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THE KANSAS CITY STAR

THREAD OF HOPE **JEFF SHELBY**



Thread of Hope

By Jeff Shelby

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THREAD OF HOPE

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First Edition: December 2011

Books by Jeff Shelby

The Joe Tyler Novels

THREAD OF HOPE

THREAD OF SUSPICION

The Noah Braddock Novels

KILLER SWELL

WICKED BREAK

LIQUID SMOKE

DRIFT AWAY

The Deuce Winters Novels (Under the pseudonym Jeffrey Allen)

STAY AT HOME DEAD

POPPED OFF

For Hannah Elizabeth

Bruises blossomed on Chuck Winslow's cheeks, explosions of red and black and purple staining his skin. A tube snaked into his mouth, held in place with small strips of clear tape. His eyelids were closed, fluttering every few seconds. An IV line ran into a thick vein in his left arm. Both of his wrists were encased in splints and wrapped with flesh colored bandages. The machines around the bed beeped and hissed, Chuck's wide chest rising and falling with the rhythm of the noise.

"Fractured skull," the doctor said from the other side of Chuck's hospital bed. "Six broken ribs. Both wrists are fractured." He flipped the pages on the chart in his hands. "Hasn't been conscious since he was found. There's some swelling around the brain. We'll wait to see if it subsides before we do anything else." He let the pages fall back into place, his demeanor measured and distant, as he'd had the same conversation a thousand times. "Anything else I can answer?"

I shook my head.

The doctor hung the chart on the foot of the bed and hustled out of the room, nodding at me as he exited.

Chuck Winslow was still big. Six-foot-four packed with muscle. While many men let their muscle soften when they entered their forties, Chuck appeared to have added another layer since I last seen him. His forearms were thick, his shoulders wide. There were fine wrinkles around his eyes, deeper lines across his wide forehead. His thick brown hair was cut short, peppered with gray, and a jagged red gash splayed across his left temple, out of place and ugly.

"I didn't know who else to call," Lauren Tyler said.

She was sitting in the far corner of the room, next to the long rectangular window that peered over Glorietta Bay, the small inlet between downtown San Diego and Coronado Island. Her legs were crossed, her right hand tugging gently at a strand of her auburn hair.

"How'd you find out?" I asked.

"Jane Wiley called me." She let go of the hair. "She's representing him. Her card was in his wallet when he was brought in, so the hospital contacted her. She found my number in his cell, the last one he called."

I glanced out the window. More buildings had been added to the downtown skyline since I'd last been home and they glimmered in the late day sunlight. "You talked to him before all this happened."

She nodded, the small silver hoops in her earlobes bobbing forward. "I think it was the day before he was arrested."

"Why was Chuck calling you?"

She stared at me for a moment, then smiled the same smile I saw a lot before she divorced me. The one that was sad and frustrated and a lot of other things. "He checks up on me, Joe. Just to make sure I'm okay. Nothing more."

The tone of her voice combined with that smile snapped me back eight years in time to when her voice and smile were much different. We weren't standing in a hospital room. We were walking on the beach on the other side of the island, a couple of blocks from our home. Our lives were normal. She was a lawyer, I was a cop. We were married, had a family. We were happy. Things were good.

"Are you still looking for her?" Lauren asked, as if she could sense that I had mentally left the room for a moment.

I shrugged, not having an uncomplicated answer to give her.

"I'll take that as a yes," she said. She paused. "He looks, too, you know."

"Chuck does?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

She looked at me like she'd never known me. "For you, Joe. For me, too, I guess, but mostly for you. He misses you."

It was strange to hear that I'd been missed. I'd been in my own vacuum for awhile, not thinking about how my absence might affect others.

"He hasn't seen or heard from you in three years," Lauren said. "Nobody around here has. I"

knew that finding her would be the only thing that might bring you back.”

I couldn't tell whether she was angry about that or just stating a fact.

I gestured at my friend in the bed. “Not the only thing.”

Lauren stood, ran her hands down the front of her jeans. “To be honest, I doubt Chuck would've believed you would've come even for this. I didn't think you would.” She folded her arms across her chest. “I'm still surprised to see you here.”

I didn't know how to respond, so I didn't try. “How did it happen?”

She glanced at Chuck. “I'm not sure. When Jane called me, she just said that he'd been found on the beach. I'd imagine she knows more.”

“Why was he arrested?” I asked.

Lauren wrapped her arms tighter around herself. “I don't know that, either. I didn't even know he'd been arrested or that he was out on bail until Jane gave me a quick rundown. She just said he was arrested two days ago. She didn't say why.”

Chuck and I hadn't spoken in half a decade. I didn't pretend to still know him, but finding him in a hospital bed was a shock to my system. I wasn't sure how he thought of me, but I still thought of him as the best friend I'd ever had. It hurt to see him lying there, motionless, beaten to the point where he might not wake up.

“Jane was going to try and find you herself,” Lauren said.

“Me? Why?”

“Chuck asked her to.” She forced another smile onto her lips. “When Jane called me, she asked me how to get ahold of you.” The smile tightened. “I wasn't sure how to answer that. But I told her I'd call you. Told her it would be awhile before you responded and that I didn't know where you were, but that I was pretty sure you'd get back to me.”

“Sorry,” I said, averting her eyes and shuffling my feet. “I should've...”

“It’s okay,” she interrupted. “Really. I think it’s better that I don’t know where you are, what you’re doing. It’s easier for me.”

She was staring at me and I could see the question in her eyes. She could say that she thought it was easier for her, but there was still a tiny fragment of her that wanted to know.

“There’s nothing new, Lauren,” I said. “I would’ve called you in a second if there was. You know that.”

Something flickered in her eyes, something I couldn’t read. She unfolded her arms. “I’m going to go.” Her fingers brushed my arm as she passed. “It’s good to see you. I’m glad you’re okay.”

It was good to see her, too, but I didn’t say that. Just like when our marriage was in its final, crumbling months, I couldn’t get the right words out of my mouth.

“Did she say why, Lauren?” I asked. “Did Jane say why Chuck wanted to find me?” I looked at Chuck, then Lauren. “I mean, if it was about his arrest, I don’t see how I could help. I’m not a cop anymore. And it’s not like anyone around here would be glad to see me.”

She stood in the doorway, her hand on the door, her eyes moving from Chuck to me. “All I know is that he told her you would know what to do.”

TWO

“Never thought I’d see you again, Joe Tyler,” Jane Wiley said, looking me up and down. “This can’t be much fun for you. How are you?”

We were in the public area down on the main floor of the hospital. Jane had gone to high school with Chuck and me and, like most people we went to school with, she hadn’t left Coronado, unable to pull herself away from the idyllic setting. I had left, but not because I’d really wanted to.

“I’m fine. How are you, Jane?”

“Be better if my client hadn’t gotten the shit beat out of him.”

“Why exactly is he your client?”

She pointed at the two chairs next to us and we sat.

She shifted into lawyer mode, her expression growing serious. “Physical assault on an eighteen-year-old female. She’s a high school senior.”

“That’s not funny, Jane.”

“I’m serious.”

I paused. “Then it’s garbage.”

“Victim’s father filed the complaint,” she explained. “The girl backed it up with a statement. And with her appearance. She’s pretty banged up. There was more than enough to charge him.”

I hadn’t been around him for years but I knew that Chuck wouldn’t have beaten up a teenage girl. Couldn’t have.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“Said he didn’t do it,” she said, frustration showing in her bunched up eyebrows. “Then he sh down and asked me to find you.” She studied me. “Which, by the way, wasn’t the easiest thing I’ve ever tried to do. If I hadn’t run across Lauren’s number in his phone, I’d still be looking. Where the hell have you been?”

“You think the charge is solid?” I asked.

Annoyance flashed through her eyes. But it passed quickly. “As solid as you’d expect. He kne the girl. There was some corroboration by some of the girl’s friends that they were spending time together. Alone.”

“She said, he said,” I said.

“Pretty much. The bruises tend to back it up,” she said.

“He didn’t do it.”

“Gonna need more than that, Joe.”

“So you can deal it down?” I asked. “Cut its legs off and turn it into a misdemeanor?”

Her cheeks flushed and irritation rippled through her small, compact body. “Fuck you. I’ve already done ten times more for him than some P.D. would’ve done by trying to dig up your sorry ass. Because Chuck’s a friend. You wanna work on your bad lawyer clichés, I’ve got plenty of other clients who want my time. I couldn’t care less.” Her eyes narrowed. “And you’re the last person I expect to be throwing around bullshit accusations.”

She was right, but I didn’t apologize. “What happened to him?”

She eyed me carefully before she spoke. “They’re calling it a random attack. Maybe a robbery gone bad. Seems he was running on the beach and got jumped. No wits, of course, because that would be too easy. He’s been unconscious since he was found.”

It would’ve taken more than one guy to bring down Chuck. “Is he gonna be alright? Doctor ju gave me the basics.”

“It’s the skull fracture that’s the issue,” she said. “There’s some swelling and bleeding in ar around the brain. Assuming the swelling and bleeding subside, he should be okay. But he won’t b

alert until that happens.”

Like the doctor, she didn't state the obvious, that the swelling and bleeding might not subside.

“You're an investigator now?” Jane asked. “That's what Lauren said.”

“Not officially. I'm not licensed or anything.”

“But it's what you do, right? Mostly cases involving kids?”

I glanced past her toward the front doors. A man and a very pregnant woman walked in, glancing at each other, nervous smiles on their faces. She whispered something to him and they giggled. The man kissed her on the cheek as they walked past us toward the information desk.

I shifted on the sofa. “Lauren tell you that, too?”

She shrugged. “You know how it is. I hear things every so often. I would've found you. Crossing paths with Lauren just sped up the process. But I did find other bits and pieces. Seems like you've been able to help some people.”

The first few years after I left Coronado and San Diego, I had trouble looking people in the eye when they said something similar. I didn't know how to take the compliment. But I'd finally gotten past it. I met Jane's gaze. “I do alright.”

An uncomfortable look settled on her face and I knew what was coming. “I'm sorry, Joe. For everything you went through. Both you and Lauren. I'm sorry.”

I'd heard it so many times that I was numb to reacting. I responded automatically. “Thank you.”

She opened the satchel on the ground next to her feet, pulled out a file and leveled her eyes with mine. “But I have to say, I'm not sure having you attached to this is going to help Chuck. Your name comes with a lot of baggage.”

“I know.”

“And more than a few people here still think...”

“I’m here to help Chuck,” I said. “And I could give a shit what anyone here thinks of me.”

She kept her eyes on me, pursing her lips, like she was trying to make some sort of decision. Finally she shrugged and handed me the file folder. “That’s what I’ve got. It’s not much, at least for coming up with a defense. Nothing much will happen until he’s in better shape. It buys us some time. Keep me in the loop and I’ll do the same.” Jane stood and hesitated for a moment, her eyes looking past me. “People already know, Joe.”

“Know what?”

She pulled the satchel over her shoulder and refocused her eyes on me. “I grabbed a sandwich over at Ike’s before I came over to meet you. And goddamn if half the restaurant didn’t already know. No idea how that shit happens, but it does. This place is worse than a girl’s bathroom in middle school.”

I stood, the folder in my hand, uneasiness filling my chest. “Know what, Jane?”

She raised an eyebrow. “They already know you’re back.”

THREE

I walked out of the hospital. Palm trees waved in the breeze, the smell of the ocean riding the air as if to remind me I was in a place that used to be home. Massive aircraft carriers hulked beneath the arching blue bridge on the other side of the bay, anchored to the south end of downtown. I sat down on a stone bench just off the main doors and opened the file Jane gave me.

The complaint had been filed on behalf of eighteen-year-old Meredith Jordan. It said the contact between her and Chuck had come as a result of their relationship at Coronado High School. And it said Chuck beat the crap out of Meredith Jordan.

I stopped reading. Two questions immediately popped into my head. What was Chuck doing on a school campus? And more specifically, what was he doing at our alma mater? He wasn't a teacher or administrator last I knew and I was willing to bet that hadn't changed.

As unlikely as it was to find him on any school campus, Coronado High School's would've been the last one on the list. We spent four years there and while I hadn't minded high school, Chuck thought it contained all the charm of a toxic dump. He had clashed with teachers, coaches and other classmates and barely managed to graduate. He'd skipped the graduation ceremony and as far as I knew he hadn't had anything to do with the school since he walked off the campus more than two decades prior.

He'd spent most of his adult life working construction. He started out as an employee for a homebuilder, but didn't care much for taking orders and building tract homes. He'd gotten his general contractor's license and built a small but thriving business of his own when I'd left Coronado. He was happy doing it.

I flipped quickly through the papers in the file until I found what I was looking for. Five photos were clipped to the back flap of the folder. Meredith Jordan was a pretty girl beneath the bruises. Long brown hair. Two perfectly brown oval eyes above a slender nose. Cheekbones that looked like a magazine cover worthy. At least, before someone had used her as a sparring partner.

There was a wide cut across the bridge of her nose. Deep purplish rings encircled the pretty eyes. Small yellow bruises dotted her cheeks. Red lines that resembled fingerprints snaked around the middle of her neck. Another cut at the right corner of her mouth gave her the macabre appearance of smiling when she was doing anything but.

The damage on her face wasn't from a fall or a car accident or any other benign occurrence. Someone had teed her up and swung away. Choked her for an encore.

I clipped the photos together again and paged through the rest of the file. Dates, descriptions, times. Nothing damning one way or another. The photos were enough.

I turned the pages again, looking for the girl's address, seeing if I might recognize it. I was surprised to find two. One in Coronado and one up in Rancho Santa Fe. I wondered if the girl's parents were divorced or if they had bought their way in to one of the best public high schools in the country. I closed the file and laid it down next to me.

A light fog was rolling in from the south, a thin layer of moisture clinging to the air. Lauren and I used to sit on our back deck with a bottle of wine, watching the fog drift in from the other side of the island across San Diego Harbor. We'd talk about dinner plans and friends and vacations and work and family and other things you talked about when you were drunk on a cheap bottle of Merlot. Things that held promise, provided excitement.

I picked up the file and stood. I took a deep breath, let the salty air filter into my nose and lungs. Returning to Coronado was going to bring back memories. I knew that before I'd hopped on the plane. If I was going to help Chuck, I'd be fighting those memories the whole way and I wasn't sure I had it in me.

As I gazed at the now gray-looking buildings across the bay, murky behind the fog, I felt no promise. No excitement. No hope.

The Jordan address in Coronado was clearly a buy-in.

On a seven-and-a-half-square-mile island, inhabited by just 26,000 people, there was only one high school. The classes were small, the teachers rarely left, and the wealthy parents on Coronado were very involved. It was a good high school, perhaps the best public one in the state of California. As such, people wanted their kids to attend Coronado High School as much for the education as for the status.

But you had to live on the island to be eligible to enroll. With a limited amount of real estate and a median home price that edged closer to a million bucks every year, most folks just stared across the bay with envy.

Most folks.

The Jordan address on Coronado was a small bungalow south of the park on B Avenue. Maybe twelve-hundred square feet with a flat roof, windows without curtains, an uninspired lawn and an empty driveway. I knew it was vacant and didn't even bother getting out of my car.

The only way around the tough enrollment boundaries for the high school was to buy in. The few homes that came up on the market were usually older, unexciting homes. Most people with the money to afford them wouldn't consider actually living in them, and the lots were too small to rebuild. So they would buy the home to get the Coronado address and send their child to the island schools but continue living elsewhere. The school district frowned upon it and did their best to ensure that it didn't happen often.

But sometimes it did and it was clear to me that the Jordan family had bought their way in to the high school.

I plugged the Jordan's Rancho Santa Fe address into my rental car's GPS and headed over the bridge to the mainland. Headed north on I-5, through downtown, past the airport, Sea World and the backside of La Jolla. The area had continued to grow rapidly during my absence, clusters of homes built into nearly every valley and canyon along the coast, like Monopoly pieces on an already crowded board.

When I hit Del Mar, I exited the freeway at Via De La Valle and turned east. The GPS led me well back into the rolling canyons of Rancho Santa Fe, the mansions going from small to large and humongous the further east you went. The Jordan address was about as east as you could go, a road sign an indicator that whoever Meredith Jordan was, her family could afford a vacant home on Coronado. After a few twists and turns into the canyon and I'd located the Jordan home.

Actually, I'd located their front gates. I couldn't see the house from where I stood. There was a small intercom just to the left of the drive and in front of the ornate iron gates. I got out of the rental car and pushed the call button. After a pause, it crackled to life and a smooth female voice asked "Yes, sir?"

I glanced up and saw two small security cameras mounted on top of the gates rotate in my direction. "My name's Joe Tyler. I'd like to speak to Mr. Jordan."

"Mr. Jordan doesn't receive business calls at his home, sir."

"I'm working on his daughter's assault case."

Another pause, longer this time. "Please wait there, Mr. Tyler."

I nodded at the cameras and stepped back to the car. I stood on the tips of my toes and tried to get a glimpse of anything over the small, grassy hill behind the gates but failed.

Five minutes later, headlights flashed in the darkness and a white BMW 750 pulled up on the other side of the gates. I squinted into the bright halogen lamps. A tall blond woman stepped out from the driver's side, pointed a remote at the gates and the huge iron fixtures began to slide to the sides.

She was around thirty, her hair cut short, almost to the point of looking like a boy's. She wore black cotton sweat pants that flared at her ankles, the kind that usually had some word printed across the rear end. A matching jacket was zipped up to her neck. The stripes on her running shoes glowed in the dark as she crossed through the gate opening.

She held out her hand. "Gina Coleman. I work for Mr. Jordan."

I took her hand and before I could say anything, she jerked me toward her, swept my legs out from under me with one of hers and dropped me to the ground on my back. The air whooshed out of my lungs and bright colors flashed in my eyes. She dropped down, spearing my chest with her knee and dug a thumbnail deep into the skin just below my right eye.

“You move and I’ll bury my thumb directly into your eyeball,” she said, her other hand expertly sweeping my body.

I held still, more irritated than afraid.

She finished the sweep and refocused her eyes on mine. Up close, I could see that her hair was natural yellow-blond, her skin golden-tan, her eyes the color of fresh-cut green grass. Very attractive if she hadn’t been threatening to blind me.

She increased the pressure just a fraction below my eye, blurring my sight. “Why are you out here?”

I was bigger than she was and I thought I could toss her weight off of me, but that thumb was too close to my eye and I appreciated the ability to see. “I told you. I’m working on his daughter’s case.”

“And you just show up here at night, unannounced?” She kept her voice low, relaxed, like she was perusing the items on a menu.

“I just got into town,” I said, moving my eyes to her thumb. Her nail was painted purple. “My friend of mine was arrested and I’m trying to help him.”

The pressure beneath my eye let up a fraction. “Your friend is Winslow?”

“Yeah.”

She blinked several times. “He tell you to come out here?”

“No. He can’t talk. He’s unconscious in the hospital. But where else would I start?”

Something flashed through her eyes. “The hospital?”

“With his head cracked open.”

The pressure let up again. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah.”

She removed her nail from my face and stood. She offered her hand to help me up. I ignored her and got myself up.

“He’s really hurt?”

I brushed off my jeans. “They found him on the beach. He’s in pretty bad shape.”

She started to say something, then stopped. She rubbed at her chin, her mouth drawn tight with concern. She glanced at me and the conflict in her expression was gone.

“You’ve got some guts showing up here and representing the other side,” she said.

“And you’ve got one helluva way of greeting visitors,” I said, rubbing the throbbing area beneath my eye. I could feel the tiny, crescent-shaped impression her nail had made in my skin.

“It’s my job,” she said.

“To threaten people who say hello on the intercom? I didn’t force my way in. You came down to meet me.”

“I’m Mr. Jordan’s security director. We aren’t comfortable with people making their way out of his property, particularly when we’re unprepared for their arrival.”

“Well, I’m trying to do my job, too,” I said. “I’m an investigator.”

She looked over my shoulder at the car. “You got a gun in the car?”

There was no reason to lie. “Yes. In the trunk, in a backpack.”

She nodded. “Okay. Just wanted to see if you’d be up front about it.” She studied me for a moment. “He won’t talk to you.”

“I’ll hang around until he does.”

“Then I’ll be forced to hurt you again.”

“But this time, I’ll know its coming.”

She smiled. “Won’t make any difference, honey. And I’ve got backup.”

She was confident. She wasn’t used to losing. And it worked in her favor.

“Look, I don’t want to fight with you,” I said, not wanting to tangle with her again at the moment. “Chuck Winslow is a friend and I’m trying to help him. The complaint lists Mr. Jordan’s daughter as the one who filed the complaint. I understand why he might not want me to speak to her. She’s a minor. I get that. But, at the very least, I’m going to need to speak with him.”

She studied me, her eyes intense, brighter than the headlights on the BMW. “You used to live here, right? In San Diego? You were a cop?”

My gut jumped. “Yeah.”

“You’re the one he talked about.”

“Who?”

“Chuck.”

“You know him?”

She folded her arms across her chest and something changed in her eyes. Sympathy mixed with curiosity. I knew immediately that she knew Chuck and that she knew about me.

“I’ll talk to Mr. Jordan and see if he’ll agree to speak to you,” she said. “But don’t count on it.”

“Alright.”

“Where are you staying?” she asked.

She wasn’t going to tell me how she knew Chuck. I let it go for the time being, pulled a card out of my pocket and handed it to her. “You can reach me at that number.”

She took the card and studied it for a moment before fixing her gaze on me. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She slipped into the BMW, the gates slid to a close and she whipped a U-turn, disappearing into the darkness.

I retraced my original route into Rancho Santa Fe and returned to the highway. Gina Coleman had asked where I was staying. I wouldn't have told her even if I had known, but the truth was I hadn't found a place to stay yet. I'd gone straight from the airport to the hospital to both of the Jordan homes.

I drove south out of Del Mar and back toward downtown. Staying on the island was expensive and something I didn't want to do, regardless of money. It had been hard enough to drive over the bridge the first time, returning to a town that did nothing but bring my stomach to boil. But Chuck was there, Meredith Jordan went to high school there and I figured that at least being close would save me some time. I didn't have to stay on Coronado, but I knew I'd be spending time there.

I settled for one of the hotels across the bay from the island and checked into a room on the fifteenth floor. I threw my backpack in the closet and sat down on the edge of the bed. Twelve hours prior, I'd been napping in a small apartment in Biloxi, Mississippi, two blocks from the Gulf of Mexico. I'd been in Biloxi for almost three months, enjoying the quiet and isolation and the walk along the shores of the Gulf. No one had come calling for my help recently and I was happy not to give it.

But Biloxi started to close in around me, as I found all places eventually did. Too much time by myself, with nothing to focus on other than the past. When my cell phone chirped and woke me from the nap, I was grateful for the interruption in what had become my life.

Lauren's voice had startled me. I hadn't spoken to her in close to a year and for a moment, for an excruciatingly long moment, I thought that this was the phone call that I'd been hoping for for nearly seven years. Maybe we had an answer and after I said hello, I realized I was holding my breath. Lauren probably knew that and very quickly explained why she was calling. I was ripped hard back into reality.

The thought of returning to San Diego created a dull ache in my gut. There were so many reasons not to go back and yet as soon as she told me about Chuck, I said yes, told her that I was on my way. He had cut everyone out of my life and I knew he was the one person that hadn't held it against me. He understood. He'd stood by me in more ways than any friend should ever be asked to and I owed him

Things change quickly.

I walked over to the window. A ferry boat was crossing the bay to the island and lights freckled the bridge over to the place I'd called home for thirty-plus years.

I wasn't comfortable being back. My plan was to never come back because I didn't think anything good would come of it. It wouldn't repair my marriage or my reputation, and it wouldn't bring my daughter back. The only thing I could count on was seeing the past rush at me head-on. I stared out that hotel window and I could feel all of it bearing down on me, with no clue how to stop it.

Not ready for sleep, I went down to the main floor of the hotel and walked outside toward Seaport Village, a collection of shops and restaurants strung along the north end of the bay where PCH meets Harbor Drive. I bought fish and chips from a walk-up window and found a small table near a fountain trying to straighten out Chuck and the high school and Meredith Jordan in my head as I ate.

The complaint stated that Chuck knew Meredith through their contact at the high school. Maybe Chuck had some sort of mid-life crisis and decided to become a teacher. I doubted it, but anything was possible. Gina Coleman definitely knew Chuck, but I didn't know if that was through Meredith or another avenue. Coleman was the first link of any kind I'd found and I'd go back to her soon if I had no luck elsewhere.

A couple sat down at the table next to mine with their daughter. She looked to be about seven or eight. She was small for her age and struggled awkwardly to get into her chair. The family had purchased fish and chips as well and the little girl was soaking the fries in ketchup, then jamming them into her mouth. She turned to me with stained lips and grinned.

My stomach jolted and I stood, gathering up my trash without returning the little girl's smile.

I walked through the village to Buster's, a beach-themed bar and grill with old longboards on the walls. I didn't want to go sit in my quiet hotel room. I found a corner stool at the far end of the bar with a window that looked out over the boardwalk toward Marina Park. I bummed a piece of paper and a pen from the bartender and started making notes on what little I knew about Chuck and Meredith. I was on my second diet soda when the guy two stools down from me motioned in my direction.

"You've got an admirer," he said.

The guy was bigger and younger than me and looked like hell. Unshaven, black circles around his eyes. A tan that was fading.

"Excuse me?"

He motioned to the window. "Hang on. He's coming around again. He's watching you."

Ten seconds later, I saw who he meant. A guy about six feet tall in jeans and a blue button-down

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