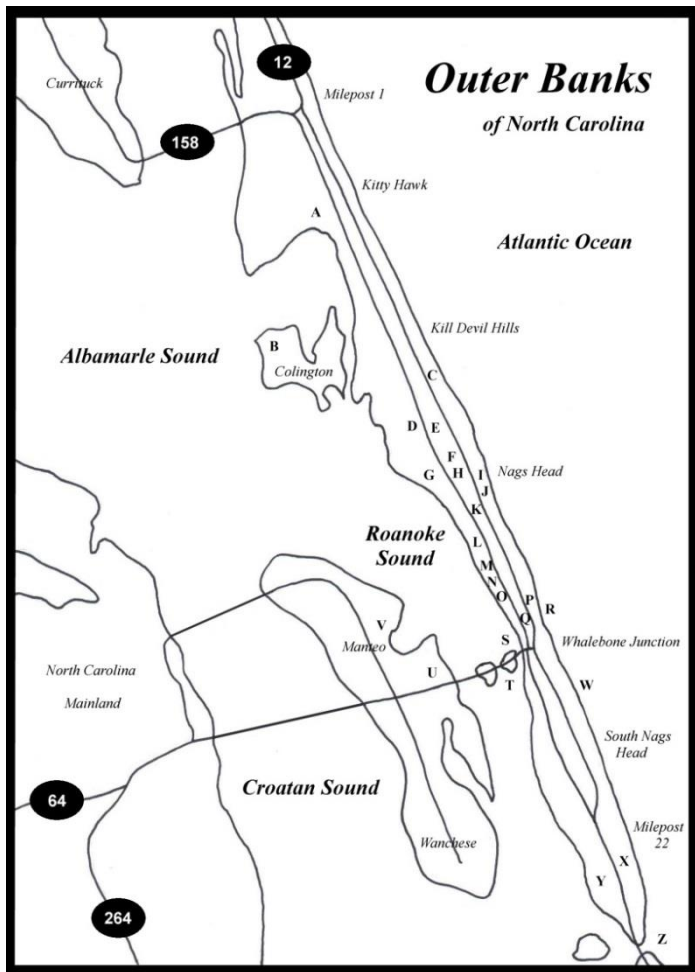


The book cover features a composite image. On the left, a young man with dark hair is shown in profile, wearing a blue t-shirt. The background is a sunset over a body of water, with a person on a small sailboat visible in the distance. The title 'Legend Sampler' is written in a large, elegant cursive font, and 'Excerpts from An OBX Novel' is written in a smaller, simple serif font below it.

Legend Sampler
Excerpts from
An OBX Novel

Joseph K. Waltenbaugh

Legend Sampler



- A. Holy Redeemer by the Sea Catholic Parish
- B. Colington Harbour
- C. Port O' Call Restaurant
- D. Kelly's Restaurant and Tavern

- E. Secret Spot Surf Shop
- F. Jockey's Ridge Crossing/Kitty Hawk Kites
- G. Jockey's Ridge State Park
- H. Mulligan's Raw Bar & Grille
- I. Surfside Plaza/Harley-Davidson
- J. Cavalier Surf Shop
- K. Animal Hospital of Nags Head
- L. The Village at Nags Head/Golf Links/Outer Banks Mall
- M. Harvey Sound Access
- N. Miller's Waterfront Restaurant
- O. Kitty Hawk Water Sports
- P. Cahoon's Market & Cottages
- Q. Sam & Omie's Restaurant/Dune Burger
- R. Jennette's Pier in Nags Head
- S. Sugar Creek Seafood Restaurant
- T. Tale of the Whale Restaurant
- U. Blue Water Grill & Raw Bar/Pirate's Cove
- V. Manteo Waterfront Marina
- W. Outer Banks Fishing Pier/Fish Heads Bar & Grill
- X. Coquina Beach/Wreck of the *Laura Barnes*
- Y. Bodie Island Lighthouse
- Z. Oregon Inlet

Also by Joseph K. Waltenbaugh

The Elephants' Graveyard

A Guide for Getting and Keeping Your Welfare Entitlements

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Legend Sampler

Excerpts from
An OBX Novel

Joseph K. Waltenbaugh



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CHAPTER 1

... Speaking distinctly and purposefully, he slowed his delivery to increase the level of suspense. “First,” he continued, “you need to understand something about ghosts.”

“What’s that?” Jeffrey asked, the volume of his voice reduced to a muted tone.

“Sometimes, just sometimes ... they sneak up on you!” The moment Tim delivered his warning, Jay clawed his little brother’s back, causing Jeffrey to shriek involuntarily. The cry echoed throughout the tent, its sheer volume causing Tim and Jay to start laughing hysterically to which Jeffrey frowned and called them “assholes” again, this time with a more pronounced lisp. The sound of his insult only served to increase their amusement, embarrassing and infuriating Jeffrey even more until he jumped on the two older boys and began wildly swinging his fists at them, pummeling them with punches that mostly missed their marks. Tim and Jay did not retaliate against his attacks but merely protected themselves from his blows while howling with laughter.

Amid the laughter and their tossing about inside the tent, Tim leaned back and glanced out the door flap. “Hush,” he said with a motion of his hand. Once again, he saw light spilling from the bedroom window. “Quiet, quiet, quiet,” he continued before reaching over and dousing the small flashlight. A profound stillness then fell over the three of them as they sat quietly in the dark, listening to the nocturnal songs of the night creatures while wondering if this marked the end of their camping adventure.

After a few tense moments, however, the bedroom light was again extinguished, and they were granted one final reprieve.

“Okay,” Tim spoke in a low voice as he restored order and returned to his storytelling. “Like I said, it’s not actually a ghost story, but it’s close. It’s a new Dave Rasputin story.”

“Dave Rasputin, all right!” Jeffrey said approvingly, forgetting his prior anger at the mention of his beloved hero. He enjoyed listening to the stories told by the older boys about the legendary local figure, someone of questionable character who drove a hearse and was purported to have inflicted unspeakable atrocities on his brothers and sisters. Jeffrey had memorized all the Dave Rasputin tales, and he already had begun spreading them among his own friends. Now he would have a new one to tell.

“Well,” Tim began. “Brian said that it had happened years ago when Dave was about Jeff’s age. It was during the summer when school was out. His parents worked during the day, and Dave’s older sister would watch him while they were away. He and his sister were supposed to go bowling one afternoon, but she got mad at him and refused to take him. Instead, she went out into the yard and fell asleep under a giant oak tree, kind of like the one we’re under now.” Tim elevated his eyes toward the roof of the tent as he made the remark, noticing that both Jeffrey and Jay did the same.

The two brothers listened intently and hung on every word uttered by Tim as he related the tale, their passion and interest piquing when Tim paused and again switched on the small Maglite, placing it on the ground in candle mode. There, at that moment in the lives of all three boys, the only thing that mattered to them was the recounting of another episode in the ever-continuing saga of Dave Rasputin. As the two brothers hovered like moths around the light, their friend continued his discourse, acting as a chronicler of culture and entertainment, of no less importance among his peers than a Dickens or a Homer. With the storyline building to its climax, all three paused to absorb the full impact of its deep and mysterious meaning, the significance of which they could not discern but which surely must be present due to the excitement and emotion it aroused in them.

Tim continued in a slightly subdued tone that added an air of suspense to the listening experience of his audience. “So,” he said, “Dave decided to get even with her. He snuck out into the yard with a bowling ball and managed to climb the tree with it. Because his sister was asleep, she didn’t see or hear

him. Then, when he was on the branch directly over her, he let the bowling ball drop right onto her stomach. Strike!" he said with a snap of his fingers. "Killed her just like that!"

"All right!" Jeffrey exclaimed with a grin, excitedly looking around at the other two boys.

"You know," Jay said in a softer tone. "I saw a big black hearse coming down the street the other day and felt sure it was Dave Rasputin. However, when it got closer, I didn't see a hangman's noose dangling from the inside mirror, so it couldn't have been him. What do you think? Is Dave Rasputin real?"

In response to such an open and honest admission of doubt

...



... A black 1965 Cadillac hearse with Florida license plates sat in the parking lot at the southern end of the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge over the Oregon Inlet, a channel separating Bodie Island from the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge at the northernmost tip of Hatteras Island. Dredged to maintain a water depth of fourteen feet, the channel represented one of the few navigable routes into Pamlico Sound from the Atlantic Ocean beneath the arch at the southern end of the bridge. Like many other inlets of the Outer Banks, it was in constant motion, its sands displaced by strong tides and powerful ocean storms.

Standing barefoot on the giant boulders of a breakwater along the inlet's southern shoreline was a handsome young man in a relaxed pose reminiscent of Michelangelo's *David*, his lean body undisturbed by the falling rain as he gazed thoughtfully at the surging tide flowing into the sound from the sea. Like the Oregon Inlet itself, he too was subject to the vagaries of shift, flux, and drift, rarely staying in one place more than six months at a time. However, the only migration on his mind at that moment involved the itinerant sands beneath the water near a small beach next to the parking lot. Alone on the rocks, he listened impassively to the cries of the gulls and terns as he mentally performed a calculated study of the deserted beach and its environs.

Focusing his eyes, he tried to identify the shoals beneath the surface of the water, but the dark clouds hindered his ability to do so. Additionally, his rain-streaked sunglasses impaired his vision, so he removed them and hung them on the neck of his tee shirt, squinting and straining his eyes but still unable to detect any variation in water color. On a bright sunny day, it would have been an easy matter for him to discern the shallows of the inlet, but on

that day, under those conditions, the task was nearly impossible; he would need to stop back on another day when the sun was out.

If there was one thing about which Dave Rasputin was knowledgeable and passionate, it was the sea. Moreover, he was an aficionado of water sports, namely: surfing, windsurfing, and kiteboarding. In matters related to any of those activities, the man was the sport, and the sport was the man. His reason for stopping along the highway that day was to scout a new location from where he could launch his sailboard. Having never before sailed the Oregon Inlet, he wondered what it would be like to windsurf from the ocean into Pamlico Sound and back out again. Earlier in the day, he had driven down to Hatteras Island to pick up some replacement parts for his kiteboard and to look for a new windsurfing sail, stopping first at Ocean Air Sports in Avon and then Fox Watersports in Buxton. It was on his return trip home to his cottage in Nags Head that he had pulled off the highway to investigate the beach at the Oregon Inlet as a potential windsurfing launch area. He was in no hurry to get back north because the wet weather had already washed out his scheduled surfing lesson for the day.

The rain striking his body as he stood on the rocks was not the torrential downpour of earlier that morning, but it still fell steadily, although it did not seem to bother him. He found it far less vexing than the malicious flies he had encountered on the path between the parking lot and the beach, nasty insects that had attacked him savagely, biting him on the neck and refusing to surrender even in death. It was only after he had scaled the large rocks of the breakwater that they had suspended their assault, and it was for that reason he was reluctant to come down despite the rain.

Dave Rasputin cut an impressive figure in or out of the rain with a youthful appearance that made him look ten years younger than his actual age, something he used to his advantage whenever it served his purpose. His haunting, enigmatic look created an aura about him, one that naturally attracted people to him, especially those intrigued by his facial features, most notably his high cheekbones and somber expression that made him resemble James Dean when viewed in a particular light. It was especially noticeable whenever he squinted, so he usually wore a pair of Wayfarer sunglasses—both indoors and outdoors—to shield his eyes and avoid the embarrassing comparison to the deceased movie star. While he

did not attempt it, he personified the film star in much of his bearing as well as his mannerisms and appearance with his slow, halting speech pattern and his dark, wavy hair swept up in typical Dean fashion.

The long, smooth lines of his extremely tanned body made him resemble a distance swimmer without the sharp angular cuts of an athlete, although he was incredibly athletic with a well-defined musculature that even his weathered tee shirt and baggy cargo shorts could not conceal. Having spent the better part of two decades tossing around heavy sails full of wind and carving out radical turns in large ocean waves, he had sculpted for himself a slim body of high tensile strength and phenomenal flexibility that did whatever he commanded it to do. He exuded confidence, poise, and grace while always appearing lean and hungry. His emotional state, however, was not that easily defined. It was complicated.

It is a common belief that most myths and legends have their origins in truth, something he would not dispute, although he made a determined effort to avoid such reflections if only to prevent the onset of melancholy. Sadly, however, thoughts of that nature often crept into his mind, usually at odd moments, almost always in the rain. Standing in the late morning drizzle while perched atop the rocks, he experienced one such moment.

Turning his gaze from the water to the shoreline, he directed his eyes toward an old lifesaving station in the distance, and he thought about the station's watchtower, especially the way it aided rescuers in helping those in peril. The sight of it made him reflect upon his past and how life might have turned out differently had there been more lifesaving stations placed strategically along the way ...

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CHAPTER 2

... The region identified as the Outer Banks—or “OBX” as it is commonly known—is a narrow band of barrier islands running two hundred miles along the eastern seaboard, principally off the coast of North Carolina. Unlike other barrier islands, the landmasses of the Outer Banks migrate and shift under the eroding forces of nature. In fact, some people maintain that the islands are marching steadily toward the mainland as they lose beach on the Atlantic side and acquire it along the shores of the sound, the body of water separating the Outer Banks from the mainland. Because of their direct exposure to the Atlantic Ocean, the islands are vulnerable to powerful ocean storms and destructive hurricanes that continually reshape the region, giving rise to treacherous seas that have led to many a shipwreck, over five hundred of them, resulting in the Outer Banks being labeled “The Graveyard of the Atlantic” with all the legends and ghost stories that accompany such a distinctive designation.

In addition to its unique topography and climate, the Outer Banks has a rich historical past. It is the birthplace of Virginia Dare, the first English child born in the New World, who, with her fellow colonists, vanished without a trace from Roanoke Island in 1587. Another historical figure, Blackbeard the Pirate, left his mark on the area, plundering the coastline and fighting his final battle aboard the *Adventurer* in the waters off Ocracoke Island. Although most noted for its treacherous seas and ghost

fleet of sunken ships along the Atlantic floor, the Outer Banks is also recognized for its consistent and prevailing winds, explaining why the Wright Brothers chose Kitty Hawk as their initial flight location. Founded as a village in the 1830s, the Town of Nags Head was one of the first tourist spots of North Carolina, attracting people of means who sought relief from the summer heat by crossing Roanoke Sound to enjoy the cooler breezes of the region. However, before the influx of tourists, the locals—known as “Bankers”—had called the Outer Banks their home since the eighteenth century ...



... The bar at Miller’s Waterfront Restaurant had enough seats to accommodate about six people, but Mark sat alone on a stiff wooden chair dressed neatly in a white polo shirt and tan shorts, looking as if he had just stepped off the pages of a golf apparel magazine. Climbing off his chair, he strode to the end of the bar where a glass door led to the outside deck overlooking Roanoke Sound, but he stopped at a server station before reaching the door. Protruding from a pile of guest checks next to a computer, he found what he was looking for—a pencil—which he used to tap on the backs of the vacant chairs as he walked back to his seat. He liked the fact that he was alone in the barroom without even a bartender present because he was not much of a “people person” despite his occupation as a certified financial planner.

Most of the customers in the restaurant were sitting outside on the deck or in the gazebo over the water, but there were also patrons in the dining room next to the bar beyond a dividing wall containing small windows positioned six feet off the ground. At a towering height of six feet, eight inches tall, Mark easily saw through the windows into the dining room where the muffled conversations of the dinner guests made it sound far more crowded than it was. He had not yet requested a table because he was waiting for his golfing partner—a potential client—to show up.

Confident of getting a prime seat with a good view of the sunset, Mark returned to his drink and scorecard at the bar. He was not much of a drinker, but he always enjoyed a gin and tonic after a round of golf, especially on a hot summer day. Shifting his attention back to the scorecard, he added several strokes to his score on seven of the eighteen holes, increasing his final score to nine over par, a significant reduction in his margin of victory.

Mark was a two handicap, but he had been a scratch golfer in his college days when was golfing for the university team.

Setting down the pencil, he began rubbing his eyes, rolling his fingers around the sockets to relieve the fatigue and strain from all the squinting he had done on the fairway. It had been a bright, sunny day in August without a cloud in the sky, but he had inadvertently left his sunglasses at home. The slow massage of his powerful fingers helped ease the pressure and thwart what threatened to become a headache. Stretching out his free hand for his gin and tonic, he saw the glass virtually disappeared into the hollow of his massive grip. The flicker of the tendons on the back of his hand and the rippling of the muscles across his massive forearm left no doubt that he could have crushed the glass with minimal effort had he chosen to do so, but he instead took a tiny swallow and gently lowered the glass to the bar. These days, he was not into public displays of strength; however, that had not always been the case.

Mark's physical prowess on the golf links was nothing compared to his past performance on the football field. He currently weighed two hundred and eighty pounds, but he had been heavier in his college days when he was an All-American running back in the Big Ten. It was his height and weight along with his speed and agility that had made him such a formidable force coming through the line. Despite receiving several offers upon graduation, he had not pursued a professional football career because he was not an inherently violent person and felt he lacked the temperament to make it in the pros. He had played football in college only to fund his education so he could work with the things he truly loved; namely, numbers. Coming from two generations of barbers, he had been the first one in his family to attend college, relying entirely on football scholarships to pay his tuition because his father, who worked in a small barbershop in Nebraska, lacked the financial resources to help with his college expenses.

Back in school, he secretly had used steroids to increase his size and strength, and he continued taking them for a while after college. Although he no longer played football, he still maintained his weight training, exercising in his garage, which he had converted into a fully stocked weight room, a home modification that left him nowhere to park his car except in the driveway. Religiously, he scheduled time each day to pump iron, compulsively refusing to miss even a day no matter what the reason. As such, he was able to maintain his muscular physique without the need for steroids; however, it was Nikki

who had ultimately convinced him to stop using them.

The thought of his girlfriend caused him to forget the weariness of his eyes and the building pressure in his head. His expression then relaxed as he stared blankly across the bar, lifting his eyes toward a flat-screen television tuned to a cable news show. No sound came from the television, but a crawl ran across the bottom of the screen that read: ... *Tropical Storm Kim, having formed in the lower Atlantic region, is making its way toward the Windward Islands. Kim is expected to hit portions of the Lesser Antilles, U.S. Virgin Islands, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba early next week ...*

Just then, the door at the end of the bar burst open, and a server walked in carrying a clattering tray of dirty dishes on her shoulder. Her entrance ushered into the room a whoosh of air that brought with it the voices and laughter of the crowd on the deck, shattering the subtle resonances of the dinner conversations emanating from the other side of the dividing wall. Turning with a jerk toward the noisy commotion, Mark noticed the outside flags flapping wildly in a stiff breeze, signaling a significant uptick in wind velocity over what he had experienced on the golf course that day. Such a change in weather systems, however, was quite typical for that region in the summer months, especially in the late afternoon and early evening hours.

Once the door closed, everything grew quiet again until another server charged through the barroom carrying several plates filled with burgers and fries. When she opened the door, another blast of wind surged into the restaurant, this time bringing with it the sound of a barking dog. The lingering smell of food from her tray triggered Mark's appetite, and he wondered what was keeping Bill.

Pulling out his cell phone, he checked the time, wincing slightly when he saw that it was already five o'clock. It was getting late, and he still needed to return home to clean up before driving to Norfolk with Nikki later that evening. Their travel plans involved staying at a hotel near the airport in advance of catching an early flight to Hawaii tomorrow morning. The trip was an incentive award for the premium business he had generated through annuity sales. He and Nikki had never traveled together before, and it surprised him greatly when she had agreed to go with him. He often wondered why she even dated him at all because he was not the kind of man most women found exciting. If it had been anyone else other than Nikki, he might have thought the attraction was purely physical.

Besides being tall and incredibly strong, Mark was a ruggedly handsome man with a large square head and a strong jaw to match

his physique. His teeth were brilliantly white and remarkably straight, and they would shimmer and sparkle whenever he chose to smile, something he did sparingly except when trying to close a deal or generate sales. He had a well-defined cranial ridge above his eyes and a conspicuous scar on the right side of his forehead, one caused by a deep laceration he had sustained during a college bowl game. His short, sandy-colored hair stood straight up like an inverted hairbrush, making him resemble a football player from the Vince Lombardi era. Lately, he had noticed his hairline receding at the temples, but, having reached the age of thirty-five, he expected it based on his family's history. Women like to be seen with him, which is how he got most of his dates. However, his past relationships had never lasted long because he was rather dull. He knew that Nikki's friends disliked him, but that knowledge did not seem to bother him. Nikki liked him and, as far as he was concerned, nothing else mattered. Other than Nikki and his business associates, he had no actual friends ...

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CHAPTER 3

... “He’s such an ass. I don’t know what you saw in him in the first place.” The girl punctuated her sentence by jamming an oversized portion of seafood salad into her mouth.

“Maria, I think I know what she *saw* in him.” The blonde girl giggled while sheepishly glancing in Nikki’s direction.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Maria said between chews. “He may be built like an Olympic weightlifter, and he may be the only man on the beach taller than Nikki, but he’s still an ass—and a boring ass at that!”

All three of Nikki’s friends began laughing while she smiled politely at them from across the table. She knew that they meant well, and that is why she had agreed to dine with them at Mulligan’s that Sunday evening. Two days had passed since Mark had stood her up, and she had no real reason for feeling lighthearted; however, she felt obliged to make her friends believe that their efforts to support her had not been undertaken in vain.

Two of the girls at the table, Maria and Patty, were former schoolmates of Nikki. They had followed her down from Norfolk shortly after she had landed a job in Nags Head. Maria quickly found work as a dental hygienist, but Patty had difficulty finding a good paying job, bouncing around from temporary job to temporary job until Nikki found her a stable position as a receptionist in a doctor’s office. Nikki always felt a little protective of Patty, knowing that she needed someone to look after her. Conversely, she did not feel the same way about Maria, who was

quite capable of fending for herself.

With an alluring dark complexion and a sultry personality to match, Maria always made a conscious effort to emphasize her Latin heritage in the way she dressed and the manner in which she presented herself. Even at their casual get-together that night, she wore a bright red off-the-shoulder top with black eyelet shorts and black high heels. Patty, on the other hand, projected an innocent tomboy image at all times, wearing her usual beach attire that night: a white Dolman tee shirt with lemon printed cut-off boyfriend shorts and white sandals.

The third girl at the table was Jan, an attractive girl with long dark hair and a deep, raspy voice that men seemed to love. Like Maria, she looked a little overdressed for the evening in her strapless tie-dye dress, hoop earrings, and large sea-life necklace. Conscious of the coordinated overdress of Maria and Jan, Nikki suspected that they had more in store for her that evening than just consoling her at a sunset meal at Mulligan's.

Jan was the first person Nikki had met after moving to Nags Head. She worked as an executive assistant at the local bank where Nikki kept her financial accounts, and she took it upon herself to show Nikki around the Outer Banks upon her arrival, introducing her to some of her friends and ensuring that she felt at home in the area. After that, Maria and Patty arrived on the scene, and they immediately bonded with Jan. The three of them then formed a wild trio that frequented all the local nightspots, going wherever dance music was playing and alcohol was being served. The one stabilizing force in all of their lives was Nikki.

Nikki had never shown much interest in the party scene. Despite the prodding of her friends, she rarely joined them in their nightly escapades, but that never stopped them from asking. Her relationship with Mark had been the expressed reason she had given for declining their invitations; however, that relationship had now ended, and she knew she would have to come up with a new excuse.

Jan noticed Nikki's smile fading, so she chimed in. "Well, did you go over to his place and confront him?"

"Actually, I did." Nikki quickly answered, awaiting an opportunity to give a full accounting of what had happened. "When he hadn't shown up by ten o'clock, I started calling him on his cell phone, but he never answered. The call kept jumping to voicemail, so I left him messages—*many* messages. I also tried his landline, the one he keeps in his office, but I

only reached a recorded announcement telling me to call back after he returns from vacation. The voicemail function was turned off, so I couldn't leave a message on that phone ...

... Mulligan's Raw Bar & Grille where the girls sat on the outside deck was a two-story building with yellow shingles and pink storm shutters. Located between the bypass and the beach road at Milepost Thirteen near Jockey's Ridge, it served food on both levels and drinks at all three of its bars: an outside Tiki Bar on its second-floor wraparound deck, an upstairs bar that zigzagged the entire length of the room, and an octagon-shaped tavern bar—also known as the Gazebo Bar—attached to the side of the building next to the downstairs dining room. The pale yellow of the lower dining room walls nicely complemented the minty seafoam blue of second floor, giving the establishment a beachy, almost island-like charm and atmosphere. Known for its excellent food and a lively crowd, the upper bar and Tiki Deck would get jammed during the summer season, especially on Karaoke nights and whenever musicians performed on the outside deck, and that is exactly the way Dave found it upon climbing the stairs to the second-floor bar that Sunday evening.

"Commodore!" The man behind the bar became as rigid as steel with his hand glued to his forehead in a military-style salute the moment he spotted Dave at the top of the stairs. With a small nose out of proportion to the size of his head, the bartender appeared to be in his early thirties with a slight paunch around the middle and a perfectly round face that bore an affable expression at all times. His hair was short and sandy, and it stood straight up, giving him a fuzzy Kuala bear appearance.

Remaining at attention, the bartender held his salute while shuffling his feet in place, turning his body to follow his friend's progress toward the bar. Dave's usual seat was taken, as was every other chair and table in the place, so he sauntered to the end of the bar and stood by the waitress station near a glass door leading to the Tiki Deck. It was not until Dave had parked himself at the corner of the bar that the bartender relinquished his formal salute.

Dave did not say a word but instead glanced longingly at his usual seat currently occupied by someone else. The bartender immediately caught the inference and spoke up. "You know ... tourists," he said with a shrug and a grin before commenting, "What can you do?" Dave did not reply but continued gazing despondently at his favorite chair, to which the bartender said, "Oh, I suppose I'm now expected to anticipate your arrival and reserve that chair for you." He said it loudly and emphatically

while glancing around to ensure that everyone at the bar was watching his performance.

Dave still did not respond and instead began searching the space on the bar top in front of him as if looking for something he had misplaced. Picking up a cardboard drink coaster, he peeked beneath it before directing a forlorn gaze at his friend behind the bar.

The bartender understood that inference as well. “Oh, pardon me!” he said. “How is it that I failed to have a brew waiting for you so that you might quench your parched lips? And, lest I forget, a bowl of clam chowder to replenish your strength while you unload your burdensome day upon the shoulders of this lowly bartender?” As he turned to fill another customer’s drink order, he pointed his finger back at Dave and said rather good-naturedly, “Buddy, you’ve been hanging around the Mayor too long ...

... It was extremely crowded in the upstairs bar that night with the indistinct garble of voices filling the room. Occasionally, the door to the deck would open as servers passed in and out, allowing the music of the outside guitarist to drift in and blend with the overlapping voices and laughter of the people in the barroom. While listening to the snippets of songs and partial conversations, Dave waited patiently for his beer and soup while watching the others eat and drink around him. Although he was inside, he still wore his sunglasses, not bothering to remove them because their photochromic lenses had lightened to where he could see indoors without straining his eyes. Glancing through the door, he was unable to see anything on the Tiki Deck because of the outside darkness, and it surprised him how quickly night had fallen. Just then, several overhead strings of clear incandescent bulbs flicked on, illuminating everything on the deck so that he could observe the many customers sitting at the wooden picnic tables as well as those standing along the railing. One customer, in particular, caught his attention.

It was almost impossible for him not to notice the blonde girl in the light green pants sitting with her friends at the table just outside the door. He did not want to stare, but he could not help himself. She was quite possibly the most attractive girl he had ever seen in his life, at least up close and in person, and the effect she had on him was most unsettling. It was not his normal reaction to women, especially girls he had never met before. Despite the physical distance that separated them, he

felt disarmed and vulnerable in her presence.

From her outward appearance and demeanor, it was apparent that she was not the bar hopping type of girl he would expect to find in the places he frequented. No, there was something more to her—more substance, more culture, definitely more style. Even the clothes she wore complemented the smooth curved lines of her body, appearing as fresh and new as the image she projected. Glancing down at his own attire, his old green cargo shorts and his tee shirt printed with a faded advertisement reading *Surfboards by Dewey Weber*, he chuckled while turning back to the bar, saying under his breath, “Yeah, a woman like that would really be interested in someone like me ...

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CHAPTER 4

... The girl peeked flirtatiously at Mark over the top of her glass as she sipped the wine before returning it to the table. Unrolling a cloth napkin, she placed it on her lap saying, “I’m not sure what I want to eat. I can’t decide between the crab cakes or the pan-seared scallops.”

Glancing down at the menu lying open on the table, Mark said with a smile, “Why not both?”

Wrinkling her nose in a quirky fashion, she peered across the table at him and asked, “How can you read the menu with those dark glasses on? The sun went down hours ago. Don’t you think it’s time to take them off ... or are you hiding from someone?” Raising her eyebrows, she added, “I certainly hope you’re not embarrassed being seen with me?”

He did not respond to her question but simply glanced at her with an expression that betrayed a note of seriousness. She immediately noticed the subtle change in his mood and became fearful that she might have offended him with her last remark. She had intended it as a joke, but his reaction indicated that he had not taken it that way. He watched her fidget nervously in her chair a few moments before speaking. “You are aware that I am blind, aren’t you?” he asked in a manner that was very straightforward.

“What?” The candor of his admission startled her.

“Yes, I’m blind,” he said, “in one eye. I used to wear a patch, but I got tired of looking like a pirate all the time.” A

deadening silence hung in the air for a few seconds until he shattered it with a hearty chuckle and a smile that slowly broadened across his face.

Realizing that he was not sensitive about his admitted handicap, the girl relaxed and made light of the moment. "Ah, but then I could call you Patch or, rather, Patches. I used to have a dog name Patches. Here, Patches! Here, Patches!"

"You know," he said, raising one eyebrow over the top of his sunglasses, "the kids in school really put me through hell over my disability. That's why I'm not bothered by it now. You can't imagine the insults those deviant young minds could conjure up, their sole purpose to offend me and make my life miserable."

Sensing that he was being honest and not playing another one of his pranks, she said softly and sincerely, "You poor thing." Although they had just met the previous night at Kelly's Restaurant, it seemed like she had known him for years, and she felt totally at ease in his company. Surprised when he called to invite her to dinner, she had rushed out to purchase the colorful sarong she was wearing that evening because all she had with her at the beach were shorts and tee shirts. Her sisters always traveled with smart, stylish clothing that she could have borrowed, but they had left two days earlier with her parents. In fact, the whole family had gone home before her chance meeting with Mark, and she looked forward to calling them later that evening or early tomorrow ...

... It was a short drive from Pirate's Cove to the town of Manteo where Mark pulled into the parking lot beside The Tranquil House Inn along the boardwalk of the waterfront district. The car had barely come to a stop when his excited companion jumped out and began sprinting toward the marina. "Race you!" she exclaimed while running like a girl of ten until she discovered that her wedge sandals were slowing her down. Reaching down, she removed them and called out, "Chicken!" when she noticed that he was not trying to keep up with her. At the center of the boardwalk, she whirled around and peered back at him, uncertain of which way to go. His darkened figure, silhouetted against the aura of a lamppost, was all she could see of him as he strolled silently toward her, swinging the bottle of wine at his side as he walked along. "Which way?" she yelled.

Mark used his thumb to gesture to his left as he called out, "Past the next live oak. First dock near the bridge."

Lined with live oak trees, lampposts, and benches, the boardwalk snaked around the waterfront district from the

Roanoke Marshes Lighthouse to a staircase and bridge leading to a tiny island directly across from the marina. Arching three hundred feet across the water, the bridge was both a vehicle roadway and a pedestrian crossing to the Roanoke Island Festival Park, an interactive historic site depicting the first English settlement where the *Elizabeth II*, a replica of a sixteenth-century merchant ship, sat moored along the shoreline. Attached to the handrails of the pedestrian walkway were flags that snapped briskly in the fresh breeze amid the glowing radiance of several lampposts lining the bridge.

The marina consisted of several piers extending out from the boardwalk, three of them providing dock space for private slip holders and a few shorter piers used by the commercial boats. The private piers contained enough slips for about twenty boats, ten on each side, with the larger vessels moored near the ends. Most of the berths had short boarding platforms extending out from the docks as well as pilings set farther out in the water, weathered wooden posts to which the watercraft were secured with dock lines. Mark's boat floated in its slip midway down the first dock, the one nearest the bridge arching over the water to the Roanoke Island Festival Park.

Most of the moored boats in the marina had their bows facing the pier, but Mark preferred to back his sailboat into its berth. It was a thirty-five foot Beneteau Oceanis, specially rigged for single-handed sailing. Unlike most Beneteaus of that size, it had a shortened keel, which was an available option for that model year, one the previous owner had selected because of his plan to cruise the shallow waters of Florida before crossing the Gulf Stream on his way to St. Thomas. The shorter keel also aided Mark, making it easier for him to maneuver around the shoals of the Albemarle, Pamlico, and Roanoke Sounds in the Outer Banks.

Mark continued signaling the girl, guiding her to the boat via hand signals. When he finally arrived at the slip, he found her standing on the dock near the stern of the boat staring up at the mast and rigging. Approaching her from behind, he said, "It's not as big as that fishing boat I showed you, but it's very comfortable."

"I think it's wonderful," she replied with a grin.

Everything was relatively quiet at that hour except for the flags flapping on the bridge and the shackles clanking against the aluminum masts, echoes of a maritime lullaby played to the accompaniment of sailboat riggings humming in the breeze and water lapping against the hulls of the boats. The young

girl's expression made it apparent that she found the whole scene mesmerizing as she gazed starry-eyed across the marina, observing the various types of watercraft rocking gently on their moorings.

The waterfront marina played host to many sailboats as well as power boats, cabin cruisers, and houseboats. Additionally, several commercial craft operated out of the marina, boats such as Captain Johnny's Outer Banks Dolphin Tours, *The Cypress Queen* Luxury Yacht Cruise, the *Downeast Rover* topsail schooner, and the *Sea Gypsy IV* pirate ship; all of them berthed several yards away along the boardwalk. Directly across from the marina, along the darkened shoreline of Roanoke Island Festival Park, the *Elizabeth II* floated serenely in the night, its colorful hull and complex rigging brightly illuminated by several powerful floodlights. Framed in yellow pine and planked with juniper, the sixty-nine-foot square-rigger represented the type of ship used by Sir Walter Raleigh to transport colonists to that region of the New World.

"Well," Mark said, motioning to his boat, "shall we board?"

"Where?" she asked. She had never been on a sailboat before

...

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CHAPTER 6

... Dave was barely visible in the shadows of the late afternoon sun. It was shortly after six o'clock on Tuesday, and he appeared to be waiting for someone while sitting beneath the yellow Mulligan's sign along the beach road at the corner of East Soundside Road, a side street running between the bypass and the beach road. Resting his back against one of the wooden support posts, he sat partially concealed behind a sprawling juniper bush growing under the sign. About three hundred feet away, directly across the parking lot, people had gathered on the upstairs Tiki Deck of Mulligan's Raw Bar & Grille to eat and drink while listening to live music performed by a guitarist and singer. Due to the number of cars in the paved portion of the parking lot, Dave had parked his hearse in the unpaved section closest to a gravel exit lane leading to the beach road. Having then planted himself under the sign by the juniper bush, he was invisible to anyone traveling along East Soundside Road but in plain view of everyone sitting on Mulligan's deck or standing just inside the glass-paneled door of the upstairs bar.

"What the hell is he doing?" Sally asked while staring through the door panel.

Travis heard her question but ignored it, choosing instead to continue talking to Gary, a local high school English teacher who regularly spent his summer days at the bar in Mulligan's. Gary normally sat at the bar consuming large quantities of beer

while silently reading the books he intended to use in his English Literature class the upcoming school year, but he would occasionally interrupt his studies to converse with Travis, whom he considered a close personal friend despite Travis having branded him with the name the “Professor.”

“Travis, what the hell is he doing out there?” This time, Sally’s question was louder and more insistent.

“Who?” Travis asked reflexively without ending or interrupting his conversation with Gary.

“Buddy,” she said shrilly while continuing to stare out the window of the door.

The sound of his friend’s name caused Travis’ ears to perk up. “Buddy?” he asked with a grin before walking around the bar to see for himself. Gary, likewise, became intrigued upon hearing Dave’s name mentioned, so he too wandered over to observe the melodrama unfolding near the road. They could see Dave’s hearse sitting in the parking lot, but Dave, himself, was barely visible on the ground, hiding in the shadows under the sign. From their perch high on the second floor of Mulligan’s, the three of them watched with great amusement the comic antics of their friend.

“He looks like a damn hermit crab,” Travis said. “I knew he was eating too much clam chowder. It’s gone to his head.”

“Oh, leave him alone,” Sally said brusquely.

Knowing all too well that Sally never stopped at just one sentence, Travis looked at Gary and rolled his eyes while awaiting Sally’s follow-up.

“Can’t you see he’s waiting for someone,” she continued without taking her eyes off Dave whose body remained motionless under the sign.

“Who could he be waiting for?” Travis asked. “We’re all here.” He then began taking attendance while pointing a finger at each of them. “You, me, the Professor—everybody’s here.” He paused a moment before resuming. “You know,” he said, speaking frankly, “Buddy’s doesn’t have a lot of lasting personal attachments. Sad as it seems, we may be the only family he has.” With a twinkle in his eye, he then added, “But, of course, who could ask for more?” To punctuate his last remark, he spread his hands and looked around the room with a panoramic turn of his head.

While Travis continued playing to his audience in the upstairs bar, Dave remained seated on a scattering of spent oyster shells spread beneath the sign, unaware that the others were watching him. Boredom had dulled his senses, lulling him into a state of semi-consciousness where, if he had been more alert, he would have discerned the sound of something striking the pavement a

short distance away, a rhythmical percussion that increased steadily in volume until it was directly on top of him. By then, however, it was too late, leaving him dazed and surprised when a blonde flash rounded the corner of East Soundside Road and sped past him so quickly that he nearly missed it.

She was there and gone in less than a millisecond, but it was long enough to jar his senses, nudging him back to reality and reawakening him to his surroundings. He may have missed her approach from behind him, but he caught all of her departure down the beach road, telling him that he must hurry or she would get away before he had a chance to catch her. Lunging to his feet in one frantic bound, he started running after the young girl as she jogged effortlessly ahead of him, her ponytail bouncing with each stride she took, swishing back and forth like the pendulum of a clock. Inside the bar, far outside his range of hearing, his loyal fans were chanting in a cheerful, melodious tone, “Run, Buddy, run! Run, Buddy, run!”

Although he could not hear his friends’ voices resonating inside the barroom, he followed their instruction to the letter, sprinting after the girl with all his strength, running harder and faster than he had ever run in his life ...

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CHAPTER 7

... Since Dave had not yet eaten lunch, he decided to swing by Sam & Omie's to grab a quick bowl of clam chowder served "Hatteras-style," but those plans were instantly scuttled when he received a phone call from Travis whose car had broken down in the vicinity of Kelly's Restaurant. Without hesitation, he wheeled his hearse onto the bypass and sped off to his friend's rescue. Knowing that Nikki would not approve of another diversion from his surveillance duties, he nevertheless jumped at the opportunity, feeling safe in the knowledge that she would never find out. After a few minutes of traveling up the bypass, he spotted his friend trudging down the side of the road in front of the Secret Spot Surf Shop near the sixteenth milepost, so he pulled into the lot and parked facing the highway.

"Damn, it's hot ... and humid," Travis moaned while climbing onto the passenger's seat. "Doesn't this antique have air conditioning? Close the windows and turn it on. I'm dying here!" With perspiration streaming down his cheeks, the overweight bartender wiped his face on the front of his Mulligan's tee shirt while panting profusely, barely able to catch his breath.

Dave used the switch on the door panel to close all the windows and then reached for the air conditioning controls. "I'm trying to save some money," he stated grudgingly while complying with his friend's request. "It's expensive running the AC."

Travis slumped in his seat and gently closed his eyes. "I'll write you a check," he said serenely as his panting subsided. "But, first,

let me cool down and rest.”

Dave looked down the bypass but saw no sign of a disabled vehicle. He asked, “Where’s your car?”

“It’s farther up the highway, about a half-mile on the other side of the road near Kelly’s. Actually, it’s right across from Dirty Dick’s Crab House. That’s where it broke down. I thought I could walk to Mulligan’s, but it’s too damn hot for that. After a half-mile, I said, ‘Forget it,’ and I called you.” With a smile widening across his face, he opened his eyes and rolled his head in his friend’s direction.

Dave looked at him and said, “Wow, you walked a whole half-mile. So that’s how you stay so slim and trim.”

“Screw you,” Travis said lightheartedly while massaging his Buddha-like belly. “You’re just jealous of my Adonis physique.”

After studying his friend’s beer gut for a few seconds, Dave shook his head and asked, “Do you want me to stop back and take a look at your car after I drop you at work?”

“Hell, no!” Travis said with a playful glint in his eye. “Buddy, I know you’re good at keeping this old heap running, but I called a *real* mechanic—a professional. I called the Mayor.”

“You called the Mayor?”

Travis started laughing uncontrollably. “Yeah, I called him and told him that my car had broken down on the side of the road. It gave him a thrill knowing that I was stranded—an even bigger thrill when I asked for his help. He was absolutely ecstatic knowing that I was at his mercy, but I let him have his fun. I laid it on thick too. I spoke so meekly and humbly; it was pathetic. It was all I could do to keep from laughing as I sucked up to him. Trust me, Buddy, it was not pretty. Be glad you weren’t there to hear any of it. On second thought, maybe you should have been there. My performance was Oscar-winning.”

Dave again shook his head. “I can’t believe you called him ... I can’t believe he agreed to help you.”

“That’s the beauty of it, Buddy. The Mayor’s ego is so massive that he’s easily manipulated. I’ve known him longer than you have, so I know the right buttons to push when dealing with him. Here’s the thing you need to understand about the Mayor: if some piece of machinery is not functioning properly anywhere in the world, he views it as a disturbance in the cosmos and a direct affront to him. He then feels obligated to set things right by repairing it—even if it is owned by me!

The fact that I let him know there is a disabled vehicle requiring his assistance means he will become obsessed with it until it's running again. He even told me that he'd get his truck and tow it to his shop if he can't fix it on the road, but he doesn't anticipate having to do that. On the phone, he acted as if he already knew what was wrong with it, telling me he could probably repair it onsite." Travis then chuckled while reclining his head and again lowering his eyelids.

"Oh, one other thing, Buddy," he said without opening his eyes. "If you find yourself down here later today while the Mayor is working on my car, you better wear your shades because the glare of the sun reflecting off his chrome-dome might cause a driving hazard." He then sat upright and beamed an enthusiastic smile. "Perhaps we should post warning signs along the highway?"

While they continued talking about the Mayor, an old motorcycle with a sidecar whizzed past them heading north on the bypass. The sight of it surprised both Dave and Travis, leaving them slightly dumbstruck and somewhat amused. The motorcycle was a two-toned red and white 1950 Indian Chief Blackhawk with a signature fringed saddle, skirted fenders, and an ornamental Indian head mounted on the front fender. It had a hand shifter extending up along the fuel tank and two fishing poles protruding from chrome tubes on either side of the rear wheel. As the antique motorcycle roared up the highway, the fiberglass fishing rods curved backward like whip antennas bending in the wind.

The biker was a man in his early fifties sporting a graying goatee, his face a weathered patchwork of lines carved so deeply that they resembled scars. He wore a black tee shirt, camouflage cargo shorts, and biker boots in addition to a highly polished chrome skull lid cinched tightly over a fluttering Confederate flag bandana protruding from beneath the helmet. Gripping the handlebars tightly in his powerful hands, he stared straight ahead, his eyes shielded by extremely dark wraparound sunglasses ...

... Having confirmed that the car was indeed Mark's Infiniti and that Mark was alone in the car, Dave started the engine and began slowly backing out of his parking space, creeping up to the stop sign at West Seachase Drive where he waited to see which direction Mark would turn when the traffic light changed. Observing him head south, Dave then barreled full bore toward the intersection where he negotiated a hard right turn onto the bypass just as the signal was transitioning from green to yellow. That put him directly behind Mark's car but far enough back to remain unnoticed.

His pursuit of Mark took him two miles down the highway to Whalebone Junction where the gray sedan veered into the left lane beneath a sign for the Cape Hatteras National Seashore and the Nags Head beaches. Reluctantly, Dave followed him into the turning lane, knowing that he faced the likelihood of having to stop behind him at the traffic signal. Fortunately, however, the light changed just as Mark approached the intersection, and both of them were able to make the left hand turn without getting too close to each other.

Instead of proceeding south into the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Mark continued past the Holy Trinity by the Sea Catholic Chapel and turned right on South Old Oregon Inlet Road into the South Nags Head District. Through the many turns, Dave was able to keep Mark in sight, but, once they got off the highway and onto the beach road extension, he was only able to track him by means of his glowing red taillights.

They traveled just a few miles down the dark, two-lane road from the sixteenth to around the eighteenth milepost where Mark's car made an abrupt left-hand turn onto a short street lined with beach houses. With no cars behind him, Dave slowed down to a crawl as he approached the place where he had lost sight of the taillights because he did not want to turn onto a street without knowing what awaited him there. As luck would have it, another car was approaching from the opposite direction, so he brought the hearse to a full stop and waited for the car to pass him by, using those few moments to assess the situation. Sitting on the road with his left turn signal flashing, he was neither nervous nor frightened, and yet he felt his heart thumping vigorously, keeping time with each audible click of the pulsating signal. It led him to surmise that his body was sensing a danger his conscious mind had yet to recognize.

Peering through the darkness toward the end of the street, he spotted Mark's car sitting outside a beach house about one hundred feet away. It would not be possible for him to drive down there and remain hidden, so he decided to hide in the driveway of another house, one closer to the road. Fortunately, the first rental house near the corner appeared to be unoccupied, so he turned onto the street and immediately pulled into the driveway of a small stilted cottage, parking beneath its porch so that only his taillights were exposed. Jumping from the hearse with his binoculars in hand, he agilely ascended the stairs to the porch where he had a clear view of

the street all the way to the end.

The house where Mark had parked his car was a typical cottage-style beach house with a pitched roof and slatted railings surrounding its wraparound porch. Located precariously close to the sea, the weathered home sat enveloped on three sides by enormous mounds of drifting sand that limited the number of parking spaces in the driveway to two. Mark's Infiniti occupied one of the spots with another car parked beside it. Because the house faced the beach, Dave could not see into the living area, his view limited to the darkened windows of the bedrooms on the back of the house. He thought about walking down to get a better look but decided to wait a few minutes to see if anything happened. He did not have to wait long.

The first thing that caught his attention was the sound of laughter, the bright, sweet timbre of a young woman's voice. Looking through the binoculars while sitting on the railing of the porch, he was able to confirm that she was indeed young as she strolled out the door of the beach house, tightly clutching the arm of a towering man in sunglasses. She appeared to be in her early twenties, but it was hard to tell in the murkiness of the night and the weak glow of the single light fixture positioned above the door. "Oh, so that's what's going on," he said aloud as he watched the two descend the stairs and get into Mark's car.

As the gray sedan moved slowly up the road toward the stop sign, Dave remained hidden in the shadows while sitting in a wooden Adirondack chair on the porch. He waited until Mark had turned onto the beach road extension in the direction of Whalebone Junction before springing to his feet and charging down the stairs, clearing the last three steps in a single bound. Hastily backing out of the driveway, he was in pursuit of the couple within seconds, speeding down the road with Mark's taillights in view.

At Whalebone Junction, he saw Mark veer onto the beach road and then turn into Cahoon's Market beside Jennette's Pier. Rather than follow him into the store's parking lot, Dave hid in the shadows by Sam & Omie's Restaurant on the opposite side of the road where he could watch in secret everything occurring at Cahoon's. He did not have to wait there long because Mark was only in the store a few minutes, emerging with a bottle of wine that he handed to the girl through the car window before climbing back into his Infiniti and speeding away. Pulling out a short distance behind him, Dave raced down the road, beginning the chase anew.

It was astonishing how quickly he had mastered the technique

of shadowing someone, and he began thinking it might prove a lucrative career for him if he ever decided to give up the surfing life. He had no problem maintaining visual surveillance of Mark's car while remaining undetected despite driving around in a circus wagon that practically advertised his presence, and he looked forward to telling Nikki about his newfound skill along with all he had learned about Mark's secret life. Yep, he thought to himself, his discovery of Mark's affair would be just the thing to cement the deal with Nikki. Once he told her how the jerk had dumped her for someone else, it would be clear sailing for him. Observing Mark race down the road, moving farther and farther away from Nikki, he felt himself drawn even closer to her.

He followed Mark and the girl onto the causeway where the two vehicles passed by Basnight's Lone Cedar Café and crossed the Washington Baum Bridge to Roanoke Island. Driving past Pirate's Cove Marina and Condominiums at the end of the bridge, Dave smiled as he thought about Nikki, finding it astonishing how everything was unfolding practically on her doorstep. Tailing Mark's car past the Roanoke Island Marshes and through a right-hand turn toward Manteo, he pursued the big man and his date all the way into town, being especially careful to maintain enough distance to remain unseen. At an intersection several streets beyond a banner advertising nightly performances of *The Lost Colony*, Dave followed Mark onto Sir Walter Raleigh Street where they traveled down the narrow road through several picturesque neighborhoods lined with flowering crepe myrtle trees spilling their sweet fragrances into the warm night air ...

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CHAPTER 9

... He walked about a half mile down the beach before crossing over to the beach road where he stopped at the Cavalier Surf Shop. It was about eight o'clock, and the store had not yet opened, so Dave tapped lightly on the window to get the attention of Marty, who he could see standing behind the counter checking an inventory sheet. Although he regularly surfed with their son Jerry, it had been a while since he had visited with Marty and Ken, so he stayed a little longer than he had planned, putting him way behind schedule once he left the shop. Walking along the road, he came to the Surfside Plaza where he noticed the Mayor's motorcycle parked outside of the Harley-Davidson shop. He was tempted to stop by and say hello but decided against it because it was almost time for Nikki to arrive at his house. He also jettisoned his plan to drive up to Cap'n John's Marine & Nautical Consignment to check on a surfboard that he was trying to sell. That could wait for another day, he told himself. Instead, he marched straight home and jumped into the shower ...

... Kitty Hawk Kites operated out of a shopping complex known as Jockey's Ridge Crossing located directly across from the dunes of Jockey's Ridge State Park on the bypass between the twelfth and thirteenth mileposts. Marking its location along the highway were blowing windsocks, banners, flags, and twirling windmills, all made of Sun Tex fabric. The shopping center was a long yellow building trimmed in blue with white ramps and

staircases connecting the floors of the two-story complex. Perched high at the north end of the building was a crow's nest with a flagpole on which flew an enormous black and white bovine windsock, a cartoonish Holstein that fluttered and bounced happily in the constant breeze.

In addition to Kitty Hawk Kites, Jockey's Ridge Crossing also housed a number of other stores that included The Fudgery, Scoops Ice Cream Parlor & Deli, Natural Life, Kitty Hawk Surf Company, Kitty Hawk Hammocks, and Life on a Sandbar; but Kitty Hawk Kites was the largest of the retailers, occupying both levels at the north end of the shopping complex. Not only did the store sell kites, flags, windsocks, and all sorts of wind-related merchandise, it also offered hang-gliding lessons on the adjacent sand dunes. Nikki chose to enter the kite store through the second level entrance while Dave waited outside on the covered deck.

Positioning himself at the top of the ascending ramp, Dave was able to observe Nikki through the glass doors of the shop. Additionally, he could see out beyond the parking lot to the other side of the highway where an eighty-foot dune rose from the earth like a giant sandcastle. At that hour, many people were struggling to climb the enormous sand mound while others stood along its crest flying kites in a variety of designs. He enjoyed watching the soaring kites, delicate wings of fabric diving and swirling through the air in a rainbow of blending colors, some creating buzzing and whizzing sounds that he could hear from his perch high on the second-level deck. Although an accomplished kiteboarder, he had no memory of ever having flown a kite just for the fun of it, not even as a child.

Farther along the ridge of the main dune, he noticed two hang-gliders poised to plunge down the backside of the massive sand mound. With the dunes extending all the way to Roanoke Sound, Dave knew that there must be more hang-gliders on the secondary dunes behind the one fronting the highway. The existence of the larger dune and the smaller ones behind it intrigued him, mainly because they were such a contradiction. Despite their illusion of permanency, they were always in flux, change being their only constant. Continually in motion, they marched forward or receded backward depending upon the vagaries of the wind that drove them here or there. In that respect, he and the dunes were very much alike.

The shopping center was active that morning with many children and families scurrying from store to store. He seemed

unaware of their presence as he leaned against the railing at the top of the ramp, passively watching the activities on the dune. After about ten minutes, though, he started getting antsy, so he peeked over his shoulder through the shop door where he saw Nikki still milling around inside. Directing his vision away from the store, he glanced down the ramp to observe a black man walking up from the ground level. Appearing hairless, the man's highly polished cranium glistened with reflected sunlight. It was not until the gentleman neared the top of the wooden ramp that Dave noticed a light dusting of gray stubble along the sides of his head. Another "commode-head"—he thought to himself. Suppressing a grin, he wondered what Travis would say if he were there.

Although he did not know why, Dave found himself shocked to see a Roman collar on the man, an obvious indication that the stranger was a cleric. Reaching the top of the ramp, the black priest looked Dave straight in the eye and flashed him an engaging smile that exposed a mouthful of unblemished white teeth. "Good morning to you," he said in a manner indicating that he sincerely meant it. Dave did not reply but instead acknowledged the priest with a nod of his head while focusing his attention on the clergyman's accent. It sounded African.

The priest then stepped around Dave and peeked through the shop window while walking past it. Something he saw in there caught his attention, making him stop and promptly enter the store. As the door sprung shut, Dave heard him address someone inside, "My dear Nikita—" The slamming door muted the rest, and Dave turned to see Nikki rush over and embrace the priest, giving him a huge bear hug and an exceptionally warm smile. Watching the priest straighten his back to increase his stature, demonstrating to Nikki that he was as tall as she was, Dave chuckled; it was something he had done more than once himself when in her presence. He then watched the two friends talk for the next ten minutes, laughing and giggling as they did so. The priest was quite emotive, and, when something struck him as funny, he would stamp his feet in excitement and clap his hands. It was like watching a silent movie without the subtitles, and Dave longed to know what they were saying. Finally, Nikki embraced the priest again, and the black clergyman turned and walked out of the shop.

"Good morning to you, again," he said upon exiting the store. "How are you today?"

"Good," Dave answered, his response delivered mechanically without much thought.

The priest stopped and looked him dead in the eye. "Are you

sure?" he asked with a mischievous grin on his face before proceeding on his way. Walking in a casual manner, he offered a parting observation, "Yes, it is going to be a *good* day."

Dave made no reply but simply observed the priest stroll across the deck toward the other shops ...

... Nikki was at home on the water. She was also an excellent student who listened attentively to everything Dave told her, paying close attention to his instructions and the information he shared about sailing, such as what it means to "tack" and "jibe" and how to apply those principles to windsurfing. He explained how the sailboard was just a simple sailing craft consisting of a wishbone-shaped boom and sail along with a mast attached to a board with a universal joint that enabled the mast and sail to rotate freely around the board as well as fall and rise when lifted out of the water using a rope called an "up-haul." He also described how her body would act as "standing" and "running" rigging commonly found on sailboats. Instead of employing ropes and cables to hold up the mast, she would use her arms and legs supported by her muscles to perform those crucial functions. By tilting the mast fore and aft, she would steer the board, and by pulling in on the boom and easing it out, she would control her speed.

He compared the sail to an airplane wing standing on its end and explained that the board's movement through the water would result from "lift" generated by the air moving across the sail. In effect, she would be flying across the water. With the sailboard capable of skimming across the water's surface like a flat stone, the flying analogy was not far from the truth; however, the breeze that day was too light to make anything like that happen. She would have to wait until another day to experience that kind of speed and exhilaration.

Before moving into the water, Dave had her practice on dry land, standing on top of the board near the water's edge. Once Nikki had demonstrated her mastery of the basics, Dave dragged the rig into the sound about twenty yards offshore. He had chosen that area of Roanoke Sound to teach her because the water depth was mostly knee to waist deep except for a few low spots farther out and some deeper areas in the dredged channel closer to Roanoke Island.

Once in the water, Nikki immediately climbed on the board and struggled clumsily to her feet while Dave stood beside the sailboard, steadying it with his hands. He then released his grip the moment she pulled the sail out of the

water, but her erratic movements sent her tumbling backward on top of him, plunging both of them into the brackish water of the sound with the sail falling down to cover them like a blanket, creating a tight seal over the surface of the water with both of them trapped beneath it.

Forced underwater, Dave relaxed his body as he lay on the sandy bottom with Nikki on top of him and the sail covering both of them. He could feel the panic in her body as she hardened her muscles in response to the weight of the heavy sail and rigging lying on top of her, so he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him, shielding himself from being kicked and elbowed if she were to begin thrashing. The strain of her body was intense, but he held her tightly while turning slightly to poke his free arm up into the sailcloth, creating a hollow of air into which he quickly thrust her head. With her breathing restored, the tension of her muscles eased, but Dave maintained a firm grip on her waist while encircling her body to emerge in the air pocket directly in front of her. Kneeling on the gritty bottom of the sound with their heads breaking the surface of the water, the two of them then stared at each other face-to-face under the canopy of the multi-colored sail.

“And that,” he said, “is how you breathe when the sail falls on top of you. It’s a trick you need to remember, especially when you’re in deep water.”

She was so close to him that she could almost taste the salt water trickling over the taut skin of his cheekbones as she peered deeply into his gray eyes. Feeling the intense, constant pressure of his arm around her waist ...

... so Dave drove to the Sugar Creek Seafood Restaurant on the causeway instead of taking Nikki back to her car. He was hoping to find the outdoor deck open, and it looked like it was. Walking up the ramp with Nikki, he saw a young girl inside a small enclosed bar near an outdoor gazebo. She did not see him, so he tapped lightly on the screen door of the tiny barroom. “Anybody home?” he called out.

Hunched over a big white cooler, the young bartender was stocking it with beer bottles, but she raised her eyes in response to the question. “Buddy!” she cried out happily. In her voice was the slight twang of a Southern drawl.

“You open?” he asked.

“For you, Buddy, we’re always open. Actually,” she said, smiling at him through the screen door, “I’ve been here about fifteen minutes. You’re my second customer.” Nodding her head

to the right, she directed Dave's attention to an old man sitting on a wooden stool along the rail by the gazebo. He appeared sloppy and sweaty as he sipped whiskey from a small plastic shot glass and chased it down with a swig of beer. The guy looked vaguely familiar, but Dave could not quite place him. If he had to guess, he would say that the old-timer probably worked on Roanoke Island, most likely in Wanchese ...



... After Travis had walked out, Dave changed back into his shorts and neatly folded his new wardrobe before returning downstairs. By then, Travis had gone back out onto the porch, speaking up when he heard Dave step through the doorway, "Buddy, you've only been in town what? Three or four months? And you're already on your way to becoming a legend around here. Do you know that?"

Dave grinned and sat down on a chair with his newly acquired booty resting on his lap. "I thought Mojo Collins was the Living Legend of the Outer Banks, at least, that's what he told me."

"When did you see Mojo?"

"Last week. The Mayor and I had lunch at Sam & Omie's, and he told me that Mojo was playing at the Tale of the Whale that night. Of course, I had to go over and pester him a little. I arrived early while he was still setting up in the gazebo. When I started down the ramp, he was sitting there tuning his guitar, so I yelled at him, 'Hey Mojo, there's nobody here!' You know his sense of humor. He just growled at me saying, 'Well, you're here ain't ya.'"

Travis laughed. "Everything in life changes, but not Mojo."

Dave gulped down the last of his beer and continued, "We talked until the dinner crowd showed up and he started singing. He told me that he's playing at the Outer Banks Brewing Station a week from Saturday, so I told him I'd stop over. You should come too if you're not working."

"I'll have to check my schedule," Travis said. "I'd enjoy seeing Mojo again. I get tired of using my best material on the Mayor. The only problem is that Mojo is a lot quicker on his feet. His comebacks to my barbs are more expressive and pithy than what I get from the Mayor."

"Yeah, but, unlike the Mayor, Mojo actually likes you."

"The Mayor likes me. He fixed my car didn't he?" As he

said that, he chugged down his beer and spied the long shadows on the houses across the canal. "I hate to tell you this, Buddy, but it's getting late. You should hurry, or you'll miss your date. And I need to head off to work."

"Damn!" Dave said. "I've got to get going. Thanks for the clothes." Grabbing his things, he raced through the screen door and down the stairs.

Travis called out to him as he left, "I expect a full accounting of everything that happens tonight ... *if you know what I mean!* ...



... After about four miles, the Infiniti signaled left and pulled into the parking lot at the south end of the Port O' Call Restaurant. Astonished by the fact that he had come full circle, finding himself right back from where he had started only a few hours earlier, Dave drove past the restaurant and entered the parking lot on the north side of the building in an effort to remain hidden from view. Reaching for his jacket on the seat beside him, he rummaged through the inside pockets until he found the dinner receipt the waitress had given him. The spot where he had parked the hearse did not provide a clear view of the front entrance, so he waited patiently inside the vehicle, giving his quarry sufficient time to enter the restaurant.

Despite the simplicity of his plan, the first part of which involved walking over to the other parking lot to check the license plate number of the car, he found himself hesitant to act, stymied by an uncomfortable feeling that something was not right. Although he could not explain his reluctance to solve the mystery, he knew that he would ultimately act, spurred on by his desire to end the suspense. Deep down inside, he hoped he was just chasing ghosts, telling himself that the car most likely belonged to someone else; however, his wishful desires were quickly dashed when he stood at the rear bumper of the familiar gray sedan and recognized the plate number of his adversary. Although uncertain why he harbored such uneasy feelings, he knew exactly what he would do next; he would enter the restaurant if only to satisfy his need for closure.

The inside of the Port O' Call appeared no different than when he had been there several hours earlier except for a younger crowd jamming the lobby and the loud, disjointed music playing in the Gas Light Saloon. The deafening volume inside the place did not surprise him because he had already heard the din of the raucous

metal band while still in the parking lot. Studying the crowd in the hallway, he failed to spot Mark, so he ducked into the men's restroom where the only occupant was a slightly intoxicated kid leaning against the wall by the urinals. Completing his sweep of the restroom, a search that included the bathroom stalls, he then returned to the lobby, confident that Mark must be in the bar.

Handing his dinner receipt to the bouncer in lieu of a cover charge, Dave stepped into the saloon near the dance floor, finding it filled with people his age or younger, mostly girls jerking and gyrating to the heavy metal beat. Those not on the dance floor were milling around the bar or sitting at the rear of the room, but he could not distinguish their faces due to the low lighting and the flickering of multiple strobe lights distorting their features. Unable to search using facial recognition, he instead scanned the crowd based on body shapes; Mark was huge and would be easy to spot. A quick pass of his eyes around the room, however, did not reveal anything except someone vacating a seat at the end of the bar. Slithering through the crowd as quickly as he could, he succeeded in claiming the empty chair that provided him an excellent location from which to observe the crowd. From his seat beside the waitress station, he was able to view the entire downstairs and see anyone going up or down the carpeted staircase directly behind him.

When the bartender came over to take his order, Dave merely pointed to an orphaned beer bottle on the bar rather than shouting over the music, tossing money to the young man when he returned with the beer. Dave then tilted back his head to take a long swig from the bottle but found himself rendered motionless by the disturbing sight of Mark reclining on a chair high above him in the Lincoln Booth of the Captain's Lounge. Sharing the exclusive booth with the oversized brute was a petite young girl sitting on his lap, the fabric of her short white dress clinging tightly to her thin frame. Her long flowing hair, red as an autumn leaf, confirmed for Dave that she was not the same girl he had seen last night on the boat ...

... Stunned and detached, Dave watched the revolting spectacle in the role of a passive observer. Since it all seemed impossible and unreal, he was unable to react in a rational, moral way. As such, he experienced no fear, nor did he feel threatened by anything he saw. Even as he witnessed the morbid burial rite, he had no active participation in what his

eyes observed or what his mind perceived until he noticed a minor irregularity in the overall scene, a feature of the environment he had overlooked until then—shadows.

The diffused light of the super moon painting the night with the impressionistic aura of daylight was causing long shadows to appear on the landscape, but Dave had been ignoring them, observing things around him without noticing their presence. Suddenly, he became conscious of shadows everywhere, dark patches on the ground caused by anything of substance. Sand mounds, shrubbery, grass, even his own body; everything cast a shadow—everything, that is, except for Mark.

Struck by this odd phenomenon, Dave used his binoculars to search the ground around the behemoth man, but he could not find a shadow anywhere on the sand. The bizarre nature of this circumstance made him even more determined to find a rational answer, and he again scoured the ground for the elusive lunar shade until he noticed the murderous fiend raise his head and gaze upward toward the sky, sneering in open defiance at the glowing orb reflecting light upon the earth. Seeing the shadowless villain scoff at the moon in such a manner, Dave half-expected him to thrust back his head and emit a bloodcurdling howl, much like a werewolf in a horror movie, but that was not to happen. Instead, a provocation more frightening and intimidating occurred when Mark carefully removed his sunglasses and peered directly at Dave from across the sandy terrain.

The shock of seeing the lethal man staring at him from the base of the dune was enough to shake him out of his disengaged stupor. It awakened him to the danger of becoming more than just a spectator in this deadly game of voyeurism, but he managed to tamp down his fears by reassuring himself that Mark could not possibly see him at that distance, not without some sort of optical aid, which he did not appear to have. The solace provided by his argument was only short-lived due to the feelings of uncertainty that bubbled up almost instantly, steadily increasing the longer the homicidal maniac maintained his menacing glare. With each passing second, Dave felt the ghostly eyes of the predator pierce the lenses of the binoculars to burrow straight into his brain, ultimately convincing him of the precariousness of his situation and the very real threat he faced. Holding his breath while attempting to restrain his growing sense of dread, he nervously watched the menacing figure scowl at him from across the sand ...

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CHAPTER 12

... It was just before noon when Dave passed Sam & Omie's Restaurant and turned onto the beach road extension at Whalebone Junction to cross into the district of South Nags Head. His destination was Garry Oliver's Outer Banks Fishing Pier around the eighteenth milepost, but he had decided to make a quick stop at Ace's house before going there. Up ahead, off to the right, he saw the weathered planks of the small, one-story structure, easily identified by the flags in the yard and a large sign that read *Home of a U.S. Marine*.

He recalled the first time he had visited the place shortly after arriving in the Outer Banks. It had been one evening while he was out driving around after dark, trying to get the lay of the land. That was when he came upon what he mistook for an open-air bar. Noticing a string of twinkle lights around a large open doorway and several chairs arranged inside the place, he pulled into the driveway and parked alongside a classic red and white motorcycle. To his great surprise, he had not discovered a quaint little bar but, rather, the home of a former United States Marine, someone who had turned his garage and driveway into a place for drinking and socializing with his friends. Sitting inside the garage were two men engaged in conversation: an older gentleman with a long white beard reminiscent of Santa Claus and another man in his early fifties with a Marine Corps tattoo on his upper arm.

Dave immediately apologized for the intrusion and turned

to leave when Ace, the owner of the property, invited him to stay. With his bleached whiskers resting comfortably on his chest, the veteran introduced himself and proudly showed off his home after handing Dave a can of Budweiser and telling him to grab a folding chair from beside the propane grill. Placing his beer can on a fish-cleaning table, Dave unfolded one of the chairs and sat down, barely able to constrain his smile as he admired the collection of unique objects and artifacts comprising Ace's world.

Between the porch and the garage was an old wooden bench inscribed with a written endorsement suggesting that people enjoy Budweiser at Fish Heads Bar & Grill, Mulligan's, Applebee's, and Sam & Omie's. Above it was a sign that read *Home of a U.S. Marine, Budweiser drinking, Earnhardt Jr. fan*. The interior walls of the garage were stacked and lined almost to the ceiling with empty Budweiser beer cans, the contents of which Ace proudly claimed to have consumed. Hanging from the rafters were American flags and Marine posters as well as a sling hammock on which Ace preferred to sit while drinking and conversing with his friends. A refrigerator stood in the corner of the garage filled with ice cold cans of Budweiser waiting to be consumed and added to the interior motif of the garage.

Dave immediately bonded with the older gentleman, and the two became fast friends from that day forward. He also developed a close relationship with the other service veteran sitting in Ace's garage that night, someone who turned out to be the Mayor.

Approaching the ramshackle hideaway, Dave slowed down when he saw his friend sitting inside the garage. Instead of pulling into the driveway, he stopped by the side of the road and prepared to call out to Ace when the bearded veteran surprised him by speaking up first.

"Buddy, aren't you going to come in and have a Bud?" the old-timer yelled to him from across the lawn. Despite his impaired vision, Ace had detected Dave's presence along the road.

Shaking his head in amazement, Dave answered him, "How did you know it was me ...



... "I wish he'd stop looking at us," Patty moaned, her grimace reflecting her annoyance with the man sitting along the railing by the dance floor.

"He's not looking at us," Maria said. "He's looking at Nikki."

The girls sat at a large table two rows back from the hardwood

dance floor listening to a rock band on an elevated stage wail out its opening song to the syncopated flashes of colored strobe lights swirling throughout Kelly's Tavern. Sitting at a small table between the girls and the empty dance floor was a bald man with a goatee wearing camouflage cargo shorts and a black tee shirt. He was alone at the table except for two open bottles of Budweiser. With his back to the band, he sat facing the girls, squinting in their direction with a grotesque grin on his face that was accentuated by the crinkling of his nose and the puckering of his lips as he nodded his head in time to the music, clapping his hands to the driving beat of the bass drum while stomping the sole of his biker boot on the floor.

"He's giving me the creeps," Patty said, elevating her squeaky voice over the music, hoping her words would reach the ears of the annoying man.

Jan raised her hand. "Wait a minute," she said, "I think he's blind."

"Blind?" Maria asked skeptically.

"Yeah, look at his eyes. They're nothing but slits. I don't think he can see. He's not actually staring at us."

Nikki cast a dubious glance at the man and then shook her head. "He's not blind," she said to her friends.

"And how do you know that?" Jan asked defensively.

"Because—" Nikki said with raised eyebrows and a nod of her head toward the man. "Because he's wearing a watch, dummy."

Jan tilted her body and craned her neck to get a better look at the guy's wrist moving back and forth in time with the music. "Maybe it's a disguise," she said with a giggle, her low raspy snicker causing the rest of them to start laughing.

Patty added with a smile, "I liked it better when we thought he was blind."

Before going to dinner that evening, the girls had attended the five-thirty Mass at Holy Trinity by the Sea Chapel so they could stay out late and not have to get up early to attend church on Sunday morning. As was always the case, Patty wore her usual beach attire while Jan and Maria were dressed to kill for their big night out, sporting high heels, tight slacks, revealing tops, and lots of jewelry and cologne. Nikki, however, was dressed more conservatively, wearing a white cotton top, wedge sandals, and the same lime-green linen pants she had worn at their last get-together at Mulligan's on the night she had met Dave.

Having eaten in Kelly's dining room with Jan's brother and

the rest of the band members, the girls and the musicians then moved into the bar where they enjoyed a few rounds of drinks before the band took the stage. Nikki's friends had hoped to involve her with Jan's brother, but the anticipated arrival of Dave made them scrap their plan. Maria and Patty were excited about meeting Dave, but Jan was a little disappointed because she had hoped Nikki and her brother would hit it off. Her brother also shared his sister's sentiments, continually staring at Nikki from across the table at dinner and then from his spot on the stage. Polite as always, Nikki graciously acknowledged his advances and gently deflected them because she had already set her sights on other game. Positioning herself with a clear view of the bar entrance, she kept a sharp eye on the doorway, impatiently awaiting Dave's arrival.

Despite the threat of the hurricane, the barroom had filled up quickly with people coming out in droves to hear the band fresh in from Norfolk. Having performed at Kelly's before, the musicians had a good reputation in the area, one bolstered by Jan and her public relations blitz, so they knew the type of music the crowd wanted to hear. Mike Kelly, the owner of the restaurant, had given them the opportunity to cancel their contract because of the threatening weather, but they decided to keep the engagement because they needed the money. With so many predictions about when the storm would make landfall, they chose to believe the one forecasting a delay of another day; however, they had wisely left their tour bus idling in the parking lot so it would be ready to jettison them north the minute they finished their gig. As such, they did not waste any time getting on stage, starting ten minutes early, much to the chagrin of Jan's brother who had hoped to spend more time with Nikki. Because it was their first number that evening, no one had yet stepped onto the dance floor, but Nikki expected her friends to drag her out there the minute the band sounded the initial beat of their second song.

Striking the last chord on his guitar, Jan's brother brushed back the locks of his sandy-colored hair in an attempt to catch Nikki's eye, but the only thing she saw was the sudden illumination of her Android smartphone lying on the table beside her wine glass ...

... The Bodie Island Lighthouse sat about a thousand yards back from the highway down a winding road through a grove of Loblolly pines. Careening off the highway onto an access road, Dave glanced at two wooden structures sitting near the intersection, houses owned by the National Park Service built in the traditional coastal style of architecture. He was aware that one

of them housed law enforcement, but he did not know which one it was. Seeing both buildings completely dark and no vehicles anywhere in the parking lots, he sped past them and plunged down the darkened road at breakneck speed, still hoping to get there in time.

The approach to the lighthouse through the pine grove was long and dark, but Dave maintained a constant speed along the serpentine route without flying off the road or crashing into any of the tree trunks. Emerging into a clearing surrounded by other tall pines and reeds of *Phragmites* swaying in the gusty breeze, he slowed down only when he saw the dim outline of the massive beacon rising one hundred and sixty-five feet into the air behind a visitor's center located about one hundred feet in front of it. At the end of the parking lot, he noticed a few outbuildings, but he was unable to distinguish anything else other than the glowing porch lights of the buildings and one exceptionally bright light flashing twice every thirty seconds in the sky above him.

Inside the clearing, he followed the wide, sweeping course of the road as curved around the grounds to the visitor's center, a two-story structure that had once served as living quarters for the lighthouse keeper and his family. Straining his eyes to see through the inky blackness of the night, he thought he could detect the outline of a sport utility vehicle sitting in the parking lot, but he was still too far away to know for sure. It was not until he steered the hearse around the bend and flooded the area with his headlights that he conclusively identified a white Jeep Patriot parked near the visitor's center. Additionally, he saw ...

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CHAPTER 13

... It was several minutes past three when Dave steered the hearse into a large parking lot off West Kitty Hawk Road near the bypass between the fourth and fifth mileposts. Dodging the deep puddles of water while straining to see through the unrelenting rain, he approached a building at the end of the lot and parked as close as possible to its front entrance before jumping from the hearse and jogging to the shelter of an overhang above the door. Besides the wind and rain, the main impediment to his getting there that afternoon had been the bumper-to-bumper traffic on the bypass caused by the hordes of evacuees trying to outrun the hurricane. The highway had already bottlenecked at the Wright Memorial Bridge over Currituck Sound, and he knew it would only get worse as the day wore on. Standing outside the door of Holy Redeemer by the Sea Catholic Church, he questioned his reason for being there, wondering if the guidance and reassurance he sought would be worth the effort he had expended in getting there.

Except for Dave's hearse parked in a reserved handicapped space, the parking lot was deserted, making the church and its grounds appear abandoned and forsaken. Cupping his hands around his eyes to counter the reflection in the glass doors, he peered into the vestibule where everything seemed dark and unwelcoming. His initial reaction was to give up and go home, but he instead grabbed the door handle and gave it a half-hearted tug, fully expecting it to be locked. To his great surprise, it moved

easily in his hand.

The church was an odd-shaped building of a contemporary design consisting of three pie-shaped divisions, each section doubling the length of the one adjacent to it. There was a long brick wall forming one side of the church with curved, segmented walls expanding in concentric arcs around the opposite side of the building. Dave had been in a Catholic church on only one other occasion, and that was when he was a boy attending a wedding with his parents. He remembered that church, but it was nothing like this one. That one was an ancient Gothic-style building with spires, arches, buttresses, and colorful stained glass windows. Based on his one-time experience, he had assumed that all Catholic churches looked like that.

It was ghostly quiet when he first walked into the large open vestibule, but the soles of his shoes squeaking loudly on the tile floor instantly shattered the solemn silence. Crossing through the vestibule, he opened the door leading into the main hall of the church and paused briefly to look inside before entering the room. In the distance ahead, he observed a white marble altar sitting on a raised platform. Brick steps led to the altar over which hung an enormous crucifix mounted on the wall. Three sections of wooden pews spread out from the altar to fill the great room with an organ and an encasement of pipes occupying the far side of the church. Carved images of the Stations of the Cross adorned the walls of the interior space, and Dave remembered hearing from someone that Glenn Eure, a local Nags Head artist, had designed, carved, and painted them. On many occasions, Dave had driven past the artist's Ghost Fleet Gallery located between the tenth and eleventh mileposts, but he had never visited the gallery nor had he ever met the artist.

Walking down the side aisle toward the altar, he marveled at the eclectic design of the church. It was not what he had expected. There were several stylized stained glass windows at the far end near the organ, but they were not the ornate depictions of saints and angels he remembered from his youth. About halfway down the aisle, he stopped by a white marble Baptismal font set in a small alcove near six stained glass windows arranged in two columns of three. The brightly colored windows depicted nature scenes of land, sea, and sky; once again, not the saints and angels he expected to see.

"They are the Outer Banks," a cheerful voice called out from a short distance away, its bright tone filling the large, empty room.

Dave turned and looked toward another alcove along the opposite wall in which stood an ornate tabernacle made of gold,

bronze, or polished brass; he could not conclusively identify the metal from that distance. Facing the burnished coffer were two prayer kneelers along with two chairs positioned directly behind them. Father Andal sat on one of the chairs wearing neatly pressed slacks and a black short-sleeved shirt with a Roman collar. Remaining purposefully quiet, he had been watching Dave closely for several minutes.

“The stained glass windows depict the Outer Banks,” the priest explained while remaining seated on the other side of the church. “The sound side is represented by the left windows and the ocean side by those on the right.” He beamed a wide grin that Dave could see even from that distance. “You have fish, water, trees, birds, animals—everything you find in the Outer Banks,” he declared quite jubilantly.

Dave did not immediately respond but instead turned to reexamine the windows. Yes, he could now see the visual representation of the region in both landscapes and seascapes, all depicting the world he had come to know and appreciate over the past several months. When he looked back, Father Andal had risen and was genuflecting solemnly before the tabernacle, so Dave began walking toward him across the middle of the church ...

... His destination was only three miles away along a route leading down the bypass to East Gray Eagle Street, a cross street connecting the bypass to the beach road in the vicinity of Whalebone Junction. The intersection had no traffic signal, so he had to slow down to keep from missing it, straining his eyes to see through the blowing rain and roadside debris tumbling across the highway. Whalebone Seafood Market sat on the corner of the intersection, so Dave searched the darkness for the *Fresh Seafood* signs displayed on the sides of the building. Despite the distraction of the highway signs flapping wildly in the wind, he spotted the lighted signs of the seafood market and determined where he needed to turn.

Reducing his speed even more, he quickly engaged the four-wheel-drive while turning onto the cross street and plowing straight into the standing water covering the road. He hoped to travel as far as possible before becoming mired in water and sand, but he knew he was close enough to his destination to finish the journey on foot if necessary, although it would not be easy given the circumstances. As it turned out, he did not encounter excessively deep water on the street, but he could see it up ahead near Banks Surf Supply in the Dare Building at the corner of East Gray Eagle Street and the beach road. Unable to predict the

water's depth but unwilling to halt his forward progress, he threw caution to the wind and plunged directly into the swollen lake while turning south on the beach road.

His discovery that the water was not as deep as he had feared both surprised and delighted him. The depth of the flooding was only about two-thirds the height of his wheels, so he plowed through it with relative ease, proceeding just a little slower than normal due to the extreme weather conditions. His biggest challenge was visibility as he strained to see through the rain while endeavoring to keep himself centered on the pavement. He could not afford to veer into the sandy soup along the berm, not even in a four-wheel-drive Jeep, but he could not see the edges of the road, forcing him to align himself using only the lighted business signs that were hard to distinguish in the blinding rain. Passing Cahoon's Market on the left, he searched ahead for the Sam & Omie's sign on the right, a lighted landmark that told him he was traveling safely in the middle of the road. A quick glance to his left then confirmed that he had arrived at his intended destination, Jennette's Pier.

Despite the glowing light from the numerous tall lampposts rising high above the ground, it was still dark and gloomy in the pier's parking lot due to the blowing sheets of rain obscuring the powerful overhead floodlights. Using Sam & Omie's Restaurant as a guide, he approximated the location of the pier's entrance ramp and plowed straight into the parking lot, fighting his way onto the flooded asphalt by spinning his tires over the buildup of sand along the berm of the road. With the parking lot completely empty, he encountered no obstacles as he soared across the wet pavement and parked near the pedestrian ramps leading to a large pier house on which hung the logo of Jennette's Pier, a stylized fish silhouetted by blue fluorescent lighting glowing eerily in the blustery night ...

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