

CHAPTER ONE

It was dead. Perfect.

Almost immediately, I was deep in that zone I get into when I'm shooting—where nothing matters except the shot, because nothing else exists. My problems don't exist. Even I don't exist, in a way.

With my camera attached to the mini tripod and hovering over the seagull, I hunched my entire body so I could zoom in as far as the focus would let me. I wanted to capture the little maggotty things I could barely see between the barbs of the wing feathers' vanes. Then I zoomed out a little and shot different parts of the lifeless body—the leathery feet, the limp neck, eyes sunken a little into the skull—and finally I took the camera off the tripod to get the whole bird.

The way it was stretched out on the rock, wings open and out to the sides, it almost looked like it was flying.

Standing again, I was examining my last image, trying to decide if I wanted more zoom shots of the head, when I heard this voice.

"Did you kill that bird?"

The voice shocked me out of my concentration so suddenly I almost gasped. Now I could hear the little waves lapping against the tiny strip of sandy shore at the water's edge. Now I could feel the wind off Long Island Sound, chilly for late June. Now I could feel the painful tightness in my left leg from how I'd had to balance on the rock surface as it sloped down toward the shore, while I took my shots.

I stared at the guy who'd spoken, the guy who'd brought the real world crashing back in on me. The intruder was in a sailboat, as close to the shore as he dared get, probably; I know nothing about sailing. The boat was gorgeous: pure white where it met the water, then a thin, red line separating the white from the shiny dark blue above. The afternoon sun from behind the guy in the boat lightened his already blond, curly hair, giving him a kind of halo effect. But he was more like a devil to me. He'd destroyed my mood.

"Yeah," I lied. "What of it?"

He stared back for a few seconds. I couldn't see his face very well because of the sun being behind him, but I guessed he was about my age. Then he said, "Did not."

That pissed me off further. Ignoring him, I folded the tripod and put it back in my pack.

But he wouldn't stop. "What kind of camera is that?"

As I hefted my pack onto one shoulder I heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Canon PowerShot." I turned to walk away from the shore. Away from him.

"Is not. My dad has one, and it doesn't look like that."

Head half turned toward the water, I said, "I don't give a fuck what your father has."

Before I'd taken seven steps, I heard, "Why so hostile, anyway?"

I turned around to face him, and now that I was higher up on the hump of rock, looking down toward the water, I could see him better. Yeah, my age. Sixteen, maybe seventeen. He wore a pale yellow IZOD polo shirt and khaki shorts, and he was very blond and very tan, even this early in the summer. He'd grabbed a long tree branch that stuck out over the water, one foot on the edge of the boat, using the branch to hold the boat in place. On that foot was a light brown shoe, raised stitching around the toes, with a bright white sole. I was pretty sure he was wearing what's called boat shoes.

Like so many stones, I threw these words at him: "Why do you care?" I didn't want an answer. I turned and walked away, fast.

"Wait!"

Again, I ignored him. All I wanted was to be alone again, and to find something else to shoot, find something else—anything else—to get me back into the zone he'd stolen. I decided to walk farther east along the shore where it would be easier for me to get to the edge of the water. I still needed a shot I could double-expose with the whole seagull to make it look like it was underwater, a dead swimmer.

An hour later, with several shots of water that wouldn't work because they were too opaque, I gave up and pedaled home. I locked my bike to the metal stand around the side of our unit, the motel manager's apartment where my mom and I lived, and as I took my helmet off I had a brainstorm: Take a shot of the pool water! That would be clear, and there was still enough sun left in the afternoon to light it up nicely.

I ignored the odd stares from the family with three kids who were already using the shallow end of the motel's pool. I hate families. They make me angry, all that togetherness and camaraderie. Too bad for me; lots of them came to stay at the motel.

Legs hanging over either side of the puny diving board at the deep end, I managed to take a few shots when the stupid kids weren't splashing around too badly. Then the biggest kid, maybe eleven, swam toward me.

Treading water made his voice waver with his efforts. "What are you taking pictures of?"

I gave him an evil, sideways glance. "Sharks."

He nearly looked around, I could tell. And then I saw his arm get ready to fling water, so I pulled my camera out of the way of the splash and scooted off the diving board.

Inside our unit, Mom was at the kitchen table hunched over her laptop, surrounded by paperwork and cigarette smoke, bottle-blond hair pulled into a messy nest in the general direction of the back of her head. It was a shade she'd had since just after New Year's, and although she didn't seem to know it, it wasn't her friend.

A glass with something clear in it was within reach. Didn't look like water. Or, it wasn't in a typical water glass. I guessed it was her usual: gin. That was something else that had changed in the last year or so; she never used to have more than a gin and tonic before dinner on the weekends. She's insisted that she's not an alcoholic. Says she could stop any time. I've never challenged her on it.

She didn't look up as I came in. "Where've you been, Micah? I need you to pick up a few things. Nick isn't here today."

Nick Dowd. The motel manager's assistant. Mom's assistant, in other words. Nick was a local kid home from college for the summer who, although I didn't much like him, was obliging enough when he had a chance to earn a little money. He was short and kind of funny-looking, with twisted teeth that were too easy to see because of how often he smiled. He was one of those people who are always asking if they can help you but you aren't really sure if they mean it, which is why I didn't like him. Also, it seemed like he was never around when I needed him to be.

"Can I take the car?"

"You can not." She scowled at me. "I don't have time to go with you, and you can't drive on your own yet. You know that. What's wrong with your bike?"

I did know that, yes. I'd asked mostly to hear her talk some more so I could gauge how much she'd had to drink. It was a good thing to know generally, and also if she'd had enough, she wouldn't care that I wasn't yet legal to drive alone. But she was sober enough to be practical. So I said, "Depends. How much stuff do I need to carry back?"

"Nothing you can't fit into a backpack. Here." She pushed a few papers around, picked up something with pencil scrawls on it, and flapped it in my general direction, eyes back on her paperwork. As I took the list from her hand, I glanced over the rest of the mess on the table. Looked like she was working on financial stuff for the motel, so it was a good thing that she didn't sound too drunk yet. I tucked the paper into a pocket, grabbed some bills from the stash she keeps in a box on the counter, and headed out again, not even glancing toward the kid in the pool who shouted something at me.

At my laptop after dinner, I had just put the final touches on the image of a dead seagull "swimming" in crystal blue water when the sounds of Mom crying cut through my focus. Ordinarily I do my best to ignore her crying, partly because it happens so often, and partly because I just don't want to know about it.

She never used to be like this. Once upon a time, she was a normal mother, and we were a normal family. She cried sometimes when something made her happy.

Now when she cries, it's almost always for one reason. She misses Dylan, and she pulls out the box of his stuff that she saved from our old house—the one we lived in before she and Dad split, the one we all lived in before Dylan was killed in Afghanistan—and paws through his few worldly possessions as though he might appear at the bottom. But his Army dog tags are in there, and they wouldn't be if there was any hope.

I really didn't want to see her doing that. For one thing, it's pathetic. But also it made me feel... Shit, I don't know. It made me feel like shit. Like, she was the only one who missed him? Okay, so he was her son, but he was my brother! So it pissed me off.

But that's not the worst feeling. Hell, no. The worst feeling is that I have something of his that she really, really wants, something I'd bet she's looking for every time she goes into that box. And she doesn't know I have it.

The next day, Saturday, was a weekend with Dad, and I got to leave that sad motel unit haunted by Dylan's box. Dad lives in Warwick. It's not a big city or anything, but at least there are things to do. Dad always had something planned. It was a challenge, though, to get Mom moving in the morning, and she needed to drive me to the parking lot of the Big River Management Area, half-way to Warwick, where Dad always picked me up. He'd get pissed if she was more than fifteen minutes or so late, and it would spoil some of my time with him, which would piss *me* off. Today I was lucky, and we hit the road only about ten minutes behind schedule.

Dad was there in the parking lot, waiting in his blue Chevy pickup, arm hanging out of the window and tapping in some regular beat that no doubt matched the music he was playing. He likes "oldies."

Mom didn't get out of the car. "You make sure he's got you back here by six tomorrow night, Micah. I don't wanna have to ruin dinner on his account."

On *his* account? More likely he and I would wait in the parking lot, mostly just hanging out, for maybe half an hour before she showed up to get me. Without me to light a fire under her backside, the only thing she seemed able to rouse herself for were her regular visits to Madam Alberta Halliday, the medium who'd been picking our pockets since January. One of Mom's New Year's resolutions, which started around the same time as the change in hair color, was to connect with Dylan, and she believed this charlatan was doing that. I didn't buy it.

Whatever. I grabbed my duffle bag and dashed over to the pickup, threw the bag behind the seat, and climbed in beside Dad. He grinned at me, and I grinned at him. He looked great. The skin around his blue-gray eyes crinkled, and his dark hair—the same color as mine, the same color Mom's used to be before she rejected it—was tousled and hanging a little over his forehead. His face was ruddy from working outdoors on construction sites.

He held up his right hand in a loose fist, and I bumped it with mine, exploding our fingers at the same instant.

"You all set?" he asked, which I knew meant did I already have my swimming trunks on under my jeans, as he'd texted me to do.

"All set. Where are we going?" Wherever it was, I hoped it would be someplace other than the ocean, maybe a lake someplace. But I didn't want to say that to Dad.

He turned his grin toward the windshield and started the truck engine. "You'll see."

We drove south for maybe forty minutes, mostly in silence. And unfortunately, south was where the ocean would be.

Dad did ask a little about shooting; he'd given me the camera for my birthday last August, and he'd been pretty tickled when I took it to shop class and constructed a wooden housing for it that made it look like the Rolleiflex that Vivian Maier used when she took all those shots of New York City. This explains why that sailing boy didn't believe me; his father's camera would look very different from mine, given my modifications.

“What are you shooting these days, Micah?”

I was tapping the roof with my right hand, elbow propped on the door, window open, my head nodding in time with the music. It was old stuff, but it had an okay rhythm. “Took a cool series of a dead seagull yesterday.” I described in as few words as possible how I’d made it “swim” in the pool water.

Dad chuckled. “When you said you wanted a camera, I figured you’d shoot people. And I sure never thought you’d shoot dead birds.” He laughed, a sound I loved. “You’re full of surprises, boy.”

I didn’t respond to that. I could give him a really big surprise and tell him I’m gay, but I wasn’t willing to risk pushing him even further away than Mom had already done.

Eventually we left the paved road and followed a track for a bit. I could hear the surf and smell the salt of the ocean better every minute. Damn. Dad pulled the truck in beside several other vehicles in an area that didn’t look like any kind of official parking lot.

We were still on the Rhode Island side of the border with Connecticut, where Mom and I lived. I’d never been to this spot before. “Special beach?”

Dad laughed again. “You have no idea. Just you wait.”

We got out, and from the bed of the truck Dad pulled a large cooler and a tote bag. With each of us holding one handle of the cooler, he led the way through some bushes, down a narrow path toward the water, and then down the beach for maybe five minutes.

“Just how far are we going, Dad? This thing is heavy.”

“Don’t be a wuss, Micah.” His own breathing was a little labored. “And it’ll be worth it, I promise. You’re nearly seventeen. Old enough to appreciate this place.”

I focused on the sand, willing myself to keep moving despite the difficulty of walking on the shifting stuff, so when Dad said, “Okay. Here we are,” I hadn’t seen what or who was around us.

I could tell Dad was watching me for some kind of reaction as we stripped down to our swim trunks. And when I did finally take stock of the surroundings, what I saw said worlds about why Dad had wanted to come here, and why he'd thought I'd want to come here. There weren't a lot of people on this narrow stretch of beach, but most of the women were not wearing the tops to their two-piece bathing suits.

Almost under his breath, just loud enough to be heard above the surf, he said, "Well? Worth it?"

I didn't have the heart to disappoint him, or to see that broad grin turn into a grimace, which is what I was sure would happen if I told him why this sight was more "meh" than "wow" for me.

"Amazing." I hoped that would get me by.

While we spread the blanket he'd brought in the tote, he told me how this was one of the few places in Rhode Island where people did this. "They used to go totally nude, men *and* women, over at Moonstone Beach. But that was a while ago. There was too much resistance from residents in the area."

Now, *that* might have interested me. "So people all have to wear the bottoms now?"

"Yeah. But topless girls? That's what I'm talkin' about. That's enough."

He pulled beach towels out of the tote and tossed them onto the blanket. "Race you to the water!"

And we were off, sand flying behind us as we swerved around the half-naked women, crashing into water so cold it took my breath away. But I was also breathless for another reason. I hated being in the ocean.

I stopped—as I always do—not far from shore, at a depth where it was waist-high between waves, and already I could barely breathe. Already the blood pounded in my head, my vision blurred, and I felt dizzy. Dad swam out farther and gestured, but I stayed put, arms waving in the water at my sides, gasping for air long after it was the cold that made me do that.

My foot hit something under the water, and I nearly lost consciousness. But it was just a rock, not a horseshoe crab or anything that was going to attack me. That had happened once already, and I had the scars to prove it.

It had happened when I was twelve, when we were still a family, when Dylan was still alive, still with us. My folks had rented a tiny cabin on the shore in North Carolina for a week that summer. It had seemed like heaven: long, lazy days on the beach, fried clams and french fries for dinner, body-surfing in the ocean, flying kites with Dylan, playing Frisbee with Dylan and Dad and Trapper. Trapper was Dylan's dog, but I really loved him, too. He rode down to North Carolina in the car with us, and boy, did he love the water. And Frisbee. He was part shepherd and part something else, with a lighter coat than most shepherds have, and he was super smart. Dylan and I had both taught him lots of tricks, and he'd always seemed as entertained doing them as we were watching him.

Anyway, one evening over dinner I must have been doing something that annoyed Mom, because I got scolded, so I got sulky. I wanted to be alone, so I headed down to the beach. The sun had set, but it was still barely lighting a few high clouds with deep shades of peach.

I walked down the shore, kicking at the surf, then back toward our cabin, but I wasn't ready to go back. I turned and watched the water for a bit as the tide went out, the white surf almost all I could see. For some reason, I walked into the water. I didn't want to swim, I just wanted to feel the water surround me, to feel the sand move under my feet. I was maybe fifteen feet from the tideline, water halfway up my thighs. And then something slammed into my left calf. Something sharp. Very sharp.

You always see TV shows where people get totally surprised by something, and they scream. I don't think most people would do that. I think most people would do what I did, which was to take a sudden, painful gasp of breath into my body. I tried to pull away from the pain in my leg, which was getting worse by the second, but it moved with me. I reached down with a hand and felt something firm and slimy. All I

could see was churning water. Then I felt something warm, the churn turned darker, and I knew it was my blood. That's when I found my breath. I screamed.

The next thing I was aware of was something crashing through the water from the shore. It was Trapper. He didn't make a sound, just dived toward my leg. He must have bitten the shark, because it let go suddenly. I was barely aware that someone was calling my name, and then Dylan was beside me. He lifted me out of the water and laid me onto the dry beach. Mom appeared next and wrapped something tight around my thigh and something soft around my calf. I don't remember anything after that.

Later, in the hospital, I woke up to throbbing pains in my leg and my head. There were umpteen bazillion stitches in my calf, and a doctor who came in told me that there would always be a scar and a bit of an indentation in the muscle where the shark had made off with a piece of me.

"It's actually not too bad," he told me, his southern drawl reminding me of where I was. "The size of the bite indicates that it must have been young. I'm pretty sure it was a black tip shark. It left a tooth in you. Here it is." He opened his hand, and this small, white, serrated triangle fell onto the table beside the bed. I still have it.

My shark bite wound got me a lot of cred when I went back to school in the fall. I tried to make like I hadn't been terrified, but that was a lie. At sixteen, I was still terrified. And I hated going into the ocean.

So I couldn't bring myself to follow Dad out farther into the water. He was still gesturing to me, so I half turned away so pretend I didn't seem, but I kept him in my peripheral vision in case he tried to sneak up on me. He'd done that once last year, trying to get me to "buck up" and stop being afraid, about to drag me by force farther away from shore, and in my total panic to escape I'd given him a black eye. It was not something I wanted to repeat, and it made me not trust him.

After maybe five minutes that felt like an eternity, I headed back to shore, forcing myself to move casually. I sat on my towel, arms wrapped around my knees, and

tried like hell not to be pissed at Dad. Maybe he thought that I'd be so distracted by the semi-nudity that I'd forget to be afraid of the water. Or of what was in the water.

Before long, Dad headed back toward the beach and dripped his way toward our blanket. Standing over me, hands on hips, he said, "One of these days, Micah, you're gonna have to get over this."

I didn't look at him. "Why?"

"If you don't master your fears, they master you."

"Think I'll let this one get away with that."

He toweled off a little and sat beside me, both of us looking out to sea. "Bet you didn't know I'm afraid of heights."

That got my attention, and I turned toward him. "How can you be afraid of heights with your job?" I pictured him high on one of the in-progress office buildings with his construction crew, defying death with every step.

"I mastered my fear. That's what you'll have to do."

Arguing would get me nothing; I didn't reply. Dad was silent, too, until a particularly attractive woman came into view and walked toward the water, her boobs bouncing just like the fat they were full of. Dad poked me with an elbow. "Wouldn't mind getting to know that one, if you know what I mean."

"She's a little young for you, don't you think?" I had intended my tone to be joking, but that's not how it came out.

Dad looked at me. "Fine. You go talk to her, then." He pushed at me with both hands.

If I had resisted, things would have gotten ugly. So I stood, but I walked away from Dad in the opposite direction from the bathing beauty who'd attracted his attention.

"Micah!"

I ignored him and kept walking, keenly aware that the skin around my shark bite pulled with every other step.

Why *couldn't* I just accept that I'd never again be attacked by a shark? Why couldn't I go into the water like a normal person?

Sometimes I hated myself.

Dad and I were pretty quiet as we ate our sandwiches a little later, and although we walked together along the shore after that, it felt pretty tense. After Dad took another swim—alone this time—we packed the truck up to leave, a little less pissed at each other by that point. It helped that he let me drive.

We stopped at a grocery store on the way to his apartment, and by the time we left the store we were okay again. We were in total agreement over what dinner should be: hamburgers, fries we'd heat in the oven, and just enough lettuce to say we'd had some green food, then ice cream after.

Dad's place was on the third floor, the top floor, so there was no balcony above his. Even though it was against the rules, he had a little hibachi out there where we cooked and then ate the burgers. He handed me a bottle of beer, and we sat in webbed lawn chairs, slapping at the occasional mosquito, watching the sky darken and the city's lights come on. We'd each finished a second burger when he opened another beer for himself, and somehow I knew he had settled in to talk about something specific.

"Micah, tell me about this Madam Whoever your Mom's spending so much money on. What do you know about her?"

I shrugged. "Madam Alberta. I don't know much about *her*. All I know is that Mom thinks she's putting her in touch with Dylan."

Dad took a slug of beer. "What do *you* think?"

"I think it's a bunch of crap. I mean, I never go with her, so I never see what it is Mom thinks she's seeing or hearing or whatever, but she comes back crying, kind of sad-slash-happy, convinced Dylan has nothing better to do in the afterlife than talk to her."

Silence. Then, "What does he tell her?"

“Dad, don’t tell me you believe in that shit, too.”

“No, no, I just mean, you know, what kinds of things does she *think* he tells her?”
He sounded a tad defensive, like maybe he did believe it, at least a little. Or maybe it was just that he wanted to.

“I don’t ask her. A couple of times she’s said that he’s watching over us, you know, like he cares about what happens to us. She thinks that means he’s manipulating things in our favor, like he was God or something. Once I asked what he thought about her drinking.”

“Oh, Micah...”

“I know. Dumb, huh? Won’t do *that* again.”

“Um, just how bad is it? The drinking, I mean.”

I lifted a shoulder. How was I supposed to gauge that? “I just do my best to figure out how far gone she is at any given time so I’ll know how to act.”

He shook his head slowly. “So, does she feed you okay? Do laundry, that sort of thing?”

“Sometimes I have to help. But it’s not that bad, really. She keeps up with the motel management and all. We’re not getting kicked out, or anything.”

“So she’s functional.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I polished off the last of my beer. “Can I have another?”

“I think one’s enough for you. There’s some soda in the fridge if you want.”

I didn’t even really want another beer. I just wanted to change the subject. As much as I liked being with my dad, I didn’t think I’d want to come live with him. I liked doing my own thing, coming and going however I wanted, and with Mom I could mostly get away with that. If Dad thought her drinking was bad enough, he might revisit the custody arrangement, and I doubted he’d be so easy-going to live with. Plus I didn’t want to change schools again, like I’d had to after Dylan died and my folks split. And this coming year I was going to be photographer for the school paper. Mostly I don’t hang with anyone, but my guidance counselor said I had to get involved in something. And I was kind of looking forward to this assignment.

To make sure the subject got changed, I got up and went to fetch my camera. The colors of the dying coals in the hibachi were calling to me.

Lost in that zone I get into when I'm shooting, I was surprised when Dad spoke again. "Got a girlfriend yet, Micah?"

Here we go. He'd been totally confused when I hadn't wanted to go to junior prom, and every so often he'd ask me about girls. And every time he did, I thought about telling him the truth. And instead, I'd hidden that truth, which was feeling like a bigger and bigger lie every time the subject came up.

"No, Dad. No girlfriend." I went back to my lies and to the coals, hoping that would be an end to it.

"But you date, right?"

If it's possible to sigh and clench your jaw at the same time, that's what I did. I gave up on the shooting and sat in my chair. My brain froze. I didn't know what I was going to do. I wanted so badly to tell him who I was, to be honest with him, to trust that he'd love me anyway, but the risk was so huge.

I must have been quiet for too long, because then Dad said, "Micah?"

Something in his tone, something almost pleading, got to me. I came so close to blurting out the truth, just dumping it out there onto the gritty surface of the balcony floor.

"Look, kid," he went on, "this is another one of those places in life where you have to face your fears. And, I mean, what's the worst that can happen? If you don't have a favorite girl, then just ask someone you think is okay. If she says 'No,' you've lost nothing and you've had a little practice. You'll see that the sky didn't fall, you're still fine, and you'll be able to ask someone else."

That was it? Really? He was thinking that the idea of asking girls out was like going into the ocean? It also sounded like he had a pretty old-fashioned idea of how kids hang out these days. I suppose I could have tried to explain how things had changed, how asking girls out on dates wasn't the be-all-and-end-all of a boy's teen years any more. But that semi-nude beach had pushed me closer than ever toward

who I really was, which meant further than ever from what Dad *thought* I was. Or what he wanted me to be. The lies, or near lies, were pushing me farther from shore, and I felt sure that if I let Truth open its mouth, its razor teeth would sink into my heart and tear it to shreds.

When I said nothing right away, he took a breath like he had more to say on the subject. I stopped him in his verbal tracks. "That's not it, Dad. It's not that I'm afraid of asking girls out." Deep breath. *Master your fears, even if it means going into deep water.* "It's that I don't *want* to."

Even though I was gazing off into the distance, letting the city lights blur in my vision, I knew he was staring at me. Neither of us spoke for, maybe, half a minute.

"What are you saying, Micah?" His voice was low, more of a warning than a threat in the tone.

I lifted my empty beer bottle up and tilted a couple of drops onto my tongue, jerking my hand up and down to hide the fact that it was shaking. "Not 'saying' anything. I just don't want to."

"Why the hell not?"

I wheeled toward him. "Why've I gotta have a reason? Can't I just be who I am? Christ!" I started to get out of the chair, hoping to escape inside, but Dad stood quickly and caught my arm. I jerked away and landed back in the chair so hard it thumped against the outside wall of the apartment.

I wouldn't look at him. I couldn't. But I could tell he already knew. He must have known, on some level, before he even asked me about girlfriends five minutes and several eons ago. There was no going back, and both of us knew it.

"Look, Micah, what you're not saying is just something you think is true because it's easier than facing growing up. Easier than putting yourself out there and maybe getting rejected."

I stood up and faced him, angry now, arms moving in emphatic gestures as I yelled. "Are you fucking kidding me? You think this is the *easy* way out? You think for

one fucking second that this is something I *chose*? That's it's even something I *could* choose? Christ, Dad! You sound so dumb right now."

He took a step forward and I stepped back, scared of him for the first time I could remember. He grabbed my arm again and practically dragged me inside.

In the kitchen, I yanked my arm away once more and rubbed it where his grip had been.

"Do you want the whole world to hear you, boy?"

We stared at each other, me doing my best to look defiant, him scowling and breathing hard through his nose. We were roughly the same height, but it didn't feel like that at the moment. I couldn't speak; inside my head a voice told me, "He's ashamed of you."

Finally he turned away, hands clenching into fists at his sides, like he was trying really hard not to hit me. Then he turned just the side of his head toward me. "Don't you ever say that word to me, do you hear? The word that you're thinking is you. Don't make me deal with it."

He grabbed a pack of cigs and his keys and left the apartment, slamming the door behind him.

I stood still for a couple of minutes, breathing hard and struggling not to scream. Then I grabbed anything that I'd taken out of my duffle and stuffed it back in, shouldered the bag, and left.

I thundered down the first flight of stairs but then realized I didn't know where Dad was or even if he'd gone all the way down, and I didn't want him knowing I was leaving. So I took the next flight quietly. Didn't see him anywhere, and the spot where he'd parked the truck earlier was now empty. The apartment complex wasn't very far from the highway, so I made my way toward it through the dark.

For sure I didn't want to go home; I didn't want to have to explain anything to Mom. My plan was to pick up some water and food from a Dunkin' Donuts I knew of near the Big River area and then camp out someplace in the woods until Sunday afternoon, when Mom would come get me.

Hitchhiking on the highway is probably illegal, but I did it anyway. I'd never hitched before, and I felt like an idiot, not even sure whether anyone could see me. But after about twenty cars had gone by, an SUV with two girls in it pulled over and came to a stop on the shoulder ahead of me. I ran to catch up.

One girl leaned out of the passenger side window, a cigarette dangling from her fingers. "Where ya goin'?"

"Just to Hopkins Hill Road." Closer, now, I could tell it was a roll of pot, not tobacco, in her fingers.

She blinked. "That's, like, in the middle of nowhere."

I nodded. "Suits me fine at the moment."

She shook her head, puzzled. "Hop in, then."

I climbed into the back, and the smell of weed was strong enough I thought I might get high on that alone. But then the girl who'd invited me in turned around toward me, grinning and holding the joint out.

She had to shout over the music playing, something I didn't recognize. "I'm June. Have a hit."

"Micah. Thanks." I'd never smoked pot in my life. Hell, I'd never smoked anything. And I'd never hitched. And I'd never come out to anyone. It was a day of firsts.

I inhaled as best I could, fighting the coughing fit that threatened to give my inexperience away. I knew you were supposed to hold onto the smoke as long as possible, and for me that wasn't very long.

June laughed. "Ever done this before?"

I gave up, coughed for a few seconds, and grinned back at her. "No."

The girl who was driving spoke up. "You're a virgin no longer, Micah!" Her laugh was more like a high-pitched giggle.

June reclaimed the joint and turned back toward the front. No one spoke again, and somewhere in the ten minutes it took to get to Hopkins Hill, I could barely hear my cell phone ring. I figured it was Dad and ignored it.

As she pulled off the highway onto the side road, the driver asked, “Where you going for real, kid?”

“There’s a Dunkin’ Donuts just ahead.”

“K.” And she drove me right to the store. “Here you go, then. You’ll be okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Thanks.” I hopped out before she could ask me any more questions.

The place was still open, at least for another fifteen minutes. They had a few sandwiches left. I bought two that had no mayonnaise in them and stashed them in my duffle. I didn’t like coffee, and all the cold drinks were sold in lidded cups, so I was gonna have to carry whatever liquid I wanted very carefully, but I figured I didn’t have far to go. I got a large iced green tea and asked for a large cup with just water, too. A half-dozen donuts in a bag, along with the sandwiches, went into my duffle.

It was awkward, for sure, carrying two cups of liquid with my duffle bag slung around me, but I managed to work my way back along the road toward the highway, in the direction of the Big River area. I came to a dead stop on the side of the road where it headed into a short tunnel, the underpass for Route 95.

There was no shoulder on the road inside the tunnel. It wasn’t a long tunnel, but I couldn’t run with these cups, and I couldn’t get out of the way of any car or truck or whatever might be about to run me down.

And if that wasn’t enough, it was super dark in there. What if there were bats? What if there were spiders? What if someone attacked me in there? What if there was some kind of bridge troll living in there?

I could feel my heart racing. My pulse pounded in my ears and my breathing got shallow. I tried to tell myself this was nothing like not being able to see below the surface of the ocean. It didn’t help.

Get a grip, Micah! This is what Dylan used to say to me when I’d get scared by something. Like Dad, he’d always tried to get me to stop being afraid, to show some courage, to be a man. *Get a grip.* So I did my best. I took a deep breath. And another. Should I make noise in there, or should I be as quiet as possible? I closed

my eyes for a second and, like the coward I was, nearly fell over. I stared into the tunnel, reminding myself it would lead to the other side.

Now.

I held my breath without meaning to, and as soon as I got through the tunnel I let it out with a long rasping sound. I wanted to stop and rest, but I was still way too close to that tunnel. Wobbly knees or no, I had to keep going.

The edge of the park was right there on the other side of the tunnel. Using the light of the moon, which was just past full, I turned to my left and toward the woods as soon as I could, moving slowly now so I wouldn't trip over anything. Of course it got darker as the trees blocked the moonlight. I set down the duffle and the cups someplace where I knew I could find them again and went just far enough into the woods to find a place to crash for the night, pretty quickly coming across a large rock under some pine trees with space for me to sit or lie down. With my phone lighting the way now, I retrieved my stuff, found the rock again, and did my best to settle in.

I figured the worst I had to fear in the woods was a skunk, or maybe ticks, or a rabid raccoon, or a coyote, or— *Get a grip, Micah!*

It wasn't cold, but it wasn't super warm, either, and I was kind of wishing I'd gotten something hot to drink. Even though I wasn't actually hungry, having had dinner just a little while ago, I pulled out my bag of donuts. Holding one in my hands, I stared down at it, noticing that it looked colorless in the dark. I stared, and I stared.

It was just starting to sink in that my dad had basically said he didn't want to know me. He'd left me there, in pain from what he'd said, because if he'd stayed he would have beaten me senseless. I was sure of that.

My hands dropped onto my lap, and as my head fell back I felt a jab from a pointy part of the boulder I was leaning against. It hurt, but I left my head there. Maybe it was supposed to hurt. Maybe that was my lot in life, to be hurt.

I'd never been good at much of anything. Okay, I was good at photography, something Dylan had never been interested in, but so what? I'd never been as good

at anything else as Dylan. Neither of my folks had ever loved me as much as they loved him. And if that wasn't enough, it was my fault Trapper had died.

Trapper. He was the best dog ever! And he'd saved me from that shark. And how did I repay him?

Dylan had been in Afghanistan for maybe a month when it had happened. He'd made me promise to walk Trapper, and to play with him, so the dog wouldn't miss Dylan too much. Not as much as Dylan would miss Trapper, anyway. So I promised. And I did walk him, but I wasn't very good at that, either. Before long Trapper figured out that I wasn't really leading him—not the way Dylan had done—and he started leading me. He was the brave one, after all, not me. So I decided I'd had enough, and I began just leaving him outside in our fenced back yard instead of walking him.

But one day I didn't check to make sure the side gate was shut. Trapper got out. He was hit by a car right in front of our house.

He didn't die right away. Mom had me sit in the back seat of her station wagon, and she set Trapper along the seat, his head on my lap. The vet clinic wasn't far, but the news was bad. Trapper had too many broken bones, and one of his internal organs—I forget which—had been damaged. Mom sent me out to the waiting room while they put him to sleep. On the way home, the only thing she said was, "How are we going to tell Dylan?"

She might not even have been talking to me. She might have been talking to herself. But her words tore through me like sharks' teeth.

At home, she got out of the car quickly, no doubt to go inside and cry in private. I decided to stay in the car and cry there. I got into the back seat where I'd held Trapper's head, curled myself into a ball, and sobbed. At some point I opened my eyes, and my gaze fell on Trapper's collar, on the floor of the car. Mom must have saved it as some kind of token and then dropped it in her rush to get away from me. I grabbed it.

When Mom told Dylan about Trapper, he specifically asked her to save the collar for him. And I remember the panic she flew into when she couldn't find it. She asked

me if I'd seen it, and I said I thought I'd seen it once on the floor of the car, which was true. What I didn't tell her was that I'd claimed it. At the time, I told myself I was keeping it for Dylan, like he'd asked.

Now, I'm just keeping it.

Tears seeped out from behind my closed eyelids, my chest hurt from the sobbing gasp that came next, and my head jerked forward and then landed back on that rock with a painful stab. I pulled my head forward and threw it back onto the rock. And again. And again. And again, until I was nearly unconscious from the pain. Donut forgotten, I fell onto my side. I didn't cry. I wailed. I was alone. I would always be alone. No one could hear me wail. No one cared if I wailed.

No one cared if I died.