annette said, continuing to play. "He makes this bold six-note opening statement as if he

was sitting and talking to us, then explores some emotional variations but repeatedly returns to that original phrase."

"It does satisfy a desire for logic and optimism," Sean said.

"If only life worked out so neatly," Jake added.

When Annette finished playing the piece she quietly unfolded the hinged cover back over the keyboard of the piano.

"Brava," Jake said quietly, accompanied by gently clapping like that of a spectator at a golf match.

"Thank you," she said.

"Ssh," Jake said, placing his upright index finger over his mouth to hush Annette, and then pointing toward her mother.

"Oh, great, mother's fallen asleep from drink," Annette said.

"We should probably get going anyway," Sean whispered. "It's been a long day."

"Well, let us walk you out," Annette said, taking a crocheted afghan from the arm of the sofa and spreading it over her mother's sleeping body.

Jake and Sean walked toward the front door in the center hallway, and spied Corrine extinguishing the candles and clearing the dishes from the dinner table.

"That was a wonderful meal," Jake softly called out to her.

"Thank you, Corinne," Sean added.

"Thank you, sirs," the cook replied. "Have a good evening."

"I had no idea you played the piano," Bobbie said to Annette, accompanying her out the front door behind Jake and Sean. "You keep on surprising me with who you are...I mean, with what you know...and what you can do."

She leaned toward him and kissed him as they walked.

"Not all the surprises are pleasant," Sean mumbled to Jake, on their down the sidewalk to the Volvo parked out front.

"Okay, let's get you home, Mr. Grumpy," Jake said to him, and then turned to Annette and Bobbie. "So, do you think you'll talk to your stepfather about your trust fund tomorrow?"

"I hope so," Annette replied.

"Well, keep us informed," Jake continued, as he walked around to the driver's side of the car. "You've got Sean's cell phone number, and we've got yours."

"Right," Annette said. "Good night. Drive safely."

"See you guys," Bobbie added.

"Good night," Sean said through the car's passenger side window.

A passing rain squall forced Annette and Bobbie to wave goodbye from inside the front door of the home on Pilottown Road, as they watched the two men in the Volvo drive off toward Route 9 on their way to Jake's single-wide trailer home at the Seabreeze Mobile Home Park.

Chapter Thirteen

"You're the childhood education expert, so tell me," Jake asked Sean, relaxing on the living room sofa in his mobile home, "how does a kid like Annette have what sounds like a completely dysfunctional home life and become such a sweet, refined young woman? Look at the role models she's had: a father who kept a mistress until he died young, probably from the stress of his unhappy marriage, and a mother who then weds a second husband who she constantly berates and is possibly cheating on, right under his nose."

"Children find their own way in life, JM," the former elementary school principal replied. "Some have good parental modeling they try and emulate. Others have poor role models who exhibit behavior that the kids then try to avoid in their own lives."

"I guess so."

"I mean, look at Bobbie. How does a kid from the barrio decide he needs to enlist in the Marines to get some structure and discipline in his life?" Sean mused.

Jake stood and walked to the kitchen to pour a mug of cold coffee left over from breakfast.

"So, who's our favorite choice for suspect at the moment?" Jake asked. "Somehow their attacker knew that Bobbie and Annette weren't in Germantown anymore, but had come down to her family home in Lewes."

"You and I knew. Annette called her mother on the boat, so they all knew. And Sandy Becker and Greta knew," Sean said.

"Enrique the gardener knew, too. Well, I'm pretty sure we can rule out Greta and Sandy," Jake added, returning to the sofa with his coffee. "And Enrique's been killed, plus I can't imagine a scenario in which he could have benefited from Annette's death. So let's go through the trio from the boat. Why would Janet want to get rid of her daughter?"

"For money?" Sean asked. "Sturgis said they sold the tuna he caught this summer for cash to fuel the boat. Maybe Janet is panicked that they're going broke."

"But Annette has a townhouse with years to go on the mortgage, and a car she's still making payments on. Where's the money?" Jake asked.

"The trust fund," Sean said. "It's got to be about the trust fund."

"So you think her mother might want to get rid of Annette to get her hands on the trust fund?" Jake asked.

"Sure. If something happens to Annette after she marries Bobbie, then he would inherit the money from the trust fund," Sean reasoned. "But if Annette dies before the wedding then her mother would probably get the money."

"Okay. So, why would Sturgis want to get Annette out of the way?" Jake asked.

"Same reason: money," Sean replied. "If Janet inherited Annette's trust fund, he would have access to it as the grieving mother's husband."

"We need to find out more about this trust fund, after Annette meets with Sturgis at the bank tomorrow," Jake concluded. "It looks like we have a couple in financial trouble and either one of them, or both, could be eyeing Annette's money."

Sean's cell phone rang. It was Annette.

"Hello."

"Sturgis has had an accident," Annette said. "The police called and told us that he fell into the water at the marina and nearly drowned. Bobbie and I managed to pour some coffee into mother and get her to the hospital. I thought you should know."

"Is Sturgis going to be okay?" Sean asked.

"We don't know yet."

"Where are you?"

"Beebe Memorial Hospital," Annette said.

"Jake and I will come right over," Sean said.

"There's nothing you can do," Annette said. "The doctors are still working on Sturgis. We don't know anything yet."

"Still, we should be there."

"Thank you. We're in the waiting room. I'll see you when you get here," Annette said, then hung up.

In a matter of minutes Jake and Sean were driving up the coast road toward the hospital in Lewes. The highway was shrouded in a trough of heavy mist, one of many that swirled around the distant tropical depression like the arms of a spinning octopus.

"I hate hospitals," Jake said to Sean, as they walked into the covered front entrance of the medical center on Savannah Road in Lewes.

"I know, JM," Sean said, "because they're so 'germy'."

"Right."

The last time Jake had been in a hospital was when he was treated at Shady Grove Memorial Hospital in Gaithersburg last spring, after he was struck by the car driven by the fleeing arsonist who had just set fire to Holman Hall.

Jake and Sean found Janet Vanderlind sitting by herself in the hospital waiting room.

"Mrs. Vanderlind...Janet, it's Jake Flynn and Sean Fitzpatrick," Jake said to the woman, not knowing whether she'd gotten so

intoxicated that evening that she would not remember they had dined together. "We were at your home for dinner."

"I may have been drunk, but I'm not an idiot," Janet spat out. "Of course I remember you."

"How is Sturgis? Have they told you anything yet?" Jake asked.

"No," Janet replied. "What are you two doing here?"

"Where are Annette and Corporal Vasquez?" Jake asked, choosing to ignore the woman's rudeness.

"The police are talking to them in a room down the hall."

"Thank you," Jake said. "We'll be back in a bit."

Sean and Jake walked down the corridor, looking through the vertical glass panels of the light colored wooden doors of the hospital's administrative offices as they went, until they spotted Annette and Bobbie seated at a table in a conference room, talking with a police officer. Then the two men waited in the hallway outside the room. After a while the door was opened.

"Jake, Sean," Annette said. "Officer, these are the two friends I was telling you about."

"Thank you, Miss Vanderlind," the policemen said. "I'll be out shortly to talk with your mother. Gentlemen, could I talk with you two for a moment."

"Of course," Jake said, as he and Sean entered the conference room and took seats at the table.

"Miss Vanderlind said you two were dinner guests at her family's home this evening. Is that correct?" the officer inquired.

"That's right," Jake answered. "We got there around six o'clock, and we left just before nine."

"And it's my understanding that Mrs. Vanderlind's husband, Mr. Willburn, left the home at some point to retrieve items from their boat, Dutch Treat, that is docked at the marina," the officer said.

"Yes, he left at eight-thirty," Sean said. "I know because the grandfather clock in the living room struck the half hour as he was leaving."

"And you left less than half an hour later to go back to the vacation home you own here?" the policeman asked.

"Right," Jake said. "Over in Seabreeze Mobile Home Park."

"Well, thank you. I'd like you to write down your address at Seabreeze and a phone number where you can be reached, in case I need any more information."

"Sure," Jake said, taking the officer's pen and pad and writing down the address of the mobile home and Sean's cell phone number. "But why are you asking questions about times? Didn't Mr. Willburn have an accident?"

"We're treating it that way at the moment," the officer said. "The emergency call came in from the marina at eight fifty-three this evening, which would seem to rule out any involvement by you two, or Corporal Vasquez, Miss Vanderlind or her mother, if foul play was involved. And I am not saying that it was. We are just gathering information at the moment."

"Did Annette mention to you that she was the victim of an attack recently, which took place outside the family home yesterday afternoon?" Jake asked the cop.

"We are aware of that, Mr. Flynn," the policeman answered. "In fact, I am one of the officers who have been parked across Pilottown Road keeping an eye on the house. Okay, well, that's all the questions I have. I'm going to talk with Mrs. Vanderlind now, and tell her how we intend to proceed. Thank you both."

As Jake, Sean and the policeman walked into the waiting room, Ronnie Hardwick arrived.

"Jan, I drove right over when I heard," he said, rushing to Janet Vanderlind's side. "How is Sturgis?"

"We don't know yet."

"How did you hear about Sturgis?" Annette asked Ronnie.

"One of the other boat captains at the poker game got a call from his owners at the marina," Ronnie replied.

"And your name?" the police officer asked.

"Ronnie Hardwick," he replied. "I captain the boat owned by Mrs. Vanderlind and her husband."

"Can you tell me your whereabouts this evening?" the policeman asked.

"Sure, I stopped by to see Sturgis at home early this evening," Ronnie said. "We had to talk about pulling the boat out of the water for maintenance. Then I stopped in the kitchen and Corinne, the cook, fed me some leftovers. And then I left at...I guess around nine o'clock."

"It was eight thirty, Ronnie," Jake said. "We heard your car pull out of the driveway right after Sturgis left."

"And where did you go after that?" the policeman asked.

"I went to a poker game at a buddy's house," Ronnie answered. "He lives just off Route Nine, about a mile on the other side of Route One."

"And when did you arrive?" the policeman asked.

"Nine fifteen or nine thirty, I guess," Ronnie said.

"Can you tell me why it took you forty-five minutes or more to drive a couple miles?" the policeman asked.

"Oh, right, I forgot," Ronnie replied, "I stopped by home to pick up a bottle of vodka on the way."

"And what is your home address?" the policeman asked.

"I have an apartment here in Lewes," Ronnie said, "three thirteen Skylark Road, apartment D."

"Can anyone confirm that you stopped at your apartment to pick up the liquor?" the policeman asked.

"Sure, call and ask my roommate," Ronnie said.

Just then the doctor walked into the waiting room from the emergency room where Sturgis Willburn was being treated, and took a seat next to Janet Vanderlind.

"Mrs. Vanderlind, I'm not going to sugar coat this. Your husband is in pretty rough condition right now," the doctor said. "He apparently fell and hit his head, and suffered severe blunt force trauma to the back of his skull...he's got a chunk of scalp and hair missing from the injury."

"Oh, Lord," she exclaimed.

"But that was a blessing, in a way," the doctor continued, "because it meant that he was unconscious when he fell into the water. And that prevented him from panicking and gulping down a large quantity of sea water. It likely saved him from drowning, that and the boaters nearby who jumped right in to rescue him."

"So he's going to live?" Ronnie asked.

"He's not out of the woods yet," the doctor said. "He has pretty aggressive fluid build-up from the head injury, which is exerting a lot of pressure on his brain. To prevent any permanent damage to the brain, we have to place him an induced coma and drill a few small holes in his skull, to drain the fluid and relieve the pressure."

"Oh, my God," Janet exclaimed in horror.

"We're prepping him for surgery now, but it could be two or three days before we're sure he's in the clear," the doctor continued. "There's nothing you can do right now, so I suggest you go home and get some rest. We'll call you right away if there's any significant change in his condition."

"I need to go to the bathroom," Captain Ronnie said, taking off at a brisk pace out of the waiting room and down the corridor.

The assembled crowd--Mrs. Vanderlind, Annette, Bobbie, Jake, Sean and the policeman--all sat or stood in stunned silence for a moment.

"Do you have any questions for me?" the doctor asked.

"No, thank you," Janet said.

"If not, I need to get back and scrub up for the surgery."

"Thank you," Janet repeated.

"Are you going to be okay?" the doctor asked. "You look pretty shaken."

"I'll be fine."

"All right, 'night, folks," the doctor said, rising and exiting the waiting room.

"I'm not fine. I'm going to be sick," Janet said, opening the purse in her lap.

"Not the purse," Sean said, swiftly sliding a large potted plant sitting on the floor nearby to a spot right in front of Janet.

She vomited into the planter, around the base of the plant. Her shoulders rose, her diaphragm contracted, and she retched a second time, but without expelling anything. Then she reached into her purse, withdrew a tissue and daintily dabbed the tears from her eyes and wiped the corners of her mouth, replaced the tissue in her purse, and retrieved a breath mint which she popped in her mouth.

"Wow, this woman is a pro," Jake thought to himself. "She must get drunk and puke so often that she's got the whole routine down to a science."

"Well, it's probably not the preferred fertilizer for a *figus benjamina* tree," Sean remarked, returning the plant to its original location, "but it shouldn't do it any real harm."

"Nice move," Jake complimented Sean.

"Hey, I have siblings," he explained. "We hurled a lot in public when we were kids."

"Come on, mother, we should get you home," Annette said.

"Where's Ronnie?" she asked.

"He bolted for the men's room," Sean said. "He's probably doing the same thing you just did in that potted plant."

But Captain Ronnie was not vomiting or otherwise using the men's room. He was using the public telephone located at the entrance of the cafeteria, just past the restrooms.

"Something happened in town the cops are trying to pin on me. I need an alibi, so you just say I came home before nine and got a bottle of vodka to take to the game," Ronnie said into the phone.

"No, I stopped off to see my guy for some marijuana," Ronnie said next, answering the party on the other end of the line. "Am I supposed to tell the cops I was late to my poker game 'cause I was buying illegal drugs? Yeah, I'll bring you some. Just tell them what I said, if they ask you. I'll see you when the game is over."

Ronnie returned the public phone to its receiver, ducked in and grabbed a paper towel as he passed the men's room, and splashed some water on his hands from the water fountain in the corridor. As he reentered the hospital waiting room, he was wiping his wet hands with a towel from the bathroom.

"Come on, Jan," Ronnie said to Mrs. Vanderlind, "let me drive you home."

"Thank you, Ronnie, but we'll take mother home," Annette said.

"And I still need to get your home telephone number, Mr. Hardwick," the policeman said to Ronnie.

Annette helped her mother to stand, then they and Bobbie, Jake and Sean all turned to leave the waiting room.

"Okay, Jan, I'll stop by when I'm done here," Ronnie called out, "just to be sure you're okay."

"Please do," Janet turned and said to Ronnie, pleadingly, as her daughter walked her toward the exit.

J. L. Humphrey

"Really, mother?" Annette spat out. "While your husband is lying unconscious in the hospital?"

"You've got someone, Annette," Janet replied softly. "I don't want to be alone tonight."

Chapter Fourteen

Jake was roused from sleep at eight o'clock on Thursday morning by a heavy downburst of rain pelting the roof of his single-wide trailer. He rose invigorated from eight straight hours of sleep, a sleep that had not even been interrupted by the now usual need to urinate in the middle of the night.

Whether it was the salt air or the change in barometric pressure being at sea level, or something else entirely, it seemed to Jake like a kind of minor miracle that he was able to sleep soundly while surrounded by so much upheaval in the lives of others. He began to almost feel guilty at this good fortune, but quickly banished the thought and chose instead to head to the bathroom and jump in the shower.

As he pulled back the shower curtain and stepped out of the shower stall, Jake heard his lover's voice calling from the adjacent bedroom.

"Leave it running, JM," Sean croaked. "I'm going to hop in the shower, too."

"Okay," Jake replied while smearing foam on his face, preparing to shave.

Jake watched in the mirror over the sink as Sean walked into the bathroom and removed his boxer shorts. He could not resist glancing over at his buttocks as Sean stepped into the shower. It was as if the palms of the hands of some ethereal sculptor had impressed large flat dimples into the sides of the taut globes of that

ass, Jake thought. As often as he had viewed his lover's backside, the sight still sent a jolt of electricity through Jake's loins.

And then Jake remembered that Sean and he weren't getting along at the moment. Otherwise, he thought, he'd have jumped back into the shower and gotten this morning off to a raring good start.

"I'm going to go make coffee," Jake said, having quickly dragged a safety razor across his upper lip and down both cheeks, and rinsed away the remaining tufts of shaving foam. "Do you want some toast?"

"Yeah, thanks," Sean replied. "I'll be right out."

Ever the optimist, Jake decided to make breakfast while wearing only a pair of bikini underwear. And after he finished his shower, Sean strode into the kitchen wearing just a fresh pair of boxer shorts, and seated himself on the bench on one side of the dinette table.

"Here you go," Jake said, placing a plate of toast before Sean.

He then retrieved two mugs from a nearby kitchen cabinet, and fetched the carton of milk from the refrigerator. The coffee was brewing in the French press already on the table.

"Do you want something sweet to spread on that?" Jake asked, while letting his eyes roam over Sean's broad shoulders and hairy chest. "Or would you just rather go back to bed for bit?"

"I'm still not feeling it, JM," Sean said, shutting down all hope.

"Damn, it was worth a try," Jake muttered. "But, no, you're right. We've got a busy day ahead of us anyway."

"Okay. So what's the plan?" Sean asked.

"Windows of opportunity are opening up, if we act quickly," Jake replied, while pressing the coffee grounds through the brown liquid and serving Sean and himself. "Of course, the top priority is to figure out who's after Annette, or Annette and Bobbie. And I think that we're going to need some police help with that."

"I feel bad for Annette," Sean said, chewing on a mouthful of toast. "It seems like her whole life is cursed at the moment."

"I don't think so. A curse would imply that fate was involved," Jake said, stirring milk and sugar into his mug of coffee. "I think this is all of human doing."

"You don't think what happened to Sturgis was an accident?" Sean asked.

"Well, if it wasn't an accident, who would be your top suspect?" Jake asked, volleying the question back to Sean.

"Unless it was the anonymous attacker dressed in black, it would be Captain Ronnie, I guess," Sean surmised.

"Right," Jake said. "That's why I think when we finish breakfast we should go talk to his housemate."

After they confirmed that Ronnie Hardwick's Toyota Corolla with its dull red finish was parked in the driveway of the house on Pilottown Road, Jake and Sean drove to three thirteen Skylark Road and knocked on the door of Apartment D. The door opened.

"Hello," said a scrawny young woman perhaps twenty-five years of age, with long straight brown hair. She was barefoot, wearing a pair of denim cut-off shorts and a tee shirt, and was quite noticeably pregnant.

"Mrs. Ronnie Hardwick?" Jake asked the woman.

"Do you see a ring on this finger?" the woman replied, holding up her left hand. "The only thing he's given me is a baby."

"Congratulations," Sean said. "How far along are you?"

"Thank you," the woman replied, sarcastically. "Four months. So who the hell are you?"

"I'm Jake and this is my partner, Sean," Jake said. "And you are?"

"Four months pregnant," the woman said then laughed. "Nah, I'm shittin' you. My name's Tess Matson."

"We met Ronnie yesterday evening while having dinner at his boss' house," Jake said. "Is he here?"

"Nah," Tess said.

"Do you know where he is?" Jake asked.

"I don't know. He had a poker game last night," she said.

"And when did you last see him?" Jake asked.

"Oh," Tess said, remembering the phone call she'd gotten from Ronnie the night before. "He stopped by here to pick up a bottle of booze before he went to the game. Are you with the police?"

"No, we're just acquaintances," Jake replied. "So Ronnie didn't come home last night?"

"Nah, I guess the game ran late and he decided to crash there."

"Would it surprise you to learn that he spent the night in bed with the wife of the couple who owns the boat he captains?" Jake asked.

"That fucking whore," Tess spat.

"Well, she has been sleeping around on her husband," Sean said, "but I wouldn't call her a whore."

"I was talking about him," Tess said. "Is there something else you two want now, or could you get the fuck out of here and leave me alone?"

"No, that's all," Jake said. "But please, Miss Matson, if there's anything you'd like to change about your story, any new thing that you remember, it would be a big help if you'd call Lieutenant Andrew Stern of the Lewes Police and tell him."

"Whatever," Tess Matson said, slamming the door in Jake and Sean's face.

"Okay, I think you've managed to create a significant rift in their relationship," Sean said, walking back to his Volvo with Jake.

"Let's hope so," Jake said. "Now we head to the Police Department to see Lieutenant Stern."

On the west side of Lewes, in the pool house of her family home on Pilottown Road, Annette Vanderlind and her fiancé Roberto Vasquez had risen from bed that morning, taken a shower together, eaten a hurried breakfast, and left in her yellow Volkswagen Beetle to drive to a meeting at First Delaware Trust Bank.

Sturgis Willburn, Annette's stepfather and the administrator of her trust fund, lay in a coma in the local hospital. So, as she could not discuss her trust fund with him this morning, Annette opted instead to meet with the head of Investor Services at the bank.

The news was not good. When the international financial crisis occurred in 2008, the stock holdings in Annette's trust had lost more than one-third of their value overnight. And two years prior to that Sturgis had repositioned some of the fund's assets in bundled mortgage-backed securities, which had lost their entire value when the real estate bubble burst.

To make matters even worse, in an attempt to recover lost value Sturgis had made some 'questionable reinvestment choices in high profit-high risk stocks,' as the Investor Services head described them, and the gamble had not paid off. Annette's trust fund, originally valued at just over fifty thousand dollars when she received it upon her father's death, was now worth slightly less than sixteen thousand dollars.

At about the same time that Annette and Bobbie were returning to her VW in the bank parking lot, crestfallen that the trust money they were counting on to start married life in comfort would now barely pay off her car loan, Jake and Sean were walking into the Lewes police station on East Third Street to talk with Lieutenant Andrew Stern.

"Have I told you that I don't like police stations any better than I like hospitals?" Jake asked Sean.

"Why. Because you also think police stations are too germy?" Sean asked in return, recalling Jake's phobia from his hospital stay back in the spring of the year.

"No," Jake replied. "I have this irrational fear when I walk into one that they'll find some reason to lock me up, and I'll spend the rest of my life behind bars."

"But you do remember that we're here to try and help the police," Sean reminded him.

"Yes, I know. I told you it was an irrational fear," Jake said.

Inside the station, Jake introduced himself and Sean to the civilian clerk at the front counter, and told her that they were there to talk with Lieutenant Andrew Stern, if he was available.

"Just a moment and I'll check," the young female clerk said, and then walked from the receiving area down a short hallway and into an office.

"Lieutenant Stern can see you now," the clerk said, as she reappeared and motioned for Jake and Sean to join her in the short hallway.

"Lieutenant, this Jake Flynn and Sean Fitzpatrick," the clerk said as she ushered to two men into Stern's office.

"Thank you, Beverly," Stern said to the clerk. "I've already met Mr. Flynn. Please have a seat you two."

Jake and Sean did as the police Lieutenant instructed.

"I assume that you two are the iced teas, and Miss Vanderlind was the water," Stern began. "Now I just need to meet the beers."

"What are you talking about?" Jake asked.

"When I interviewed you in the Vanderlind's pool house following the attack Tuesday afternoon, I noticed three tumblers on the coffee table--one containing iced water and the other two

iced tea," the policeman explained. "There was also a half consumed bottle of beer on the coffee table, and another empty in the trash. Those, I assume, belonged to some young friend of Miss Vanderlind's."

"Wow," Jake remarked. "You're good."

"Thanks for the compliment, Mr. Flynn, but let's not get off topic," Stern said harshly. "You want to tell me why you and Miss Vanderlind lied and told me you were alone at the time of the attack?"

"Well, to be precise, Annette and I were the only two on the pool patio at the time the attacker jumped from the bushes," Jake said.

"Don't split hairs," Stern said, verbally smacking Jake. "Now, would you tell me why you said that you and she were not intimately involved, yet when I stopped by your mobile home this morning I observed the two of you in bed together?"

"Now I can guarantee that didn't happen," Sean interjected.

"And how is that, Mr. Fitzpatrick?" the Lieutenant asked.

"Because Jake and I have been lovers for the past twelve years," Sean replied. "You saw Annette and her boyfriend sharing a bed."

"The beer drinker?" Stern asked

"Right," Sean said.

"Okay, that explains that," Stern continued. "But why is it that you've owned your mobile home at Seabreeze since the 1970s, yet the maintenance man doesn't know anyone named Jacob Flynn?"

"That's because Delvin only knows me as Beau Blue," Jake said.

"The artist Beau Blue? My wife loves your stuff," Lieutenant Stern remarked, his mood changing completely at this revelation.

"Look, I've even got one of your mugs."

Stern turned his coffee mug around to reveal artwork by Jake on its side, the design entitled "Sand sculpture at Bethany Beach."

At this point Jake decided to open up to the Lieutenant Stern and share his theories on the attack by the pool and Sturgis Willburn's 'accident.' He was careful to leave out the details of the break-in at Annette's Germantown townhouse and the fact that her boyfriend, Corporal Roberto Vasquez, was currently serving on active duty in the Marines. He remembered Bobbie's desire that the civilian cops not inform military police.

"So you two were just down here to check on your vacation rental property, and you stopped in to see two neighbors you know from up in Germantown and found yourself in the middle of this whole mess?" Stern asked, trying to encapsulate Jake and Sean's involvement.

"Yeah, that's pretty much it," Jake said, now certain that if the Lieutenant somehow dug the whole truth out of him that he and Sean would be locked up for impeding a police investigation.

"I have to rethink this now," Stern said. "We were almost ready to close the file on Sturgis Willburn's accident, except for one detail."

"What's that?" Jake asked.

"In the medical report the hospital liaison gave to the police, it lists a head injury 'with a rectangular section of scalp and hair, approximately one and one-half by three inches in size, missing from the back of the head'," Lieutenant Stern said, quoting from the medical report. "We assume that happened when Mr. Willburn fell and hit his head, following which he stood and, dazed and staggering from his injuries, he fell overboard into the water."

"Well, that sounds logical," Jake said.

"Except that our investigative team has searched high and low on the boat, and we can't find a point of impact or any remnants of hair and scalp," Lieutenant Stern said. "There's no evidence on any of the stair treads, on the edge of any cabinets, or on any of the railings."

"Could it have been dislodged in the water?" Sean asked.

"I guess that's a possibility," the Lieutenant said, "but there should still be an impact point. For now we'll leave the case open."

"I think that's wise," Jake remarked. "This morning we visited Captain Ronnie Hardwick's girl friend, Tess Matson, and are hoping that she'll call you to discuss Ronnie's alibi for the time of the alleged accident. But we're really here to discuss another matter with you."

"Okay, shoot," Lieutenant Stern said.

"We think we might have a way to catch the attacker who is stalking Annette Vanderlind," Jake told the police officer.

"I'm all ears," Lieutenant Stern said.

On their way home to Seabreeze Mobile Home Park following their meeting, Sean's cell phone rang. Since he was driving, he handed the phone to Jake to answer.

"I don't know how to use these things," Jake said, staring quizzically at the tiny keypad full of buttons that he did not understand.

"Jeez you're a technology dinosaur," Sean said. "Press the 'off' button."

"But I want to turn it on, don't I?" Jake asked.

"What, now you're the expert?" Sean replied. "Hit the 'off' button. Now press the big green key on the left."

"Okay, done," Jake said, still holding the phone in front of him.

"Well, talk," Sean said.

"Oh," Jake said, quickly putting the phone to his ear. "Hello."

It was Annette Vanderlind, calling to relate what she had learned about her trust fund during her morning meeting at First Delaware Trust Bank.

"Wow, that's tough," Jake said in sympathy. "But listen, I don't want you to tell anybody else what you've learned. Nobody, not even your mother. Okay?"

He paused for her reply.

"Good," Jake continued. "Sean and I will plan on coming over early this evening for dinner. No, don't let your mother call Corinne to come in and cook. We'll bring some food with us, and make dinner when we get there. Okay. Bye."

Jake held the phone out in front of his face again, staring at the buttons.

"Hit the big red key on the right," Sean prompted. "Now hit the 'off' button again."

"So why do you hit 'off' to turn the phone on?" Jake asked. "That seems counterintuitive."

"You know, I didn't design the phone, JM," Sean answered. "I just bought it, and read the manual so I'd know how to use it."

"Jeez, you don't have to get so huffy," Jake remarked. "I was just saying that it seems counterintuitive."

"Yeah, I heard you the first time," Sean said. "So now I suppose you want me to drive to the store, so we can pick up some groceries for dinner tonight."

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble, Mr. Huffy," Jake said.

"Bite me," Sean replied.

"Now I know why my parents always ended up fighting on family vacations," Sean said, after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Why is that?" Jake asked.

"Because they annoyed each other," Sean said.

A light rain began to fall, as the pair drove on in silence toward the Giant grocery store on the coastal highway west of Rehoboth Beach. Eventually, Sean turned on the Volvo's windshield wipers.

"When is it going to stop raining?" he screamed, scaring the hell out of Jake.

Chapter Fifteen

At five-thirty on Thursday afternoon, Sean and Jake left his mobile home to drive to the now-familiar home on Pilottown Road. Sean had taken a short nap that afternoon and, thankfully, his earlier grumpy mood had disappeared by the time Jake woke him up around five.

When they arrived at the Dutch colonial house, they saw that Ronnie Hardwick's faded red Toyota was still parked in the driveway. The two men entered the fenced backyard of the home, carrying a bag of groceries each, and went immediately to the pool house to check in with Annette and Bobbie.

After a quick huddled conversation in the pool house, Annette escorted them into the kitchen of the main house so that Jake could begin preparing dinner.

"Mother," Annette called out as they entered the kitchen, "Jake and Sean are here. Jake is preparing dinner for us. Remember?"

"That's fine," Janet responded from her bedroom on the second floor. "I didn't call Corinne to come cook for us this evening, and now we won't have to order in."

Jake set about making a skillet stroganoff, a process that would take nearly an hour. He started by cutting the beef in strips, salting and flouring the strips, and browning them in hot oil in a large cast iron skillet.

Annette helped by unwrapping a half pound block of cave aged Emmental cheese, and placing it on a cheese board to warm to

room temperature. She also put a couple dozen six-sided Bremner Sesame Wafers on a small platter, to serve with the cheese.

After the beef was browned and removed from the skillet, Jake sautéed a large sliced onion in the same pan. After that he added in mushroom slices, beef stock, and one-quarter cup of brandy. And finally, he returned the browned meat to the skillet to simmer in the liquid for approximately forty minutes.

Meanwhile, Sean served as chef's helper by taking the two dozen or so brussel sprouts which Jake and he had purchased earlier that afternoon, and pulling them apart until he had an enormous pile of individual leaves.

At this point Annette called to her mother and Ronnie Hardwick, who were secluded in an upstairs bedroom, and told them that dinner would be ready in a half hour or so. In the meantime, she told them, there was cheese and crackers to snack on in the living room.

When Jake went into the living room during a break in cooking, he encountered Ronnie sprawled shirtless on the couch wearing only his chino slacks, munching on a cracker with cheese on top. Janet Vanderlind was still upstairs, and Sean, Annette and Bobbie were all in the kitchen. Jake just stared at Ronnie.

"I think your cheese went bad. It smells rotten," Ronnie said.

"That's probably your own crotch you're smelling," Jake said. "I see you got all dressed up for dinner."

"Pull in your claws, pussy," Ronnie said.

"Oh, I wasn't attacking you. You'll know when I'm attacking you," Jake said.

"Bring it on, fag boy," Ronnie said.

"It's coming, Ronnie," Jake said, then left the living room and returned to the kitchen as he heard Janet coming downstairs.

Now about a half hour into the simmering of the beef mixture, Jake added nearly a pound of quick cook egg noodles to the skillet, cooking covered until they were soft from soaking up the flavorful liquid. He assigned Bobbie and Jake the task of setting the dining table, with help from Annette in finding the plates, flatware and napkins.

As the dinner neared completion, it was time for Jake to cook the brussel sprouts. He first put a tablespoon or so of extra virgin olive oil in a pan along with a large clove of garlic he had minced. Then he filled the pan with the brussel sprout leaves, tossing them for only a few minutes in the hot oil and garlic until they turned a bright green. He quickly transferred them to a serving bowl and squeezed fresh lemon juice over the pile of greens.

Annette placed the vegetable bowl on the dining table, and called everyone in to be seated. Finally, right before serving the entree Jake stirred a generous amount of sour cream into the mixture, and delivered the skillet full of stroganoff to a hot pad on the dining room table.

"Everyone dig in," Jake said, taking a seat at the table next to Sean, "it's serve yourself."

"It smells wonderful," Janet said groggily.

Jake guessed that she had switched from her usual bourbon and soda to some prescription medication to calm her nerves.

"Tasty grub, Jakey," Ronnie said, digging into the pile of stroganoff on his plate. "You're a good little cook."

Everyone ate in silence for a minute or two.

"Mother, there is something I need to discuss with you," Annette said. "This incident with Sturgis' accident has started Bobbie and me to thinking. If anything like that should happen to either of us, the other one couldn't even get in to intensive care to visit because we're not family."

"Yeah, that'd be a bitch," Ronnie said.

"And if I should die, my military survivors' benefits wouldn't go to Annette until we're married," Bobbie added.

"So, what are you thinking?" Sean coaxed Annette.

"We've decided we want to get married right away...tomorrow, in fact," Annette said.

"I thought we were going to have a big church wedding here in town," Janet said.

"We can still have a party to celebrate the marriage, when Sturgis gets out of the hospital," Annette countered. "We just want to make it official as soon as possible."

"It's a big step, Annette," Ronnie said. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. We've decided to drive up to Dover in the morning, and get married in the courthouse there," Bobbie explained. "Jake and Sean have agreed to go with us and act as our witnesses."

"I'm just saying, half the marriages in the U.S. end in divorce," Ronnie said, shoveling stroganoff into his mouth. "You want to be sure about this thing."

"We're sure that we love each other, and we're sure that we want to get married," Annette responded. "We have only decided to push up the date."

"Well, it sounds to me like you're rushing into it," Ronnie said, talking with his mouth full. "It's a big step."

"Why the hell do you care?" Janet said. "I think she's right. You two should grab onto each other and hold on tight."

"Amen to that," Bobbie commented.

"Thank you, mother, I wanted to make sure we had your blessing before we went ahead with our plans," Annette said. "When we've finished cleaning up after dinner, Bobbie and I will pack a few things and go spend the night at Jake and Sean's place, so we can get an early start in the morning."

"And where's that?" Ronnie asked.

"Why?" Jake countered.

"In case something happens with Sturgis, and we need to get in touch," Ronnie said.

"I see. It's on Osprey Lane in Seabreeze Mobile Home Park--number 24, the last house down on the left," Jake said. "But you could always call Annette on her cell phone, you know."

"Oh, right," Ronnie said.

"I think this is best," Janet said. "You never know what crap life is going to throw at you. Look at me and Sturgis. If anything happens to him..."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and Janet held her napkin up to hide her face as she softly wept.

"Jan, babe, we'll be okay," Ronnie said, leaning his shirtless torso toward Janet, and putting an arm around her shoulders. "Whatever happens, we'll be okay."

Janet straightened her torso, shook off Ronnie's arm, and dropped her napkin in her lap.

"What does that even mean?" Janet asked. "There is no 'we.' I am a married woman."

"I'm just saying, if anything happens to Sturgis..." Ronnie began.

"I've already been a widow once," Janet said. "The last thing I want to do is bury another husband."

Janet stood, threw her napkin on the table, and strode into the front hallway of the home, followed by Ronnie in quick pursuit.

"Wait," Ronnie said to her.

"I just want to be happy. I don't want to wait for it anymore," Janet said, nearly shrieking. "I'm always waiting. I'm so tired of waiting."

"I make you happy, don't I?" Ronnie asked.

"I think you should go," Janet said.

"Jan, don't be that way."

"No, I mean it. Go," she said, then turned and walked up the stairs.

"Okay, I'll go," Ronnie called after her. "You need to rest. I'll come back later and check on you."

"Oh, God," Janet screamed in exasperation from the second floor hallway, followed by the sound of her bedroom door being slammed shut.

Ronnie checked the pockets of his jeans to be sure he had his wallet and keys, walked out the front door, got in his dull red Toyota parked in the driveway and drove off.

Chapter Sixteen

When Ronnie Hardwick walked into his apartment on Skylark Road, Tess Matson, the mother of his unborn child, was sitting on their ratty couch watching *Wheel of Fortune* on the television.

"Where have you been?" she asked Ronnie.

"At the poker game," Ronnie said.

"You slept there last night?" she asked, knowing full well he hadn't.

"Yeah, it went late. I crashed on the couch," Ronnie said.

"Where's your shirt?" she asked.

"I must have left it," Ronnie said.

"Did you bring me some of the pot you copped from your dealer yesterday?" she asked.

"Yeah. God, what is this? Twenty questions?" Ronnie said. "At least let me change before you start grilling me."

He walked into the sole bedroom of the small apartment and shut the door behind him. Tess rose from the couch and crept to the bedroom door, silently opening it a crack.

Through the slit she could see Ronnie walk across the room to the air conditioning vent, squat down, and remove the cover. He removed a wooden cigar box from the recess and retrieved a rolled up clear sandwich bag from it. He then took two thousand dollars in cash from his wallet, part of his summer earnings he had intended to wager in the poker game the previous night, laid it in the cigar box, placed the box back in the recess and put the cover back on the vent.

Ronnie then changed out of his chinos, putting on a pair of dark blue denim jeans he removed from a hanger in the closet. He slipped his feet into pair of old brown penny loafers, with no socks. Finally he took a white tee shirt from a drawer in the wooden dresser, pulled it over his torso, and bent down to retrieve the rolled up sandwich bag from off the floor. This was the signal for Tess to close the bedroom door and creep quickly back to her position on the living room couch.

"Here's your pot," Ronnie said, returning to the living room and throwing the baggy of marijuana on the coffee table in front of Tess. He lifted his left arm.

"Look at this fucking shirt. It's got a hole in the armpit. You couldn't buy me some fucking new tee shirts while I was away this summer?"

"With what?" Tess asked. "You barely sent me enough money to pay the rent and eat. Thank the Lord they have free baby check-ups at Public Health. You know, I was so broke a woman there bought me a bottle of folic acid out of her own money."

"What are you doing taking acid when you're pregnant," Ronnie asked.

"It's a vitamin, dumbass, for the baby," Tess said.

"I'm not the dumbass. I told you that you should have gotten rid of it," Ronnie said. "We can't afford a kid."

"I can see you're gonna be a great daddy," Tess ridiculed, in a mocking tone. "You want to get pizza for dinner?"

"I already ate," Ronnie said.

"Great."

The Purple Heart Mystery

Although she did not have the words to describe it, Tess now realized that the man by whom she had gotten pregnant was a sociopath, a pathological liar who spent his life spinning webs of deception designed to benefit only him.

It was at this moment Tess Matson decided that the next time she was alone she would place a telephone call to the Lewes Police, and talk to Lieutenant Andrew Stern.

"I've got to go take care of some business. I could be late. Don't wait up," Ronnie said, and walked out of the apartment.

Chapter Seventeen

When Jake turned off the television following the ten o'clock news on Thursday night, Sean's Volvo and Annette's yellow Volkswagen were both parked in the driveway of 24 Osprey Lane.

Sean had fallen asleep mid-way through the program, before hearing the weather report that announced there would be one more day of light rain before Tropical Depression Lee moved north away from the mid-Atlantic region. Jake now woke him up and walked him through the kitchen, past the laundry area and bathroom, to the smaller bedroom just beyond.

"In you go, buddy," Jake said to Sean, giving him a gentle push toward the bed.

Jake then continued down the hallway to the bedroom at the end. The door was slightly ajar, and through the opening he could see the buzz cut black hair of a man's head on one pillow and the soft blond hair of the woman's head lying on the pillow next to his.

"We're going to bed now," Jake said softly.

"Goodnight," one of them replied.

Jake plodded back down the hallway to the other bedroom and flopped onto the bed next to Sean. He drew the light bed sheet over both their bodies, and laid his head on the pillow for some much needed sleep.

Sometime in the middle of the night Jake was awakened by an odd sound he did not recognize. It was the faint sound of metal scratching on metal as the lock on the front door was being picked.

"Someone's here," Jake whispered, nudging Sean from sleep.

They lay in bed barely daring to breathe, and heard the bottom of the front door brush against the living room carpet as it was being opened. Jake turned his head toward the bedroom door and, squinting through nearly closed eyelids so as to appear asleep, he could just make out the shape of someone walking up the hallway toward the bedroom at the end. Then he heard the sound of that door being slowly pushed open.

The two reclining figures sat upright in the bed.

"Police..freeze," the man said.

"Go, go, go," the woman said into a walkie-talkie, while shining a flashlight on the intruder.

"What the..." the intruder said.

"Privates Daniel Portillo and Carla Betts, Lewes Police," the man said, pointing his revolver at the intruder. "Drop the knife and get down on the floor."

"Oh, no," the intruder said, "I'm not going back."

Jake heard the sound of the two back-up police officers as they burst through the front door. They positioned themselves near the dinette table, across the trailer from the front door, so their fellow officers in the bedroom would not be in the line of fire if they needed to use their weapons.

"Drop the knife," Private Portillo repeated. "Do it!"

"It's my third strike," the intruder said. "I'll get life."

He turned and, mistaking the clear path down the hall to the front door as a chance to escape, he made a run for it. The back-up officers turned on their flashlights, also aiming their handguns at the intruder as he came running past the bathroom toward them.

"Freeze," one of them said. "You're surrounded."

"Aw, hell," the intruder said, raising his knife as if by instinct, still thinking he could make it out the front door.

Each back-up officer fired a single round into the attacker's chest. One of the shots was a through-and-through, passing through the attacker's body, breaking a pane in the hallway window, and sailing across the backyard and out into Rehoboth Bay.

"Jesus," Sean yelled, flinching as he lay in bed next to Jake.

Someone turned on the hallway overhead light.

"Suspect is down," Private Betts reported into her walkie-talkie, as she and Private Portillo walked down the hallway past Jake and Sean's bedroom. "He's been shot. We're going to need an ambulance."

The wounded intruder lay writhing on the kitchen floor.

"Oh, God. Oh, no," he said in a low guttural tone.

"You're under arrest for attempted murder," one of the back-up officers said while kneeling down next to the intruder.

The officer continued on, repeating the words of the Miranda Rights caution that the bleeding intruder had heard recited before.

"Do you understand these rights?" the officer asked in conclusion.

"Oh, God. Oh, no," the intruder grunted over and over again.

"Do you understand?" the officer asked again.

"Uh huh," the intruder groaned.

"What's your name?" the other back-up officer asked, removing the black ski mask that covered the intruder's head and hid his face.

Still fully dressed, Jake and Sean cautiously stuck their heads out of their bedroom door to look down the hallway.

"Is it over?" Jake asked.

"It's safe, sirs," Lieutenant Betts said. "Just stay back out of the way."

Through the assembled police, Jake could see the body of the African-American man who lay bleeding on the kitchen floor. He had a strange feeling that he had seen the man somewhere before.

"Ask him who hired him," Jake called out to the police. "Who is he working for?"

"Who hired you?" one of the kneeling officers asked the intruder.

"Won't say," he replied. "Fresh...start."

Jake inched closer to the intruder, and could see air bubbles frothing the blood pooling in one of his chest wounds. He'd been shot in the lung, Jake guessed.

"Who hired you?" Jake shouted at the wounded man.

"Findin' a new path...together," the man whispered.

That triggered Jake's memory. He had seen this man in the photo of the charity fundraiser on the breakfast nook wall of Annette's family home on Pilottown Road, standing behind then-Senator Joe Biden.

"Otis," Jake said aloud. "His name is Otis something. I've seen a picture of him. Who hired you, Otis?"

But the intruder was already glaze eyed, staring straight ahead. His breathing was a pitiful death rattle. Then it stopped.

"He's gone," Private Portillo announced, as the sound of the responding ambulance could be heard wailing in the distance.

Down in the town of Rehoboth, Annette Vanderlind and Bobbie Vasquez lay sleeping peacefully beside one another, on the futon in the upstairs space above the *Prints of Whales* art gallery.

Chapter Eighteen

On Friday morning, Donatella Maletti left the 'closed' sign on the front door while she served breakfast to the young couple she had hosted overnight in the guest accommodations above her gallery. Jake and Sean joined them as Donnie was pouring cups of freshly made hot espresso coffee and serving a homemade custard tart topped with fresh plum halves which she had brought from home.

"Ah, my little Beau Blue and his handsome lover," Donnie said, as Jake and Sean arrived at the top of the stairs from the gallery below. "Two more for breakfast. Tutti a tavola a mangiare."

"That means 'come to the table to eat' in Italian," Annette explained to Bobbie.

As the five ate breakfast, Jake detailed the incident that took place in his mobile home overnight.

"You can finally relax now," Jake said to Annette. "Your attacker is dead."

"And you're sure it was Otis, the man you saw in the picture back at the house?" Annette asked Jake.

"I'm pretty sure," Jake said. "The police are double checking."

"So, did Sturgis hire him?" Annette mused aloud. "He hired Ronnie and Enrique to work for him, after they graduated from the New Path program."

"I hadn't made that leap in logic," Jake said. "And, unfortunately, Otis died without saying who had hired him."

"It must have been Sturgis," Bobbie said. "He was probably trying to cover up how badly he mismanaged Annette's trust fund. It's criminal how much of that money he squandered."

"But your mother would have found out about the trust when she inherited it, had you died before marrying," Sean reasoned.

"He probably figured mother would be too distraught to be paying attention," Annette replied.

"But how could Sturgis have told Otis where you would be last night? He's lying in the hospital in a coma," Jake said.

"Ronnie and your mother are the only ones who thought you were staying with us last night. We told them at dinner," Sean said.

"That's not entirely true," Annette countered. "Sturgis knew about your house by the bay. When I called mother on the boat on Tuesday, I told her that Bobbie and I were staying there with you that night. She probably told Sturgis about it. He mentioned it during after dinner drinks on Wednesday. Remember?"

"So I guess before his accident Sturgis could have told Otis where Annette might be," Sean said. "And Otis could have spotted your Volkswagen that we had you park in the driveway, as bait."

"I'm not sold on that possibility. What about your mother?" Jake gingerly proposed. "Could she have been trying to get her hands on your trust fund?"

"She does seem to enjoy spending money," Sean said.

"And we know she at least met Otis, at the New Path fundraiser five years ago," Jake added.

"No, I can't believe that," Annette firmly stated. "We haven't been close in recent years, but I won't believe that."

"Then there's the matter of Sturgis' accident on the boat, which I'm not convinced was one," Jake said.

"You think someone attacked him, too?" Annette asked.

"It's a possibility. Accidents such as falls are messy by their very nature. There should be some evidence left behind on the boat," Jake reasoned. "But the police haven't been able to find anything."

"Who would want to hurt Sturgis?" Annette asked.

"Well, it looks like Ronnie is trying to muscle in on his marriage," Bobbie said.

"And it's possible that Ronnie's girlfriend, Tess, is reconsidering providing him with an alibi for the time of the accident," Jake said.

"Still, why would he want to hurt Sturgis?" Annette wondered aloud. "My stepfather is his meal ticket. Who else is an ex-con going to find to pay him that good a salary?"

"I wonder if things on the boat trip this summer might have gotten a little out of control, romantically, when Sturgis made his trips back home for business," Sean said to Annette. "I think Ronnie might be reminding your mother of her teenage years, when she felt young and desirable making out with the boys from school in the dunes at Henlopen Park,"

"Oh, God, I hoped he was just a street mongrel lusting after the show dog he would never conquer," Annette said.

"Physical attraction often masquerades as love," Sean counseled. "And the hope of love, even a false or unrequited love, can lead people to make bad choices."

"So wise for one so handsome," Donatella said, turning to Sean seated next to her and touching his cheek with her hand.

"I'd almost forgotten that we're keeping you from business, Donnie," Jake said. "We should help you clean up and go."

"All the youth and passion, it keeps the blood stirring," Donnie said. "This is the most excitement Rehoboth has had in years."

"Contessa Maletti," Sean said, standing, "you are an exotic and wonderful woman."

He leaned forward and took her hand in his and kissed it.

"If I weren't gay..." he said.

"If you weren't gay some cute some girl would have snapped you up years ago, just like you did my beautiful Beau," Donnie said.

Sean helped Jake clean the dishes from breakfast, while Bobbie and Annette removed the bed linens and returned the futon to its couch-like position. Then the two couples left the art gallery, and all rode in Sean's Volvo back to pick up Annette's car, which was parked in the driveway of Jake's mobile home.

As he drove his passengers down Osprey Lane, Sean observed a golf cart stopped on the road in front of their destination. Delvin, the community maintenance man, was walking from the rear yard of Jake's property to the front.

Annette and Bobbie left in her Volkswagen, to return to her family home on Pilottown Road and tell her mother the news that the ordeal with the attacker was now ended. Jake and Sean remained behind to talk with Delvin.

"Hey, Mr. Blue, what's for dessert?" Delvin asked.

"Well, we've just had a homemade plum custard tart for breakfast," Jake replied.

"That sounds tasty."

"It was," Jake said. "What brings you to my house, Delvin?"

"I hear there was a commotion last night...fella got himself killed," Delvin said.

"That's right. The police shot an intruder," Jake said.

"Lord rest his soul," Delvin said, shaking his head in sorrow. "I see a bullet busted out a window pane around back of your house."

"Yes, it did," Jake said.

"Well, I think I've got a piece of glass in the maintenance shed about that size," Delvin said. "You mind if I go ahead and replace it?"

"That would be great," Jake replied. "Thank you."

"Delvin, you are a prince among men," Sean said.

"No, Mr. Sean," Delvin said, shaking his head. "I'm the handy man."

Jake and Sean entered the mobile home. Jake donned a pair of latex kitchen work gloves, filled a bucket with warm water and chlorine bleach, and set about removing the blood stain on the kitchen floor where the intruder had died a few hours ago. Sean sat on the sofa in the living room and called Greta, their Germantown neighbor, to tell her the news.

"Hi, Greta, it's Sean," he began, once she answered. "I'm calling to tell you and your temporary houseguest how things are going down here in Delaware."

There was a pause, and then he laughed.

"No, I'm sorry. I know it's not funny. Yes, it's been four days," Sean said. "Well, when Miss Becker gets home from work this evening you can tell her that we contacted the local police, and we have identified the attacker and he is no longer a threat. It's safe for her to go back home to the townhouse now."

Sean paused again, listening.

"That's good. So you've been eating well," he said. "Well, I'm sure we still have a few loose ends to tie up down here, but we should be home..."

Sean glanced at Jake, who was on his knees on the tiled kitchen floor, swiping at the blood stain with a wet sponge.

"Tomorrow evening?" Jake said, tentatively.

"...sometime tomorrow evening," Sean told Greta. "All right, we'll see you then. Good bye."

Sean ended the call with Greta and replaced his cell phone in his pants pocket.

"What was all the laughing about?" Jake asked.

"It seems that Sandy Becker is a systems analyst with the National Institute of Standards and Technology," Sean replied, laughing once again, "and, as you well know, our neighbor Greta is a bit of a hoarder. She's in a panic because Sandy has done nothing but tidy up and clean since she started staying at Greta's house on Monday."

Jake now laughed, too.

"But apparently Sandy is a good cook," Sean continued, "so Greta is well fed and panicked."

The two men laughed together now. And each of them felt good about it, given the recent tension in their relationship.

They planned on joining Annette and Bobbie at the house on Pilottown Road, when Jake had finished removing the evidence of the events of the previous night from his mobile home.

Chapter Nineteen

When Jake and Sean arrived back on Pilottown Road early Friday afternoon, they observed Ronnie Hardwick's dull red Corolla parked once again in the driveway of the Dutch colonial.

"I'm going to let you out, and go to the gas station down the road," Sean said to Jake. "I want to have the car's fluids checked and fill her up with gasoline before our trip home. The tank is so low that we're practically running on fumes right now."

"Sure," Jake said, closing the passenger side door from which he had exited. "I'll see you when you get back."

"Right," Sean said, driving off west on Pilottown Road.

It was Annette who let Jake in when he knocked on the front door of the home. She, Bobbie, her mother, and Captain Ronnie were sitting around the dining room table discussing the recent developments. Ronnie had changed out of his tattered old tee shirt into the baby blue polo shirt he had left in Janet's bedroom the previous evening.

"Mr. Flynn, I'm so glad to hear from Annette that you're all okay, and that dreadful man was killed," Janet said to Jake, as he entered the dining room and sat at the table.

"Yes, it was lucky that the police responded as quickly as they did," Jake said.

"Yes, that was lucky. So I guess your trip to the courthouse in Dover to get married today didn't take place," Janet said.

"No, mother, that was all a..." Annette started to say.

"The trip fell through, for obvious reasons," Jake interrupted, subtly shaking his head in Annette and Bobbie's direction. "But I'm sure Annette and Bobbie still want to get married as soon as possible."

"That's right," Bobbie said, picking up on the cue from Jake. "We still want to get hitched as soon as we can."

There was a brief lull in the conversation during which Jake stared at Ronnie Hardwick.

"You're awfully quiet, Ronnie," Jake said, pointedly.

"What do you want me to say, Jakey?" Ronnie replied.

"Aren't you glad the attacker is dead? Isn't that good news, Ronnie? Aren't you happy for your employers' daughter and her fiancé?" Jake prodded.

"Sure," he responded flatly.

"I've got an idea," Janet said. "Let's all go out to dinner tonight to celebrate. We'll go to the best restaurant in town, my treat."

"Oh, mother, do you really think that's appropriate...going out to celebrate while your husband is laying in a coma in intensive care?" Annette asked in astonishment. "You've already committed one social gaffe this week, throwing up in the hospital waiting room."

"What did you say?" Jake asked.

"I said she threw up in the hospital waiting room," Annette said. "You remember...you were there."

"No. What did you call it?" Jake asked.

"A social gaffe," Annette said.

"That's it!" Jake bellowed, turning toward Ronnie. "Sturgis didn't have an accident and fall off the boat. You hit him over the head with the gaff pole, the same pole you used to lift the tuna onboard that he caught off Cape Cod this summer. And then you pushed him into the water to drown."

"Very clever, Jakey," Ronnie said quietly.

"And you hired poor, dumb Otis to kill Annette for you, didn't you," Jake continued, "so you could marry Janet after she inherited Annette's trust fund."

"Jesus, Ronnie, is that true?" Janet asked.

"Sure, it is," Jake said. "Otis and he met in the New Path program that Sturgis founded. Ronnie promised Otis they'd take the money and start on a new path together. Otis said those exact words as he lay bleeding to death on my kitchen floor last night."

"I did it for you, Jan. I did it for us," Ronnie explained to Janet.

"Oh, God, after all we've done for you," she said.

"Sturgis doesn't pay attention to you, Jan," Ronnie said. "You deserve more than that."

"I can't believe...I think you should leave. I don't want to see you," Janet said, rising and running from the dining room and up the stairs in the center hallway.

"Jan, please, I can give you what you need," Ronnie said, going after her.

"No. Leave me alone," she screamed.

The sound from Janet slamming shut her bedroom door echoed down the stairs.

"Don't say that, baby," Ronnie pleaded.

Then the slamming, crunching sound of Ronnie busting open the bedroom door was heard by Jake, Annette and Bobbie as they still sat, stunned, at the dining room table.

"You'd better call the police, Annette," Jake said, springing into action and heading toward the stairs.

"I'm not your baby. Get away from me," Janet said, now shrieking. "You're sick. There's something wrong with you."

"No, baby," Ronnie said, grabbing Janet and throwing her down on her back on the bed. "We can go away together, just the two of

us, to Palm Beach. Or we can disappear on some island in the Bahamas...whatever you want."

"I want you to go now," Janet pleaded, as Ronnie straddled her.

"No. You've got to listen to me," Ronnie yelled.

"Get off me," Janet screamed, slapping Ronnie hard across the face as Jake bounded into the bedroom.

"You heard the woman," Jake boomed, in the most commanding voice he could muster through his fear.

Jake knew Ronnie was half his age and in much better physical condition, and so would have the upper hand should this scene devolve into a fight.

"You fucking asshole," Ronnie said, glaring at Jake. "This is all your fault."

The younger, fit man leapt from the bed in a rage and started toward Jake, who decided that running away was the smartest of his options. Jake headed back into the hallway and toward the stairs down to the first floor.

He saw that Bobbie was now making his way up those stairs one at a time, stepping up only with his left leg since the muscles he used to lift his right leg had been severed by the accident in Afghanistan. In an instant Jake decided to take the other stairs that went up to the home's attic, or so he assumed.

Halfway up these stairs, Ronnie grabbed one of Jake's ankles. But Jake was able to kick him in the head with his other foot, a good solid hit that temporarily stunned his pursuer.

Jake reached the top of the stairs, threw open the hinged hatch door above him, and was shocked to be met by daylight. The stairs led not to the attic, but to the widow's walk.

"I'll fucking kill you, you faggot," Ronnie now roared in pain.

Jake burst out of the stairs onto the perch located above the ridgeline of the house, with Ronnie following right behind. This is

not the place I would have chosen to have a fistfight, Jake thought to himself as he scanned the ten foot square platform.

"You ruined everything, you little prick," Ronnie said, stopping to catch his breath. Blood trickled down his forehead from the gash that Jake had made kicking him with his shoe on the stairs.

"I told you that you'd know when I was attacking you," Jake said.

"We'll see who attacks who now, you fucking fag," Ronnie said.

The taunt enraged Jake, who quickly jumped toward Ronnie and landed a hard right punch squarely on his jaw. The pain in Jake's right hand was immediate and intense, and he yelped in response.

"Son of a bitch," Ronnie said, coming at Jake with both fists raised like a boxer.

Ronnie landed a hard right to Jake's nose, and followed up with a left to the gut that doubled Jake over in pain. While Jake was bent over before him, Ronnie smashed both his fists down on a spot between Jake's shoulders which drove Jake to his knees.

"Get up, you pussy," Ronnie said, lifting Jake to his feet and connecting another right jab to Jake's nose. "Otis was supposed to kill Annette last week while I was at sea, giving me a perfect alibi. But he fucked that up."

Ronnie had Jake backed against the railing and again punched him hard in the gut, but kept him upright this time.

"We moored off New Jersey so he could kill her on Tuesday. Then I was going to club Sturgis and dump him overboard, and tell the police it was suicide because he was so upset at Annette's murder. But you stopped Otis," Ronnie said, landing a right jab to Jake's chin.

"You're a fucking psycho," Jake spit out, striking out with his right fist but missing his target.

"And now you've gotten Otis killed, you stupid fag," Ronnie said, smashing his right fist into Jake's nose again.

Blood was streaming from Jake's nose past the corner of his mouth, mixing with saliva and dripping from his chin. His sight now blurred from the pain, all Jake could think was that he had better manage to get a time out to gather his strength and his wits. So with all his might he pushed Ronnie away from him with both arms.

To his surprise, the young man reeled backwards and fell over the painted railing and out of sight. Jake heard Ronnie's body as it tumbled down the roof.

"Fuuuuuck!"

Then there was a sickening dull thud as his body landed on the concrete patio next to the pool.

Unbeknownst to Jake, Bobbie had managed to make his way to the top of the stairs and had popped his head out of the hatch. As Jake pushed Ronnie backwards, Bobbie had grabbed the young man's feet, flipping him over the railing that surrounded the rooftop perch.

Jake collapsed into a sitting position on the platform.

"Sir, are you badly hurt?" Bobbie asked him.

"Oh, no," Jake replied, gently wiping his bloody nose with his shirt sleeve. "We Irish are brawlers."

"Well, you look terrible. Come on, let's get down from here."

Within a few minutes the police responded to Annette's call, followed by an ambulance. The crew first saw to Jake's facial injuries, stopping the bleeding, and then removed the body from the back patio. As Sean returned from his trip to the gas station he was met by the sight of the emergency vehicles. He dashed into the house.

"Jesus, are you okay?" Sean asked, rushing to his bloodied lover who was seated back at the dining room table.

"No, but I'll be all right," Jake replied, holding a plastic sandwich bag full of ice to his nose.

"What happened?"

"It was Ronnie who masterminded the whole thing. He was a real sicko," Jake said. "He hit Sturgis over the head with the fishing gaff. And he hired Otis to kill Annette. He thought he'd wind up marrying Janet. But he probably planned to kill her, too, and inherit the house, and boat, and everything. I accused him of it, and he went nuts. We ended up punching it out, up on the widow's walk. And then Bobbie tripped him up and he fell off the roof."

"Who fell off the roof? Ronnie or Bobbie?" asked Sean.

"Ronnie," Jake answered. "It's always the pretty boys...think the world owes them a living 'cause they're so hot. Ow. Shit. I'm too old to take up boxing."

"Is everybody else okay?" Sean asked.

"Yeah," Jake replied, "physically, anyway."

"My God, JM, I leave you alone for a couple of minutes, and you solve the whole case and kill the bad guy," Sean said. "Do you have to do everything yourself?"

They both laughed at this, although Jake did so less heartily due to the pain from the punch he had taken in his solar plexus.

When Lieutenant Andrew Stern of the Lewes Police arrived at the house on Pilottown Road, he took a statement from Jake about his confrontation with Ronnie Hardwick.

"So, what I have is a confession made under duress to a civilian, by a man who's now dead," Stern said. "It's not the way I like to close a case."

"Gee, I'm sorry that I couldn't get him to write it out and sign it for you," Jake said.

"You realize, don't you Mr. Flynn, that this is the primary reason we have civilian police forces in the United States," Stern asked rhetorically, "so that untrained citizens will not attempt to solve crimes themselves, and risk their own lives and the lives of others in the process?"

"I hadn't intended to confront Ronnie Hardwick essentially on my own," Jake replied. "And I believe my nose shows that I was not up to the task. But when I realized what he had used to bludgeon Sturgis with on the boat, I blurted it out. And things just escalated from there."

"I understand," the policeman replied. "The puzzle for me now is that my men have scoured every inch of the Dutch Treat, and no gaff pole was found onboard that boat."

"I guess Ronnie could have thrown it into the water," Jake said, staring out the dining room window toward the driveway.

"They're designed to float," Stern said. "We would have found it during our search of the marina."

"I'll bet I know where it is," Jake said.

And when the police searched the trunk of Ronnie Hardwick's faded red Toyota, they discovered the gaff pole he had used to club Sturgis Willburn over the head, with skin and hair evidence on the handle that matched Willburn's injuries.

"I have to say, Mr. Flynn, that your assistance was instrumental in the solving of both of these cases--the mysterious intruder who was after Miss Vanderlind and the attack on Sturgis Willburn," Stern grudgingly admitted.

After that, the police Lieutenant insisted that Sean take Jake to the emergency room at Beebe Memorial Hospital to be checked out. X rays confirmed that Jake had no broken ribs or facial bones. But his battered nose would be swollen for several days.

Chapter Twenty

The sun rose over the ocean into a clear blue sky on Saturday morning. The tropical depression that had stalled over the mid-Atlantic region for the past four days had finally moved north.

Jake slept until nine o'clock, and woke to the glorious smells emanating from the kitchen of his mobile home. Sean had gotten up not fifteen minutes before, and was frying the remaining bacon left from Wednesday's breakfast, toasting bread, and brewing coffee in anticipation of Jake's rising.

"Hey, bruiser, how do you feel this morning?" Sean asked his lover, as Jake eased himself onto a bench at the dinette table clad only in the underpants he had worn the day before.

"Everything hurts."

"I'm not surprised, old man," Sean said, as he set down a mug of coffee on the table in front of Jake. "It's a pretty day. What do you feel like doing?"

"Well, I told you back home in Germantown that I wasn't coming to the beach without getting in the ocean," Jake said, stirring sugar and milk into his coffee, "so I guess we're going swimming."

"Sounds like a plan."

Within the hour, Jake was floating on his back in the ocean, just out beyond the point where the waves begin to swell before breaking on shore. And Sean was body surfing on the substantial waves still being kicked up by the now departed storm front. Afterwards, they lay side by side in the sand on beach towels,

letting the warm rays of the sun melt the tension of the past few days from their bodies and cleanse their spirits.

"I've got an errand to run before we head home," Jake said, rising from his towel and donning a Hawaiian shirt over his boardshorts, and slipping his feet into his black Reef sandals.

"I'm right behind you," Sean said, doing the same.

The two looked like a pair of aging surfers sans boards, as they walked from the beach onto the boardwalk. Jake led his partner to the Candy Kitchen on Rehoboth Avenue, where he purchased two half pound boxes of chocolate peanut butter truffle fudge, a specialty of the establishment.

"Who's this for?" Sean asked him.

"I want to give Donnie a little gift for taking such good care of Annette and Bobbie," Jake answered. "And we need to take Greta something for hosting Miss Becker as a houseguest."

"Good idea," Sean said to Jake, and then he turned to the clerk behind the counter. "I'll take a half pound of that fudge, too."

On their way to the car, the couple stopped in the Prints of Whales gallery. Their entrance was announced by the customary jangle of bells that hung from the door knob. Donnie looked up from her seat at the cash register.

"Ah, look, it's my blue boy and his handsome half," she said, rushing to the men. "But look at your nose. You're my black-and-blue boy. What happened?"

"I had a bit of a run in with a bad guy, Donnie, but I'm okay," Jake said. "We stopped by to give you a little gift for letting Annette and Bobbie stay here on Thursday night. Thank you."

He handed her one of the white cardboard boxes of fudge he had just purchased at Candy Kitchen.

"Sweets from the sweets," Donnie said, leaning forward and kissing Jake on the side of his face.

"Careful," he said. "Watch the nose."

"You, too," she said, leaning over and kissing Sean on the cheek, too. "You want something to eat while you're here? I've got leftover manicotti in the fridge upstairs."

"No. We're heading home today," Sean said. "We just stopped by to thank you and say goodbye...for now."

"Well, you don't be strange now," Donnie said, in her broken English. "You'll both come back in spring, when Jake paints his next masterpiece with the whales. Right?"

"You bet, Donnie," Sean said.

"Take care of yourself," Jake said. "We'll see you next spring."

The two men drove back to the Seabreeze Mobile Home Park, to pack their belongings and close up the house before embarking on their return trip to Germantown. As Jake finished washing the towels and bed linens, and returning all of his personal supplies to the owner's closet, Sean decided to check in by phone with Annette and Bobbie, who were still at her family home in Lewes.

"Hi, Annette, it's Sean. How are you all doing today?" Sean began the conversation. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Sure. Sure. We'll stop by on our way out of town."

"What's up?" Jake asked Sean, when he had hung up the phone.

"Sturgis died in the middle of the night last night," Sean said. "I told Annette that we would stop by before leaving for home."

As they drove up Osprey Lane away from Jake's mobile home, with the Volvo fully packed, Sean stopped at the maintenance shed. He had spotted a golf cart parked just outside of the door.

"What are you stopping for?" Jake asked. "We don't need to check out. It's not like a motel."

"There's something I want to do," Sean told Jake.

He hopped out of the car, taking a paper bag with him, and strolled toward the shed.

"Delvin," Sean called out.

"Who's that?" Delvin answered, while emerging from inside the shed. "Oh, Mr. Sean, it's you. What can I do for you?"

"Not a thing, thank you. You've already done so much," Sean answered. "I noticed that you replaced the broken window down at the house. You did a great job. And I also want to thank you for watching out for Mr. Blue all these years. You're a good, kind man, Delvin, and I hope we become good friends."

"That is darn nice, Mr. Sean."

"And to thank you for all your kindness, I got you something for dessert," Sean said, handing Delvin the half pound box of fudge that he had purchased at Candy Kitchen.

"Oh, look at that," the handyman said, opening the box. "There's gonna be a sweet time at Delvin's house tonight."

"You take care of yourself, buddy. We'll see you soon," Sean said, and then turned to walk back to his Volvo.

"Thank you, Mr. Sean," Delvin said, and spying Jake in the car he held up the box. "Look, Mr. Blue. I got dessert!"

"So, you're an old softy, too," Jake said as Sean climbed into the driver's seat of the car.

"Yep, that's why you love me," Sean said.

"That's certainly one of the reasons."

The two men waved goodbye to Delvin as they drove off down Sandpiper Lane, toward Seagull Lane and on to Route One.

When Jake and Sean pulled onto the service road in front of the home on Pilottown Road, they saw that Ronnie Hardwick's dull red Toyota was still parked in the driveway.

"I wonder what will happen to Ronnie's car," Jake said.

"Maybe his girlfriend, Tess Matson, could get it," Sean conjectured.

"Probably not," Jake said. "I'm guessing that Ronnie Hardwick never made a will, and the two weren't married, so if he had no other relatives his car will probably go to the state."

That morning, in her apartment across town, Tess had packed all of her belongings, retrieved the money stashed behind the air conditioning vent cover, and headed for the Greyhound bus station in Rehoboth. She was not even aware that Ronnie was dead. But she had decided to start a new life for herself and her unborn child near her uncle's home in Port Arthur, Texas.

When Jake and Sean entered the home, Annette and Bobbie were seated at the dining room table. It seems as if a majority of family affairs are played out around a dining room table, Jake mused.

"How are you two holding up?" Sean asked.

"We're fine," Annette said.

"And how is your mother?" Jake asked.

"She's inconsolable," Annette replied, "and heavily medicated. She's asleep upstairs. Oh, Jake, look at your poor nose. Are you okay?"

"It's fine," Jake said. "It'll look like normal in a few days...God willing."

"Will you two be staying down here for Sturgis' funeral?" Sean asked.

"Oh, no," Annette said. "Mother has already decided there will be no funeral. She will have him cremated and scatter his ashes at sea. She's also decided to sell the house and the boat, and move to Florida."

"I advised her not to rush into anything, but she has her mind made up," Bobbie said.

"How do feel about that?" Jake asked Annette. "This house has been in the Vanderlind family for almost three hundred years."

"All of my good memories are of the time before my father passed away," Annette said. "It's mother's money and her decision, after all. She plans to buy a condo along a canal in North Palm Beach, get a Donzi motorboat, and cruise down to Palm Beach and stroll up and down Worth Avenue window-shopping for her next husband. Why stop at two?"

"Well, we've got the car packed and are ready to head out of town," Sean said. "Are you two going to drive home today?"

"Yes, I've told mother I have to leave. I have a job and a life of my own that I need to get back to," Annette said.

"And I have my physical rehab at the Naval Medical Center," Bobbie added. "I already missed one session this week."

"So, we'll see you back in Germantown," Jake said. "You two should come over for dinner tomorrow, with Sandy. We'll invite Greta, too...just to celebrate having lived through this week."

"I don't feel much like celebrating right now. But it does sound good to be surrounded by friends," Annette said.

"We'll plan on it," Bobbie said. "And I want to thank you guys for all that you've done for Annette and me. This time last week we felt like we were on our own, running from some crazy man."

Bobbie stood and gave Jake and Sean each a tight, heartfelt hug.

"We still have to return your medal to you, and get your id tags back from the police," Sean said.

"I'd appreciate that," Bobbie replied.

Annette then stood and hugged each of the older men, too.

"Thank you. You were lifesavers, literally," she said.

As much as Jake wanted to leave and start on the long drive to Germantown he also dreaded it, since he knew Sean intended to discuss their relationship on the way.

"Please say our goodbyes to your mother," Sean said.

"And take it easy on the trip home," Jake added. "Be safe."

Chapter Twenty-One

By three o'clock on Saturday afternoon, Jake and Sean were leaving Lewes going west on Route Nine, crossing the coast road and driving on into the heart of Delaware. They were almost to the small town of Georgetown before Jake felt that he finally had to break the silence.

"Okay. Look, I know you want to talk about our relationship, so I'll start," Jake began. "I'm sorry. I know I've been selfish, not telling you about the beach house and my yearly trips to Rehoboth. But, I..."

"Stop, JM, stop right there," Sean interrupted. "Do you realize that you just said 'I' six times in less than a minute? You're still being selfish. This is not about you. This is about me."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked.

"The day we got to Rehoboth, on the way back to your mobile home from the gallery that sells your artwork, it hit me that I had been shut out of an entire segment of your life," Sean explained. "It's as if I had been cuckolded, not by another person but by a career, and a house, and a whole set of friends that you had which I knew nothing about. And it made me angry."

The interior of the Volvo suddenly felt too confined to Jake, and he rolled down the passenger side window next to him even though Sean had the car's air conditioning on.

"And then, when I was swimming laps in the community pool at Seabreeze, I realized that I wasn't just angry but I was also sad," Sean continued. "I'm sad because for more than ten years I've been

robbed. I was robbed of the opportunity to be proud of you, and to enjoy your success as an artist. And I was robbed of the opportunity to comfort and encourage you when you hit setbacks. I was robbed because I got shut out. So, yeah, this is about me. And I'm angry, and sad...not to mention being pissed about missing out on ten years of vacations to a beach house I didn't even know you owned."

A period of silence followed, during which Jake digested and processed Sean's words. And then he responded, even though he knew in his gut it was probably a bad idea before he verbalized it.

"Well, to be fair, I don't remember you inviting me to any 'Back to School' nights when you were a teacher, or being asked to attend any talent shows or school plays after you became a principal," Jake said. "You never gave me the chance to take much pride in your accomplishments, either."

"But at least you knew about them. I didn't keep them a secret from you," Sean roared. "And there's another major difference. When I was a teacher, right after we met, I wasn't sure if I would be fired if the school system found out I was gay. And I didn't know how it would affect my ability to serve as a principal, if certain of the parents knew I had a same sex partner. It's a lot different in the art world, where homosexuality is practically the norm."

"Sure, I should have figured you'd have an answer," Jake shot back. "I'm the bad guy here, but you have got a good excuse for doing the exact same thing."

"It's not about bad guys or good excuses. I..." Sean temporarily stopped, in exasperation. "When Bobbie and I were at the trailer, before you and Annette joined us the night they stayed over, he asked me how you and I decided on splitting up the household

chores. I said that I thought the trick to being a successful couple was to keep communicating with one another, to stay open and talk things through. I guess I can't understand why there was a whole side of you that you chose to keep secret from me."

A door of understanding into himself suddenly opened for Jake.

"Secret...I'll tell you the secret I think is behind this whole thing," Jake began. "You hit on it when we were standing and looking at the mural on the upstairs wall at the gallery. My father and Dirk, the first two men I ever loved, both left me the same year."

"But they died, JM," Sean said softly.

"It didn't matter why they left. They both abandoned me, before I could get their approval," Jake continued. "I never felt like my father had any real confidence that I would succeed in life. And I wanted to show Dirk that I had some worth as an artist, as an individual in my own right. But before I got back from Europe and had my book on religious iconography published, and could gain their approval, they were both gone."

"So you got robbed, too," Sean said.

"I think I decided then that I was never going to let anyone have that kind of power over me again. I would be the only one who could make me happy, whose approval meant anything," Jake said. "And so I walled off that part of me that really mattered to me, my being an artist, and I kept it to myself."

"You even created a whole separate identity for that part of you...Beau Blue," Sean said.

"I guess I kept the beach house as a kind of refuge, a place I knew I could escape to if anybody got too close, if they started to matter too much," Jake added. "There were times I wanted to tell you about it, but I thought it would seem stupid that I'd kept it a secret for so many years. I'm glad it's all out in the open now. I'm so glad I've got you...I love you."

As Jake broke into tears, Sean pulled the car onto the gravel shoulder of Route 18 in rural Delaware, in front of a farmhouse. He opened the door and leapt from the driver's seat, dashed around the hood, and embraced Jake as he exited the car.

As the two men stood hugging beside the Volvo, an attractive young blond woman came out of the front door onto the porch of the farmhouse, accompanied by a golden retriever with its tail wagging in friendly greeting.

"Can I help you fellas?" she called out.

"No, thank you," Sean called back. "There was a bee in the car. But it's gone now."

"Well, all right then...y'all have a good day," the young woman said.

"I think we will now," Sean replied.

"Come on, Champ, let's go in," she said to the golden retriever.

The dog barked a 'woof' in farewell, and followed its mistress back into the house.

"Wow, you're a facile liar," Jake said, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"Oh, that's right. You never saw me on 'Back to School' nights with the parents who were fishing for compliments about their oh-so-average kids."

The two men laughed, and then got back in the car and continued on their way.

"Do you think maybe the reason you got so angry last year when you found out about my outings with my bartender bowling buddy was because you were also upset with yourself for keeping a big secret from me?" Sean asked. "We often get most upset at behavior in others that we dislike in ourselves."

"Maybe," Jake said, after giving the idea due consideration. "How did you get so smart?"

"Introduction to Psychology class in college," Sean said.

As they neared the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, Sean pulled into the parking lot of the Wendy's on Kent Island, because he knew that the bacon cheeseburger on their 'dollar menu' was Jake's favorite fast food treat. And they arrived back at the home they shared on Holman Road just prior to seven o'clock in the evening, before the early September sun had set.

Another discussion took place in Annette's yellow Volkswagen that evening, as she and Bobbie headed home to her townhouse in Germantown.

"I'm not quite sure how to start this," Bobbie began, "but the things that happened this week got me thinking, and I think we need to talk about our relationship."

"What do you mean?" Annette asked. "If this week has shown us anything, it's that we can get through anything together."

"No, I'm talking about what our next move should be, after I leave the Corps," Bobbie explained.

"Why would you leave the Marines?" she asked. "It's been your whole life."

"I'm pretty sure that when my physical rehab is finished they'll bring me in for 'the talk,' to counsel me that it might be best for me and for the Corps if I retired," Bobbie said. "I've seen it happen to other guys who were injured in service."

"Well, I hope you're not making this decision because of me," Annette said. "If you're worried about me not being happy as a service wife, I'm ready and willing to give it my best shot."

"That's the other thing," he said, tentatively. "I'm not sure if we should get married right away."

"Are you breaking up with me?" Annette practically screamed. "Is that what this is about?"

"No. No. Look, I know this might sound stupid because I'm sure a million guys have said this to women that they were breaking up with. And that's not what I want," Bobbie explained. "It's just that this isn't about you. It's about me."

"Tell me you did not just use that lame excuse," Annette shot back.

"But it's true. Let me explain," Bobbie said. "I learned things about you this week...good things, like you know how to sail, and you can play the piano, and you knew what the art gallery lady was saying when she called us to breakfast in Italian."

"Those things don't mean anything," Annette boomed.

"But I saw the house you grew up in and the kind of wealth your family had," Bobbie said, grasping for a way to explain what he felt.

"So it is about me. What are you saying...that I'm too good for you?" Annette boomed. "That's weird!"

"Look, I just don't want to be the guy you're attracted to now, but later you realize you have nothing in common with...like your mother and her boat captain."

"Do you really think I'm that shallow?" Annette shouted.

"No, I love you," Bobbie said. "But I'm not sure of my value...of what I have to contribute to our relationship."

"Well then I don't know whether to be angry at what little faith you have in me," Annette said, heatedly, "or sad at how little confidence you have in yourself."

"I do love you, Annette," Bobbie said.

"I'm not convinced, at the moment," she shot back.

The yellow VW was now rounding the enormous left-hand curve where Route 50 merges with westbound 301, and Annette was so angry that she could barely focus on her driving.

"No, it's true. Calm down," he said. "Take a breath, and let me explain."

"This better be good."

"I went right into the Marines from my mom's house," Bobbie said. "I've never had my own place, never run my own household or paid my own bills. I never even cooked or did my own laundry until I started staying over at your place. Christ, I don't even have a driver's license."

"But when we get married I can show you all those things," Annette said. "I can teach you."

"No, I need to do this for me," Bobbie reasoned. "I need to prove something to myself. I need to gain confidence from getting a job, and having my own home, and knowing that I can stand on my own feet. I might even want to go college and get a degree."

"I thought you agreed with mother that life throws crap at you, so you should grab what's important and hold on tight," Annette said.

"But look at how badly her relationship with your biological father turned out," Bobbie rebutted. "Maybe that's because she never thought about the demands that marrying a brilliant research chemist who came from old money might make of her. And he never considered what effect his marrying the girl who liked to make out with schoolboys in the dunes might have on his life."

"Pretty smart," Annette said. "But where does this leave us?"

"Like I said, I don't want us to break up. I just want us to go into this with our eyes wide open," Bobbie replied. "I think we should go on seeing each other, so I don't want to live too far away from you. But it would be more like dating, you know? We've never really gone out on dates. We skipped that whole phase where most couples get to know one another."

"You're really not trying to break up with me?" Annette asked.

"No, babe," Bobbie said. "Look, I'm sure we can work through this together. Sean told me he thinks one of the keys to a couple having a good relationship is that they keep communicating with one another, talking things through."

"And you still love me?" she asked.

"I do. I think you're smart, and classy, and kind...and you've got a smoking hot body. When I look at you it's like, I don't know, like I want to surround you with my body and at the same time be inside of you filling every pore of your body. It's like there's a blob of molten lava in my gut that's melting my insides, creating a hunger that only being with you can satisfy. I don't know...I can't explain it."

"You just did a pretty good job," Annette said, nearly breathless at the heretofore unspoken depths of Bobbie's emotion. "And, by the way, I think you're amazing. You're disciplined and intelligent, you're brave and sweet...and you've got a pretty hot body there yourself, stud."

"Well...okay."

The couple drove on in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts as they stared at the road that lay ahead.

"So, how are we doing at this communicating thing?" Annette finally asked.

"It was a little disorganized, but not bad for a first attempt," Bobbie answered.

"And you still love me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And I still love you," she said.

"Good."

"And you still think we're going to get married at some point?" she asked.

"I sure hope so."

"Then we better stop and get something to eat soon, because I am starving," Annette said. "I just realized we haven't eaten since Thursday night."

They both laughed at this. And both of them knew that was a good sign. On Kent Island, Annette drove off Route 50 to the Sombrero Mexican Kitchen on Shopping Center Road in Stevensville. Before going in to dinner, the couple stood in the parking lot tightly hugging each other for several silent minutes.

Inside the restaurant, with its egg yolk yellow walls and bright red booths, Annette ordered the steak fajitas and Bobbie ordered the tamales with pork carnitas. And they shared each other's dishes as the sun set below the western horizon.

Following dinner the couple resumed their trip in the yellow VW, traversing the Chesapeake Bay Bridge in darkness. Up the bay to the north, the glow from the sodium vapor lights lining the streets lit up the sky over Baltimore like an orange mushroom cap floating over the city.

Chapter Twenty-Two

At six o'clock on Sunday evening, a small party gathered for dinner at Jake and Sean's house on Holman Road in Germantown. Annette, Bobbie, and Sandy had driven over in Annette's VW from the townhouse on Bluebird Court. And Greta walked over from next door, with two bottles of decent red wine in hand.

Much of the feast came from the vegetable garden that Jake, Sean and Greta shared: eggplant parmesian, with a marinara sauce made from fresh picked tomatoes and basil; two loaves of buttery garlic bread; and cole slaw made from the first enormous head of cabbage to be harvested that year.

As they all ate, Jake and Sean related a summary of the events of the past week to Sandy and Greta.

"You two are awfully quiet," Jake said to Annette and Bobbie, noting the fact that they had not engaged in the retelling.

"Well, we've been doing some thinking, sir," Bobbie said.

"My name is Jake," Jake said.

"Jake," Bobbie repeated.

"Don't make me feel old," Jake snapped, humorously.

"Okay. Well, on the ride home I told Annette that I didn't think we should live together right now," Bobbie said.

"You two aren't splitting up, are you?" Jake asked.

"No," Bobbie quickly replied. "It just that I've decided I need to find a job and a place to live on my own right now. You know, see if I can stand on my own two feet. And Annette and I can go out on dates together, and find out what we really have in common.

We've never really dated. We started living together right away, as soon as I got back from Afghanistan."

"But don't you have a room to stay in at the Naval Medical Center during your rehab?" Sean asked.

"It's not going to last, sir...Sean," Bobbie said. "My physical rehabilitation is almost completed, and the Corps will be pushing to discharge me. They don't want to hang on to troops like me that aren't a hundred percent fit and combat ready."

"So you need a place to live and a job," Jake said slowly, staring straight at Greta.

"That's how it looks," Bobbie said. "And my Corporal's pension isn't going to go very far, even if I get a disability benefit."

"Well, here's the thing," Greta said, placing the wine glass she held on the table and pointing a finger at Bobbie. "I'm looking for a young man just like you, to be the caretaker for the Holman Hall Farm Museum and Wildlife Center. Do you know anything about farm animals or agriculture?"

"No, I grew up in the barrio in east Los Angeles," Bobbie said.

"Perfect. You're hired!" Greta exclaimed. "I think it's called 'veterans preference.' You can live for free in one of the bedrooms in Holman Hall, so you'll be right there to keep an eye on the place. And the job comes with a salary stipend, which ought to help supplement your military pension."

"And you can borrow my pickup truck, to help you get around," Jake offered.

"And you'll be living right across the field from Annette's townhouse," Sean said, "which will be convenient when you go courting."

"I don't know what to say," Bobbie stuttered.

"Say that you'll take the job," Greta prompted.

"Sure...yes...I'd be honored to work for you," Bobbie said. "I could move in as soon as I get processed out from the Corps."

"That reminds me," Sean said, jumping up from the table and retrieving a box from the corner hutch. "Corporal Roberto Vasquez, I believe this Purple Heart belongs to you."

Sean handed the box to Bobbie.

"Thank you," Bobbie said.

"And tomorrow we can go to police headquarters in Rockville, and get your id tags back," Sean said.

"Boy, I'd really appreciate that," Bobbie said.

"Now, what's for dessert, Mr. Blue?" Sean asked, glancing at Jake.

"I hadn't even thought about dessert," Jake replied. "I'll go put on coffee, though."

"I do have some extravagant fudge at home, which two kind gentlemen brought me from their recent travels," Greta said. "But I was rather hoping I could have it all for myself."

"Oh, I forgot, we left something in the car," Annette said. "Sandy, Bobbie, do you want to help me?"

The three younger members of the dinner party exited through the screened side porch to the yellow VW parked in the driveway, and soon returned to the dining room with a white cardboard box.

"Nine days ago it felt like I was dropped into the middle of a nightmare of fear and confusion," Annette began. "Some terrible things occurred. But one unexpected benefit was discovering that there were two kind human beings who..."

"Three, counting Greta," Sandy added.

"That's right...three kind human beings, strangers, who were willing to jump in and help us out in our time of need," Annette continued. "And for that I want to thank you."

"I was sure an incident from my past, an error in judgment on my part, had come back to haunt me," Bobbie said. "But Jake and Sean, you helped me put those ghosts to rest. And I also got some good advice from Sean along the way. And I want to thank you for that."

"And my closest friend and her boyfriend took off, leaving me on my own and too afraid to even stay in my own home," Sandy said. "But I found someone willing to take me in, and to keep my mind off things by letting me cook and help with chores. By allowing me to help you clean and bring order to your house, you helped to calm me and bring order to my mind. And I want to thank you for that, Greta."

"And I am at a loss for words to express what having you in my home has meant to me," Greta said.

Sean and Jake could barely stop themselves from bursting out in laughter, knowing what a psychological toll the decluttering had wrought on their hoarding neighbor.

"This is for the three of you," Sandy said, lifting the lid of the box.

Inside the box was a devils food cake with dark chocolate buttercream frosting, on top of which the words 'thank you' were swirled in contrasting yellow icing.

"Oooh, looky there," Jake exclaimed. "Now it's a party! I'll get the coffee started. Who wants a cup?"

"I'll have a cup, Jakey, if you've got a brandy to go with it," Greta said.

"I think that can be arranged," Jake said. "Sean?"

"Yeah, I'll have a cup with a piece of cake," Sean said.

"None for me, Jake," Annette said.

"Or me," Bobbie said.

"No thanks," Sandy said. "The caffeine in the chocolate cake alone will have me climbing the walls half the night."

"You young people are such pansies," Jake laughed, heading into the kitchen.

After Jake had ground the beans and started the coffee brewing he returned to his seat at the dining room table, carrying with him six dessert plates and forks, and a cake knife.

"Before we cut the cake, I think we should pause for a moment of serious reflection," Sean said. "No matter what we may have thought of any of them while they were alive, we note the passing this week of four human beings whose lives intersected with ours: Ronnie Hardwick, Enrique the gardener at the Vanderlind house, Otis something-or-other, and Sturgis Willburn."

"Five, if you count that poor man they found on the canal towpath," Greta said.

"That's right, five human beings," Sean said. "We commend their souls to God."

"May He bless and keep them," Jake said.

"Thank you," Annette said to Sean.

"Nicely put," Jake said, kissing Sean on the cheek.

"That was...beautiful," Greta said tearfully, overcome by her emotions and the wine she had imbibed.

"Oh, jeez, Greta, cut the cake," Jake said. And he chuckled as he walked into the kitchen to get the coffee.

Chapter Twenty-Three

On Monday morning, Sean, Jake and Bobbie rode together in Sean's Volvo to the county police headquarters building in Rockville, Maryland.

"How can I help you gentlemen?" the civilian clerk at the front desk asked the three men entering the station lobby.

"Hi. I'm Marine Corporal Roberto Vasquez," Bobbie said. "I understand the police found my military id tags on an unidentified corpse that was found along the C&O Canal eight days ago."

"If you'll just wait here, I'll go get those tags from Property," the clerk responded, exiting from his spot behind the front counter into a back room.

Jake wandered about the station lobby nervously, reading the titles on brochures stacked on a table for public distribution.

"What's up, JM?" Sean asked.

"I told you in Lewes," Jake said. "I don't like police stations."

"Right. We should have left you in the car," Sean said.

At that moment, the clerk returned to the counter.

"I apologize for the delay, gentlemen," the clerk said, looking straight at Jake. "There's a 'hold' tag on that property noting the owner will need to see Captain Markham before it can be released. If you'll just walk over to the security door, I'll buzz you back."

"You go ahead, Bobbie. We'll wait for you out here," Jake said.

"No, the Captain would like to see all three of you," the clerk said.

"Oh, boy, here we go," Jake said, walking with Sean and Bobbie to a heavy metal door with security key pad on the wall next to it.

There was a loud click, as the clerk pressed the button allowing the door to be opened. And an annoying buzzer sounded the entire time the door was open, as the three men entered into the secure bowels of the police stations. They were met by the clerk on the other side of the security door.

"If you'll follow me, I'll take you to Captain Markham," the clerk said, as he led the men to an office at the end of a long hallway.

"Gentlemen, I'm Captain Frank Markham. Please come in and have a seat," the Captain's voice boomed.

Markham was a large man in his early fifties, at least six feet five inches in height, with broad shoulders and an enormous head topped by a short buzz cut of salt and pepper hair. The Captain shook hands with each of his three visitors as they introduced themselves, and then he motioned for them to sit.

Bobbie, Sean and Jake occupied chairs across the desk from Captain Markham, as he sat and studied a sheet of white paper stapled to a large brown paper envelope.

When he looked up from the paper, Captain Markham glanced at each of his three visitors' faces and then fixed his gaze on Jake.

"Your face is familiar," Markham said. "Oh, I know. You're the man who blew up the Planning Board Chairman last spring."

"Well, Captain, there were extenuating circumstances," Jake said, felling a bit agitated. "After all, he had tried to kill me and my neighbor...repeatedly."

"I understand," Markham said.

"It just seems that a lot of people have mentioned that lately," Jake said.

"That can happen when one is involved in a violent occurrence of some notoriety," the Captain remarked.

"I mean, is that all people are going to remember about me?" Jake said, now rambling from anxiety. "When I die is my gravestone going to read: here lies Jacob Flynn, he blew up the county Planning Board Chairman?"

"Calm down," Sean mumbled under his breath to Jake.

"No, I'm not going to calm down," Jake continued. "I'm sorry, but there is more to me than just that one incident."

"Actually, all of us here at the station thought it was damned brave, what you did," the Captain responded calmly.

"Oh...well...thank you," Jake said.

"Good. I'm glad we got that cleared up, Mr. Flynn," the Captain said. "Now, Corporal Vasquez, I understand you are here to retrieve your military identification tags."

"That is correct, sir," Bobbie responded.

"I just have a few questions for you first," Markham said. "How did you come to lose the tags, Corporal?"

"They were removed from my person during a struggle with an intruder, when the townhome belonging to my fiancée, Annette Vanderlind, was broken into ten days ago," Bobbie stated.

"And why was the break-in not reported to the police?" the Captain asked.

"Well, I'm sure that Corporal Vasquez' first thought was to take his fiancée to a location where she would feel secure," Jake said, injecting himself into Bobbie's questioning, "such as her family home in Delaware, which is where they went."

"Thank you for answering the Corporal's question for him, Mr. Flynn," Captain Markham said. "And just how did you and Mr. Fitzpatrick come to be involved in this?"

"We were down at the vacation home I own in Rehoboth, and thought we'd stop by and see our Germantown neighbors, Annette and Bobbie," Jake said.

"And how did you know they would be at Miss Vanderlind's family home in Lewes?" the Captain asked Jake.

"Well...you see," Jake stammered.

"Let me stop you before you dig yourself in any deeper, Mr. Flynn," Captain Markham said. "I have been in touch with a Lieutenant Andrew Stern of the Lewes Police Department."

"Aaaah," Jake said.

"And in the report which he sent me, Lieutenant Stern states that you extracted a confession from the man who hired the intruder to break into Miss Vanderlind's townhome on Bluebird Court, Mr. Flynn."

"Uh huh," Jake uttered, lamely.

"You see, gentlemen, the problem is that there is another crime that occurred here in this area, another case which the Metropolitan Police Department in D.C. needs to close," the Captain continued. "And it involves the murder of a victim, or at least the burning of an already deceased victim, whose remains were found beside the C&O Canal next to your id tags, Corporal Vasquez."

"Yes, sir, I understand," Bobbie said.

"And I can't help but wonder whether that crime might have been prevented, had you informed the police of the original break-in at the townhouse," Markham said. "You know, if it were up to me, I'd like to throw all three of you behind bars for obstructing a police investigation, or at least for failure to report a crime."

Jake's anxiety kicked into high gear and he glanced at the trees growing outside Captain Markham's office window, wondering whether this was to be his last look at the world outside of prison.

"But I'm fairly certain the county State's Attorney couldn't make that charge stick," Markham said. "I will tell you that Lieutenant Stern was generous in his reporting of how you, Mr. Flynn, were instrumental in the solving of two cases--the one involving the

intruder stalking Miss Vanderlind and the other a related attack on her stepfather by a Ronald Hardwick."

"Yeah, well, the Lieutenant's a good guy," Jake said, relieved that his odds of ending up behind bars seemed to be decreasing.

"And your involvement occurred at some risk to your person, as I can see by the bruises on your face," the Captain said.

"It's nothing," Jake said, brushing off his injuries. "It'll heal."

"Well, between this affair and the county government contracting scam you uncovered last spring, you've shown yourself to be quite the crime solver, Mr. Flynn," Captain Markham said. "Maybe we should give you your own desk here at the station house."

"Hahaha," Jake laughed weakly.

"Seriously, though, the next time you find yourself embroiled in this kind of situation, I want you to call me so that we can work together on it," Markham said, handing Jake his business card.

"Do you promise you'll call?"

"I promise," Jake said.

"Good. Now let's get your id tags returned you, Corporal Vasquez," the police Captain said, producing another white sheet of paper from the brown envelope on his desk. "I need you to sign this form, acknowledging receipt of your property, and show me some proof of identification with your picture on it."

"Can do, sir," Bobbie said, signing the form and producing his military identification card from his wallet.

"Thank you. And here you are," Captain Markham said, handing over the charred id tags to Bobbie.

"By the way, Captain, did the D.C. Medical Examiner's Office confirm the identify of the victim whose remains were recovered along the Canal?" Sean asked Captain Markham.

"Yes, let's see," the Captain said, extracting yet another sheet of paper from the brown envelope and reading from it. "He was ex-Army Private First Class Howard Philbin, age thirty-one, of no fixed address. He must have been living on the streets in D.C. They could not locate any living relatives, so his remains have been turned over to the military for burial."

"PFC Howard Philbin," Bobbie repeated, "thank you, Captain."

Jake, Sean and Bobbie stood, shook hands with Captain Frank Markham, and walked out of police headquarters.

"Damn! Pardon me for cursing, sirs. It was bad enough when I thought our attacker had killed some nameless bum, to try and lure Annette and me out of hiding," Bobbie said. "But now to find out he was an Army veteran. He probably served in Afghanistan or Iraq, and he ended up back here, living on the streets with nobody to take care of him. And then some maniac picks him at random and kills him, and burns his body. Nobody should die like that...all alone."

"You're right, Corporal," Sean said.

On the following Wednesday morning, at ten hundred hours on the dot, a small procession of uniformed men walked into a field at Arlington National Cemetery, carrying the casket containing the remains of PFC Howard Philbin to his final resting place.

Jake and Sean, dressed in suit and tie, stood alongside the open grave, next to Corporal Roberto Vasquez, who wore his Marine dress uniform complete with Purple Heart medal pinned to the chest. The three stood at attention as a lone bugler blew Taps.