

"Grisly, unsettling, and dark—and also beautifully written . . . I loved it." —ALEX MICHAELIDES

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N I C H O L S

A NOVEL

G R A N I T E

H A R B O R

GRANITE
HARBOR

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The Rocks

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Sea Change

GRANITE HARBOR



Peter Nichols



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*For my son, Gus Nichols,
David Nichols, Liz Sharp, Matt deGarmo, Ann Caswell,
Peter Selgin, Annie Nichols, Roger Salloch,
Richard Podolsky, Bridget Conway, Bill and Jan Conrad,
and Emily Fletcher.*

When the crowd caught sight of the murderers, with their escort of blue-coated highway patrolmen, it fell silent, as though amazed to find them humanly shaped.

—Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

• • •

The three boys rode their skateboards down Chestnut Street until long after dark. Streetlights glowed faintly in the depthless shadow that draped Granite Harbor below the rim of Mount Meguntic. Channel buoys winked green and red out in the blackness of Penobscot Bay.

The boys whooped and shrieked as their boards flew over unseen bumps and hollows. These hours were the buffer between school and home, when time became elastic and they didn't think of their changing lives, school pressures, disapproving parents, the looming end of childhood.

The evening's cool fall mist was turning to a cold rain. The backs and hoods of the boys' sweatshirts were dark. Tramping back up Chestnut Street, Jared said, "Man, I'm getting soaked. Let's go to my house."

"I'm hungry," said Ethan.

"We've got Hot Pockets at my place," said Jared.

"Let's stay out a little longer," said Shane. He jumped on his board and drifted away from the other two at the intersection of Limerock Street.

They'd been born within days of each other. Their mothers, who met on the Midcoast Medical Center maternity ward, drifted apart over the years as they went through divorce, widowhood, a move to a distant neighborhood, but the boys remained inseparable growing up. Now, in their teenage years, their characters were evolving. They were not always in sync.

These days, Shane wanted to stay out later.

"It's more fun in the dark," he said. "Let's go down Elm Street, then we'll go to your place."

"Bro, c'mon . . ." Ethan called, "it's—"

His words were blown away. A fierce gust of wind tore into the large oak at the corner of Chestnut and Limerock, shaking it with a sound like breaking surf, scattering spray down the street.

"*Shane . . .*"

They could hardly see him through the filmy air. When the gust dropped he had disappeared into the gloom beneath the black outline of Mount Meguntic. But they could still hear his skateboard clattering away.

Then through the rain they saw a flame. A brief smeary glimpse of Shane's face as he lit a cigarette. "Dude . . . I'm staying out," his voice came back after a moment. "It's too beautiful a day."

The other two boys laughed. Ethan called louder, "We'll be at Jared's."

As Ethan and Jared turned, headlights swept them. They lowered their eyes and moved to the side of the road to let the vehicle pass.

The pickup truck's high beams raked the two boys' faces as it slowed and turned onto Limerock Street. The driver saw them squint, avert their eyes, and turn away as he passed.

He passed the third boy halfway down the block.

Two had stepped off their boards, stopped at the corner. The third floated slowly away.

They were separating.

The driver lifted his foot off the accelerator and coasted. . . .

His truck, a slightly battered Ford, dark blue, was like many others in every town in Maine. In winter, he hitched a snowplow to the front. He drove around at all hours. He parked and ate sandwiches, sipped coffee, and watched the people who passed. He learned their routines, who they spent time with.

At the next stop sign, he was no longer in the cab of his truck. He was squatting beside the dog shaking and groaning above the muddy brown Florida canal. The pictures shifted. . . . He was beneath the small blond girl riding him like a rocking horse. . . . He was pinned to the ground as boys and girls spread their legs above him. . . . In the woods with Ivan, the Master . . .

The hanging coyote was speaking his name. . . . In his mouth he tasted the bitter pus. . . .

Chemical neurotransmitters leaped in his brain.

Then the rain was drumming again on the roof. The wipers slashed back and forth.

He turned right onto Union Street. Sped up, touching forty as the road sloped downhill, then slowed and turned right again on Elm. A block of six tall captains' houses returned him to the intersection at the bottom of Chestnut Street.

He stopped and looked around. There was no traffic. On such a night, everyone in town was at home, making supper, watching TV.

He turned right and drove slowly up the hill again.

The two boys appeared ahead on their skateboards. His headlights lit them up through the rain, forcing their eyes down and away as they clattered past.

He knew the headlights were all they would see of him. They wouldn't remember the truck.

He turned once more onto Limerock Street. Before the stop sign, he reached the third boy.

Part One

I

The air was frigid, condensing Isabel's breath into plumes above her face. It was October and she was no closer to being able to pay for a new furnace than when it had died in August. She had to throw the thought aside like the down comforter as she jumped out of bed, turned on the space heater in her bathroom, and went downstairs to let the dog out.

Back upstairs, with no hot water, she used a washcloth at the sink. Then she began to dress.

She'd laid out her costume the night before. Roger Priestly had given her a photocopied illustration showing the name and arrangement of each particular layer: linen shift (over her own cotton underpants and L.L. Bean sports bra), large-weave woolen hose stockings, petticoat, free-hanging pockets of some rugged burlap material fastened around the waist like empty udders beneath outer layers, front-lacing bodice, thick homespun woolen dress, apron, cape, and the linen "coif," shaped like a loose-fitting bathing cap. Finally, those awful shoes, like black orthopedic clogs with a large ornamental buckle—pirate shoes from some Disney cartoon. All of it purchased for her from a theatrical costume house in Boston.

Good lord, Isabel thought, looking at Goodwife Swaine in the tall bedroom mirror. You poor woman! You milk cows, chop wood, nurse infants, churn butter, slaughter pigs, chickens, God knows what else, cook over an open fire, and entertain your husband . . . in this getup?

At least she felt warm.

Ethan was still asleep as she passed his bedroom door and negotiated the narrow staircase with her voluminous layers, making a noise as if she were dragging a canvas tent down the stairs.

When she opened the door to let the dog back in, Flynn barked at her and stepped backward.

“Quiet, Flynn! Come inside.”

Warily, the dog edged in, giving her a wide berth. He looked at her and growled.

“Oh shush. It’s just me. Now lie down in your bed.” Isabel pointed.

A high-strung Australian shepherd, Flynn had difficulty with change, surprises. He slunk to his bed in a corner of the kitchen and lay down.

Now the house was still. No noise—not even the rumbling of a furnace in the basement. She’d never noticed the sound until it had stopped. No shouting—one of the mercies of the new regime of Ethan’s “unschooling.” Her doubts at pulling him out of school allayed for now by the extraordinary peace in the house every morning. Ethan had stopped throwing up from stress before slouching off to the bus with that insanely overloaded backpack. She should have done this five years ago. Or maybe from the beginning. He knew everything anyway. And he had his ships to build.

She grabbed her mug and pushed herself and her outfit out the kitchen door.

The girl at the Granite Deli & Bagel drive-through window didn’t bat an eye at the cape, the bodice, the voluminous dress and apron bunched under the steering wheel. Isabel felt like someone on her way to a Halloween party.

She sipped her latte and let out a long heartfelt sigh. Again, she was awash with relief that Ethan was no longer in school. Better now they were both out. As a high school teacher, she’d grown sick of pushing her students through the prescribed mass of facts, dates, summaries, training them for tests, abetting the notion that education consisted of the rote repetition of curricula. Trying to get Ethan to do his homework, repeating all the tired and tedious rationales, had only made him angry, frustrated, and, in recent months, physically ill. Almost every kid she knew in school was anxious,

bored, heading for or already suffering deep depression. Half of them were on the standard prescriptive response: Zoloft or Ritalin.

They should all be outdoors! she'd screamed inside her head a hundred times, watching them bent over their phones at school, on the way to school, after school, at home. *They should be in the woods! On the water! Making things, breaking things! Digging holes! Climbing and falling out of trees!*

A few other teachers and parents agreed with her. Others told her kindly that the problem was hers: she was burning out. She needed to take up yoga, qigong, cut out gluten. Quit mourning and get a relationship. She'd tried that.

It was a relief when the high school fired her. Afterward, four years of copyediting on the *Penobscot Bay Journal* had been peaceful, dull, but it paid the bills, until the magazine had folded. Then an additional year of getting up in the icy predawn to prepare the sourdough had made it easy to quit the Red Barn Bakery and, at Nancy's urging, join the crew at the Granite Harbor Settlement.

The Settlement paid even less than the bakery, but "it'll be fun!" Nancy promised. "Dressing up! Gardening! Making fires! Physical things! Educating people who *want* to know everything you can tell them! And you'll go back in time!"

She sipped her latte, still warm—the new commute was not far. Two miles north of town, she slowed as she approached the sign and turn for the GRANITE HARBOR LIVING HISTORY SETTLEMENT.

Roger had filled her in on the history of the place, ancient and modern. Sometime in the 1970s, picnickers had found a half-buried scattering of old tools, broken ceramic pieces, and colored glass in the gravel bank of the stream that ran through the marshes to the rocky beach two miles north of Granite Harbor. The archaeology department at the University of Maine dated them from the early seventeenth century. Subsequent investigation of the site unearthed rusted pieces of flintlock mechanisms, stones arranged in the shape of a crude forge, rotting half-buried timbers roughly the size of the cabins erected by early European settlers in what was then still part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

A single paragraph among the many histories of the colonization of this part of the Maine coast mentioned the landing, in 1643, of a ship from Wareham, England. Here, a band of English colonists founded and later, for reasons unknown, abandoned a small settlement.

After it gave up its small, buried artifacts, the dig was also abandoned in the 1980s. A group of investors decided to erect over the scabble of unfilled holes an imagined re-creation of the original settlement. They built four small shingle-roofed log cabins, a blacksmith's forge, laid out a split-rail stockade fence perimeter, installed a gift shop, a parking lot, and charged an entrance fee. Local "players"—retirees, history buffs, burned-out schoolteachers—were hired to inhabit the roles of the settlers. They dressed in seventeenth-century clothing and interacted with visitors. Operating as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit enterprise, Granite Harbor Living History Settlement became a popular midcoast attraction. Tourists, schoolchildren in buses, came and chatted with the "settlers," asking them about their daily lives.

Isabel had been trying to imagine Goodwife Hannah Swaine, the settler she had been assigned to represent. A scant record, listing the owners of cattle in 1649, recorded her age as thirty-two, and her husband, Samuel Swaine, thirty-six.

Nothing more was known about Hannah—whether she and Samuel had children, if she loved her husband, was a cheerful soul or a bitter, complaining shrew. Nor why they had left England for the sketchy perils of the New World. They were simply two names in the aspic of history. They lived and struggled here, at the mouth of this river, before, at some unknown date, the settlement had been abandoned.

At forty-two, Isabel Dorr was ten years older than Hannah. She had grown anxious, broker, and finally, despite fighting it with all the usual remedies—drugs, alcohol, yoga, Buddhism—deeply depressed since her husband, Joshua Dorr, had disappeared on a yacht race to England eleven years earlier. Without a body, a funeral, or witnesses, she'd had a problem with *closure*. She hadn't passed through the predicted five stages of grief but gotten stuck in an unending rut between denial and anger.

She suffered from trichotillomania—a childhood tic that became a full-blown disorder after Joshua's disappearance—and couldn't stop pulling out

the hair on both sides of her head with fingers like tweezers. More recently, coinciding with Ethan's adolescence, it had gotten worse, resulting in bare patches over her ears. Finally she'd cut it all off, an eighth of an inch all over, too short to get a purchase on it with her fingers, maintaining a Sinéad O'Connor buzz cut that her friends insisted made her look sexy and awesome. She'd adopted chemo headwear fashions, fleece clothes, beanies, watch caps, or a scarf knotted at the top of her head, and sometimes she wore no covering at all on the rare occasions when she felt she could carry off sexy and awesome, or when she was at home. She was five foot nine, and with her height and slim hips she looked "awesome in jeans!" her friends told her. She practiced yoga with Kathy McKinnon at Mountain Hall when she could find the time, walked the two miles out and back to Calderwood Point with Flynn most mornings around dawn. She'd become aware of incipient vertical lines above her lips and the suggestion of gathering flesh beneath her jaw, but on good days she felt she was still holding her own—whatever that might still be.

But she was probably doing better than Hannah. From what she'd read, the early colonial settlers had been worn to nubs and early death by hardship. There was no knowing when Hannah had died, but at thirty-two, she'd reached what would have then been considered solid middle age, or older. Isabel imagined her: weather-beaten, with scarred, chapped, thickened hands, dirty, broken nails. Her hair, if she wasn't pulling it out, was no doubt thinning from stress and poor nutrition, lank with unwashing, beginning to streak with gray. Her face reddened and broken-veined, vertical lines, worse than Isabel's, furrowing lips habitually pursed with worry and resignation.

But this didn't allow for character: a woman who might have been warm, humorous, feisty, shy or assertive, strong or weak, forgiving, tender, meek or mean. As a person, Hannah was a blank.

But a voice—Hannah's—started in her head. A kind of earworm that suggested a character with a tongue in her, who began to make unsolicited comments. *Look at the state of this place!* the voice scolded inside Isabel's house. *Have you no shame, woman?* And, on seeing the closed door to Ethan's room: *That lad of yours—idler! Lie-abed!—why isn't he up helping you?*

Hannah or not, Isabel got a sense of someone there. She began to like her.

The road ended in a gravel parking lot beside the gift shop: a modest National Park-style building that also housed a small office and naturally composting toilets.

And today, a police car, its roof light flashing.

2

Once upon a time, Alex would have said:
“Sophie, we’ve got to get going or you’ll be late for school. What do you want for breakfast? I’ve got eggs, nice crunchy seedy toast, or porridge, or—”

“Lucky Charms.”

“I don’t have Lucky Charms.”

Sophie would make a disappointed frown. “I want Lucky Charms.”

“They’re just sugar, sweetheart. They’re not good for you.”

“Mommy lets me have Lucky Charms.”

And Alex would say evenly, “Yes, well, we don’t have Lucky Charms here.”

At six months, when Sophie began to eat solid foods, Alex boiled organic squash, steamed organic spinach, puréed organic fruit and other high-nutrient, pure-as-angels foodstuffs for his little girl, and stored tubs of it in the freezer. This gave him profound satisfaction. *Fatherhood? I’m all over this*, he’d thought, and been sure of it. One of the many things he hadn’t anticipated before becoming a father was how much he would love feeding his daughter—how much he would *need* to. He became possessed, recognizing it for what it was: an evolutionary imperative. The image came to him of a mother bird, as he hovered, spoon in hand, over Sophie’s gaping mouth, his entire focus and life force intent on filling it.

But when she turned three, Sophie’s tastes abruptly contracted. This

coincided with Alex's divorce from her mother, another thing he hadn't anticipated, and the beginning of her eating in two different households. Soon she refused to eat anything but white mishmash food. Alex suspected it was because Morgana had begun to feed her crap.

"I feed my daughter only the finest food!" Morgana said confidently when he mentioned it.

This happened to all kids, other parents told him. At seven, all Sophie wanted was sweet or salty mushy food, like mac 'n' cheese. Or Lucky Charms.

But at seven she still spoke to him, hugged him, laughed with him.

Nine years later, she barely ate or spoke, with him anyway, and she appeared to be suffering from chronic fatigue. Morgana pooh-poohed his concern. "It's called being a teenager," she told Alex.

Really? He hadn't been that way. Nor had any of his friends. They hadn't shuffled through life like zombies, groaning when they spoke, hard of hearing, flaking out on their beds, working only the muscles used to operate their phones. He'd insisted that Sophie be tested for chronic fatigue, or whatever torpor-inducing neurasthenic disorder had sapped all the vitality out of her. But she was found to be healthy and normal. "See?" Morgana said. "Normal."

"Sophie?" He knocked on her door. "Five minutes . . . I want you to eat something, please."

Five minutes later he knocked again: "Sophie, time to go—"

"*St-o-o-op, D-a-a-a-d . . .*" she groaned from behind the door.

Finally she came out of her room, pale, exhausted, stumbling forward as if sleepwalking.

"There's a piece of toast on the table. You can eat it in the car."

"I don't want anything."

"Just take the toast."

"*Stop, Da-a-a-d . . .*"

Dragging her backpack—he was worried it was giving her scoliosis—she moped out the door. She dumped the backpack in the front passenger seat and plopped herself in the back.

• • •

When she was seven and he'd buckled her into her car seat in the back, Sophie would often say, with a note of tragic longing in her voice, "Daddy, when will I see you again?"

"Next Monday, sweetie. I'll pick you up after school. Like always. Mummy will pick you up this afternoon and you'll be with her this week and next weekend, and then I'll pick you up from school next Monday. Right? You know how it works."

"It's *Mom*, Daddy! M-O-M! *Mommy!* Not M-U-M! You always say it wrong."

"Well, that's because Daddy's an alien."

"You are not an *alien!*"

"Haven't I shown you my flying saucer? It's a folding model, it's in the garage."

"*Daddy!*" Sophie shrieked happily.

They both knew the court-mandated schedule. That was how Alex and Morgana exchanged her: picked her up from school on alternating Monday afternoons. That way, in theory, neither parent had to come to the home of the other.

So why was she asking? Except when Morgana traveled on her antique-buying trips to Europe, this had been the custody arrangement since Sophie was two. Was she rubbing in the failure of her parents' marriage? *Calm down*, he told himself. She's still in the bliss of childhood. She's not putting you on trial. *That's your doing*. She just wants reassurance. She wants to hear you say: *I will pick you up next Monday after school, sweetheart. As always.*

"I'll pick you up next Monday after school, sweetheart. As always."

The arrangement had relaxed in recent years. It was now mostly determined by Sophie: which parent's house best provided for her activities, plans with friends, and the current state of her relationship with her mother.

"We have to pick up Kendra," Sophie said now from the backseat.

When they drew up outside Kendra's house, Kendra opened the back door and got in beside Sophie.

"Good morning," she said politely to Alex.

"Hi, Kendra," he said.

As he drove up West Street to Granite Harbor High School, the girls didn't talk. Strangled, snorting sounds came from the backseat. He glanced once in the mirror, under cover of looking both ways when he stopped and crossed Rockland Street. Sitting close together, they were looking at their phones, their own, each other's.

From first to fifth grade Sophie had gone to the Yellow House Waldorf. In those days, he didn't just drop her off. He'd park, get out, unbuckle her from the backseat, and Sophie would climb out, hug him hard, and say, "Bye, Daddy, I love you."

"I love you too, sweetie. I'll see you next Monday."

She would grab her little backpack and run away from him without looking back, through the white wooden gate, like a portal in a magical story, until she reached Erin and Kendra. Sometimes Alex stood outside the gate, smiling his besotted father's smile, watching her with her friends as they laughed and squealed, struck poses, made faces at each other.

Now, at the high school, Sophie opened the front passenger door and hauled her backpack out, pushing the door behind her with insufficient effort to close it, walking away. Still without looking back, but it felt different now.

He reached over and pulled the door shut. He watched Sophie and Kendra join the other girls moving hypnotically forward, staring into their phones. These girls—he still saw them as children—wore sprayed-on tight stretch jeans (Sophie today) or black yoga pants. Short jean jackets over long torn flannel shirts worn studiously askew, hair gel-punked or hanging in wild lustrous strands, makeup, lip gloss.

He wanted to call out "Bye, sweetheart! I love you," but she would be mortified.

3

Alex parked in front of Brown & Cord and went in for his second cup of coffee. The thermos on the left, labeled BIOHAZARD, dispensed a blend that brought in firefighters from the fire station across Mechanic Street, lobstermen headed for sea before dawn, prison guards starting eight-hour shifts at the Supermax. Alex found most publicly brewed coffee in the United States insipid, but Biohazard, formulated by Gary, B & C's walrus-mustachioed, suspender-wearing owner and roaster, was bracing.

Cup in holder, he drove up Union Street and parked a few hundred yards below the large, turreted, sea captain's house that was now home to the Granite Harbor Historical Society. He was seven minutes early.

Glenn Bell, the society's director, had called two days ago and asked if he'd be interested in authoring a history of Granite Harbor, an illustrated book being commissioned by the Historical Society, and if he thought he could fit it in with his day job. Alex was one of several local authors who were being approached by the Historical Society, Glenn told him. The fee would be \$50,000, the work to be completed in a year.

Glenn didn't tell him who the other contenders were, but Alex could guess: Hud Stradling, whose *Alewives* and *Elderberry Wine* series of historical novels about four sisters, wives of Maine fishermen, set around Penobscot Bay during the Great Depression, had to be a favorite. The consummate local author, Hud had actually hung a shingle that read: HUDSON STRADLING, NEW YORK

TIMES REVIEWED MAINE AUTHOR outside his barn writing studio on Bayview Street, where fans and summer tourists stopped in and bought boxed sets of his books and took selfies with Hud.

Mary Louise Ralston had published a genuine *New York Times* bestseller, *Monbegan Summer*, about a badly divorced Boston plein air painter who discovers love with a traumatized Vietnam veteran ornithologist counting ospreys on an offshore island. Mary Louise had subsequently published two more novels, *Isleboro Fall* and *Isle au Haut Equinox*, all *New York Times* bestsellers, and Alex doubted she'd be interested.

Hatch Stornaway, who wore a thick rim of whiskers around an otherwise shaved face in the manner of the old whaleship captains, had written twenty or thirty slim books, monographs, on maritime mysteries and shipwrecks. His "hearty as lobstah chowdah" style might not be what the Historical Society was hoping for, but his research skills and local knowledge were unquestionable.

Alex's own slender literary efforts were dwarfed by all of them in sales and output and bore no relation to Maine: two novels set in a working-class suburb of Manchester, England, where he'd grown up, during the early years of the millennium. But one of them, *Swallow Street*, had been shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and he had once been numbered among the Best British Novelists Under 30 by *Granta* magazine.

He finished his coffee, drove down Union Street, and parked in front of the Historical Society.

"Hey, Alex." Glenn Bell himself opened the front door. He smiled, crushed Alex's hand, and led him into a large entrance hall lined with maps and oil paintings.

Glenn and his wife, Tinker, who used her maiden name, Fox, though everyone still called her Tinker Bell, were *the* Granite Harbor power couple. They were funded by Tinker's money, which provided endowments to the library, the literary and art festivals, got her onto the town council, made Glenn an active member of the Rotary Club, the Meguntic Watershed Association, director of the Historical Society, and paid for their cosmetic surgeries. Both gazed out through the smooth, bright-eyed masks of face-lifts, and this morning Glenn's thin hair glinted with fresh chestnut highlights, his clearly visible scalp still tinted from recent dyeing.

“Been in here before?”

“Yes.”

Glenn didn't seem to hear him. “It's quite a place. Come take a look.”

He led Alex through magnificently curated rooms: floor-to-ceiling shelves of jacket-less leather and green and blue cloth-bound books; the wall spaces between the shelves covered with early nautical charts, old photographs, venerable paintings of the coast of Maine, limpid in dusk or frothing with sea spray breaking upon the unyielding granite.

The tour finished in Glenn's office.

“Given the job some thought?”

Alex's phone began to vibrate audibly in his jacket pocket.

“You want to get that?” Glenn asked.

“No, that's okay,” said Alex. “Yes, I have thought about it. I'm certainly interested.”

“How does it square with the day job?”

“I think I can do both. I'd find the time.” He'd be writing, at least, and getting paid for it.

His phone stopped vibrating.

“Well, we've considered the competition. . . . We've got a lot of talented authors in this town,” Glenn beamed, drawing out the suspense, “. . . and you're our choice, Alex. We've all read your book. We're all agreed. I mean, you're a *real* writer. Not to cast aspersions on any other candidate, but that Bookman prize, that's impressive.”

“I didn't win it.” Alex was surprised Glenn knew about that, and even had the name half right. “I was just shortlisted.”

“That means you made the cut. You're way ahead of anyone else here. And we like the cut of your jib.”

Alex was sure that his jib—for Glenn, Tinker, and the town's social and political movers and shakers—had been partly tailored by Morgana, and her postdivorce purchase of Belleport, in the Chestnut Street Historic District. The house, designed by the famous firm of McKim, Mead, & White, was a National Historic Landmark, which Morgana had renovated to a degree that earned it a feature spread in *Architectural Digest*. Her garden parties filling the gazebo, spreading out on the terraced lawn overlooking Penobscot Bay, had established her as a patroness of the first rank, and brought an invitation

to the board of the Historical Society. While amusing her few friends with vicious stories about Alex, she publicly talked up her daughter's father, and she had no doubt been a factor in his being awarded the job. She would rub it in forever.

"Well, I'm very glad to hear it, Glenn. Thank you."

"Great! Then we're all happy! Betsy—our Betsy Plourde—you know Betsy, I'm sure—she's here most days. She knows our library. She'll be a great resource to you."

Alex's phone began vibrating again.

"Go ahead and take a look," said Glenn, leaning back grandly in his leather chair.

"Okay, thanks." Alex pulled his phone out and looked at it. "The day job. I'd better answer it."

Alex looked away from Glenn's beady eyes as he listened to his caller. He tried to compose his face. "I'm on my way," he said, then pocketed his phone. "Glenn, I'm sorry. I have to go."

"I guess you'd better—when they need you, they need you, right? We can talk about it all later. Just wanted you to know you're our man, and we're very happy."

"Great," said Alex, standing up. "Me too. Thank you."

He drove a hundred yards down Union Street before turning on the blue police strobe lights hardwired into his Subaru Outback and picked up speed.

4

Alex saw Patrolman Mark Beltz beyond the yellow crime scene tape he'd run across the path from the gift shop. A big man, top-heavy, he was standing beside a bed of herbs and flowers, weight on one leg, a relaxed posture, his stomach hanging over his bulky duty belt. Mark had taken his hat off and was holding it beside his thigh with one hand. He was staring into the flower bed like a man struck with wonder at nature.

Alex ducked under the tape and walked toward him. Mark looked up as he approached. His eyes found Alex's. "Good morning, Detective."

He'd known Mark for seven years. They'd been patrolmen together before Alex had made detective, and had called each other "Mark" and "Alex." Mark was at least ten years younger than Alex, but he'd been a policeman since his early twenties and he was an old hand by the time Alex joined the department. He'd been a generous mentor to the older recruit during Alex's first two years on the job.

Yet Mark now called him "Detective" when they spoke.

His eyes skittered away as he put on his hat. "Over here." He began to lumber across the center of the re-created village, past the log cabins, out-buildings, the forge, facing an open space of grass, gravel paths, small crop beds. Alex followed.

Mark stopped beside several rows of pumpkins, squashes, and other leafy things where the tilled ground gave way to cordgrass and ferns that sloped

up to the trees that marked the edge of the Settlement, the beginning of the woods.

“There,” said Mark. He pointed, to the trees and upward, but Alex had already seen the naked body, male, hanging from the odd structure: a rectangle the size of a doorframe, built of two-by-fours bolted together, mounted on a simple plywood box. The body hung by the bound wrists, arms raised, from a short crossbeam in the “doorway” space between vertical posts. It almost looked like an art installation: a crude, shocking statement, framed for presentation.

Why the structure? There was a stout oak tree with good hanging limbs just behind it.

Before he noticed anything else, Alex’s eyes were drawn to the body’s most prominent, lurid feature: the long, clean, vertical incision stretching from the sternum through the center of the belly button, stopping above the pubic bone. The edges of the wound were half an inch apart. A long row of stitches would have pulled them neatly together.

Alex looked down at the ground, mostly ferns and marsh grass, between where he stood and the body hanging from the frame. No blood.

“Did you approach the body, Mark?”

“No closer than you are now.”

“And the person who found it?”

“That was Jeff Block. One of the people here. I don’t think he got any closer. He said he backed away once he saw it.”

Alex walked slowly forward, aiming to reach the body by a side-circling route, watching where he placed each foot, looking for any sign of disturbed vegetation, or footprints. But he also looked up continually at the body as he drew closer to it. Long bangs of brown hair obscured the face; the head hung forward over the chest, as if staring down at the foot-long wound. The body, male, was full grown, long, skinny, sinewy, and, he could easily see, young.

Alex had seen only four other dead bodies since he’d become a police officer seven years ago. Granite Harbor’s troubles were mostly traffic violations, unruly summer residents, domestic troubles, the occasional stolen bicycle. The deaths he’d been forced to examine were one teenage gunshot suicide in a bedroom on John Street, considerably done so that the result-

ing mess had been mostly contained in a thick wool blanket emblazoned L.L. BEAN, and three bodies that were the result of accidents: a drowning, a rock-climbing fall, and a woman, alcoholic according to her family, frozen in her own backyard within yards of an open door.

He had never seen a murdered corpse.

As he got within a few feet, he felt a lurch in his chest as he realized he knew this boy.

He heard Mark approach and stop just behind him. Mark took off his hat again and peered upward. "That's Shane Carter."

Sophie knew a Shane at school.

"Doreen Wisner's boy," Mark went on. "He's in the eleventh grade with my boys, Jack and David. Judy at the station knows them."

"His name's Carter but his mother's called Wisner?"

"Carter's his father's name. Doreen remarried, to Dennis Wisner." Mark's thick Maine accent was evident. *His fahtha's name. Dawreen Wisner.*

Watching where he planted his feet, Alex walked around the other side of the frame with the hanging boy. From here, because of the way the head was tilted, he had a better view of the face. He could have been any boy in Granite Harbor, boys he'd seen for years, a mess of open jackets, untucked shirts and untied shoelaces, crowding into and out of school, hanging out in the library, his own house even. The eyelids were half open, suggesting an impression that he was still only half asleep.

There was no sign of blood on the leaves around the frame base, no footprints, no sign of disturbance. This was not the kill site. The body had been brought here dead. Maybe the forensic team would find—

"Oh my!" Mark said suddenly.

Alex looked over his shoulder at Mark and then, following the direction of his gaze, back at the body. His eyes involuntarily caught at the wound.

The clean line of the incision undulated. Something was moving beneath it. Inside Shane's belly.

As both men stared, a tiny hand, almost humanlike, dark red with gore, protruded from the wound.

"Oh my Lord!" Mark said, louder.

A second hand thrust itself out of the wound.

Mark stepped back, lost his footing on a tree root beneath the leaves and

fell backward. He got to his feet. He was breathing hard. "What in the good Lord . . ."

They both watched the hands waving, reaching out of the wound just above the belly button, and now the edges of the incision distended . . . pushed from inside . . .

"Oh . . . my . . ."

A small head, wide, flat, smeared with clotted blood, emerged. A protuberant golden eye closed and opened in a slow blink.

"What the—"

"It's a frog," said Alex.

"What the hell's it doing in there?"

"That's a good question."

The frog's arm reached farther along the incision, gripping the edge with the bulb-tipped fingers of both hands. The head quivered. A leg emerged— It leaped, plopping onto the leaves between the two men.

"We need to get it, Mark!"

It jumped again, away from them, behind the frame, toward the trees.

As they stepped after it, the frog sprang again, away from Mark's heavier footfall, clanking bulk—to land in front of Alex. He dropped onto his knees, fell forward onto his elbows, and closed both hands around the frog.

"Get a bag! And gloves."

Mark was breathing fast. "Okay." He ran off heavily, panting audibly, his belt jangling.

The frog squirmed. Alex kept his hands closed over it. He felt the wet thick blood on the cold reptilian skin.

"Grisly, unsettling, and dark—and also beautifully written . . . I loved it." —ALEX MICHAELIDES

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