Dear John

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Extract

Prologue

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What does it mean to truly love another?

There was a time in my life when I thought I knew the answer: It meant that I'd care for Savannah more deeply than I cared for myself and that we'd spend the rest of our lives together. It wouldn't have taken much. She once told me that the key to happiness was achievable dreams, and hers were nothing out of the ordinary. Marriage, family . . . the basics. It meant I'd have a steady job, the house with the white picket fence, and a minivan or SUV big enough to haul our kids to school or to the dentist or off to soccer practice or piano recitals. Two or three kids, she was never clear on that, but my hunch is that when the time came, she would have suggested that we let nature take its course and allow God to make the decision. She was like that—religious, I mean—and I suppose that was part of the reason I fell for her. But no matter what was going on in our lives, I could imagine lying beside her in bed at the end of the day, holding her while we talked and laughed, lost in each other's arms.

It doesn't sound so far-fetched, right? When two people love each other? That's what I thought, too. And while part of me still

wants to believe it's possible, I know it's not going to happen. When I leave here again, I'll never come back.

For now, though, I'll sit on the hillside overlooking her ranch and wait for her to appear. She won't be able to see me, of course. In the army, you learn to blend into your surroundings, and I learned well, because I had no desire to die in some backward foreign dump in the middle of the Iraqi desert. But I had to come back to this small North Carolina mountain town to find out what happened. When a person sets a thing in motion, there's a feeling of unease, almost regret, until you learn the truth.

But of this I am certain: Savannah will never know I've been here today.

Part of me aches at the thought of her being so close yet so untouchable, but her story and mine are different now. It wasn't easy for me to accept this simple truth, because there was a time when our stories were the same, but that was six years and two lifetimes ago. There are memories for both of us, of course, but I've learned that memories can have a physical, almost living presence, and in this, Savannah and I are different as well. If hers are stars in the nighttime sky, mine are the haunted empty spaces in between. And unlike her, I've been burdened by questions I've asked myself a thousand times since the last time we were together. Why did I do it? And would I do it again?

It was I, you see, who ended it.

On the trees surrounding me, the leaves are just beginning their slow turn toward the color of fire, glowing as the sun peeks over the horizon. Birds have begun their morning calls, and the air is perfumed with the scent of pine and earth; different from the brine and salt of my hometown. In time, the front door cracks open, and it's then that I see her. Despite the distance between us, I find myself holding my breath as she steps into the dawn. She stretches before descending the front steps and heads around the side. Beyond her, the horse pasture shimmers like a green ocean, and she passes through the gate that leads toward

it. A horse calls out a greeting, as does another, and my first thought is that Savannah seems too small to be moving so easily among them. But she was always comfortable with horses, and they were comfortable with her. A half dozen nibble on grass near the fence post, mainly quarter horses, and Midas, her white-socked black Arabian, stands off to one side. I rode with her once, luckily without injury, and as I was hanging on for dear life, I remember thinking that she looked so relaxed in the saddle that she could have been watching television. Savannah takes a moment to greet Midas now. She rubs his nose while she whispers something, she pats his haunches, and when she turns away, his ears prick up as she heads toward the barn.

She vanishes, then emerges again, carrying two pails—oats, I think. She hangs the pails on two fence posts, and a couple of the horses trot toward them. When she steps back to make room, I see her hair flutter in the breeze before she retrieves a saddle and bridle. While Midas eats, she readies him for her ride, and a few minutes later she's leading him from the pasture, toward the trails in the forest, looking exactly as she did six years ago. I know it isn't true—I saw her up close last year and noticed the first fine lines beginning to form around her eyes—but the prism through which I view her remains for me unchanging. To me, she will always be twenty-one and I will always be twenty-three. I'd been stationed in Germany; I had yet to go to Fallujah or Baghdad or receive her letter, which I read in the railroad station in Samawah in the initial weeks of the campaign; I had yet to return home from the events that changed the course of my life.

Now, at twenty-nine, I sometimes wonder about the choices I've made. The army has become the only life I know. I don't know whether I should be pissed or pleased about that fact; most of the time, I find myself going back and forth, depending on the day. When people ask, I tell them I'm a grunt, and I mean it. I still live on base in Germany, I have maybe a thousand dollars in

savings, and I haven't been on a date in years. I don't surf much anymore even on leave, but on my days off I ride my Harley north or south, wherever my mood strikes me. The Harley was the single best thing I've ever bought for myself, though it cost a fortune over there. It suits me, since I've become something of a loner. Most of my buddies have left the service, but I'll probably get sent back to Iraq in the next couple of months. At least, those are the rumors around base. When I first met Savannah Lynn Curtis—to me, she'll always be Savannah Lynn Curtis—I could never have predicted my life would turn out the way it has or believed I'd make the army my career.

But I did meet her; that's the thing that makes my current life so strange. I fell in love with her when we were together, then fell deeper in love with her in the years we were apart. Our story has three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. And although this is the way all stories unfold, I still can't believe that ours didn't go on forever.

I reflect on these things, and as always, our time together comes back to me. I find myself remembering how it began, for now these memories are all I have left.

PART I

One

Wilmington, 2000

My name is John Tyree. I was born in 1977, and I grew up in Wilmington, North Carolina, a city that proudly boasts the largest port in the state as well as a long and vibrant history but now strikes me more as a city that came about by accident. Sure, the weather was great and the beaches perfect, but it wasn't ready for the wave of Yankee retirees up north who wanted someplace cheap to spend their golden years. The city is located on a relatively thin spit of land bounded by the Cape Fear River on one side and the ocean on the other. Highway 17—which leads to Myrtle Beach and Charleston—bisects the town and serves as its major road. When I was a kid, my dad and I could drive from the historic district near the Cape Fear River to Wrightsville Beach in ten minutes, but so many stoplights and shopping centers have been added that it can now take an hour, especially on the weekends, when the tourists come flooding in. Wrightsville Beach, located on an island just off the coast, is on the northern end of Wilmington and far and away one of the most popular beaches in the state. The homes along the dunes are ridiculously expensive, and most of them are rented out all summer long. The Outer

Banks may have more romantic appeal because of their isolation and wild horses and that flight that Orville and Wilbur were famous for, but let me tell you, most people who go to the beach on vacation feel most at home when they can find a McDonald's or Burger King nearby, in case the little ones aren't too fond of the local fare, and want more than a couple of choices when it comes to evening activities.

Like all cities, Wilmington is rich in places and poor in others, and since my dad had one of the steadiest, solid-citizen jobs on the planet—he drove a mail delivery route for the post office—we did okay. Not great, but okay. We weren't rich, but we lived close enough to the rich area for me to attend one of the best high schools in the city. Unlike my friends' homes, though, our house was old and small; part of the porch had begun to sag, but the yard was its saving grace. There was a big oak tree in the backyard, and when I was eight years old, I built a tree house with scraps of wood I collected from a construction site. My dad didn't help me with the project (if he hit a nail with a hammer, it could honestly be called an accident); it was the same summer I taught myself to surf. I suppose I should have realized then how different I was from my dad, but that just shows how little you know about life when you're a kid.

My dad and I were as different as two people could possibly be. Where he was passive and introspective, I was always in motion and hated to be alone; while he placed a high value on education, school for me was like a social club with sports added in. He had poor posture and tended to shuffle when he walked; I bounced from here to there, forever asking him to time how long it took me to run to the end of the block and back. I was taller than him by the time I was in eighth grade and could beat him in arm-wrestling a year later. Our physical features were completely different, too. While he had sandy hair, hazel eyes, and freckles, I had brown hair and eyes, and my olive skin would darken to a deep tan by May. Our differences struck some of our neighbors as

odd, which made sense, I suppose, considering that he'd raised me by himself. As I grew older, I sometimes heard them whispering about the fact that my mom had run off when I was less than a year old. Though I later suspected my mom had met someone else, my dad never confirmed this. All he'd say was that she'd realized she made a mistake in getting married so young, and that she wasn't ready to be a mother. He neither heaped scorn on her nor praised her, but he made sure that I included her in my prayers, no matter where she was or what she'd done. "You remind me of her," he'd say sometimes. To this day, I've never spoken a single word to her, nor do I have any desire to do so.

I think my dad was happy. I phrase it like this because he seldom showed much emotion. Hugs and kisses were a rarity for me growing up, and when they did happen, they often struck me as lifeless, something he did because he felt he was supposed to, not because he wanted to. I know he loved me by the way he devoted himself to my care, but he was forty-three when he had me, and part of me thinks my dad would have been better suited to being a monk than a parent. He was the quietest man I've ever known. He asked few questions about what was going on in my life, and while he rarely grew angry, he rarely joked, either. He lived for routine. He cooked me scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon every single morning and listened as I talked about school over a dinner he'd prepared as well. He scheduled visits to the dentist two months in advance, paid his bills on Saturday morning, did the laundry on Sunday afternoon, and left the house every morning at exactly 7:35 a.m. He was socially awkward and spent long hours alone every day, dropping packages and bunches of mail into the mailboxes along his route. He didn't date, nor did he spend weekend nights playing poker with his buddies; the telephone could stay silent for weeks. When it did ring, it was either a wrong number or a telemarketer. I know how hard it must have been for him to raise me on his own, but he never complained, even when I disappointed him.

I spent most of my evenings alone. With the duties of the day finally completed, my dad would head to his den to be with his coins. That was his one great passion in life. He was most content while sitting in his den, studying a coin dealer newsletter nicknamed the *Greysheet* and trying to figure out the next coin he should add to his collection. Actually, it was my grandfather who originally started the coin collection. My grandfather's hero was a man named Louis Eliasberg, a Baltimore financier who is the only person to have assembled a complete collection of United States coins, including all the various dates and mint marks. His collection rivaled, if not surpassed, the collection at the Smithsonian, and after the death of my grandmother in 1951, my grandfather became transfixed by the idea of building a collection with his son. During the summers, my grandfather and dad would travel by train to the various mints to collect the new coins firsthand or visit various coin shows in the Southeast. In time, my grandfather and dad established relationships with coin dealers across the country, and my grandfather spent a fortune over the years trading up and improving the collection. Unlike Louis Eliasberg, however, my grandfather wasn't rich—he owned a general store in Burgaw that went out of business when the Piggly Wiggly opened its doors across town—and never had a chance at matching Eliasberg's collection. Even so, every extra dollar went into coins. My grandfather wore the same jacket for thirty years, drove the same car his entire life, and I'm pretty sure my dad went to work for the postal service instead of heading off to college because there wasn't a dime left over to pay for anything beyond a high school education. He was an odd duck, that's for sure, as was my dad. Like father, like son, as the old saying goes. When the old man finally passed away, he specified in his will that his house be sold and the money used to purchase even more coins, which was exactly what my dad probably would have done anyway.

By the time my dad inherited the collection, it was already quite valuable. When inflation went through the roof and gold hit

$850 an ounce, it was worth a small fortune, more than enough for my frugal dad to retire a few times over and more than it would be worth a quarter century later. But neither my grandfather nor my dad had been into collecting for the money; they were in it for the thrill of the hunt and the bond it created between them. There was something exciting about searching long and hard for a specific coin, finally locating it, then wheeling and dealing to get it for the right price. Sometimes a coin was affordable, other times it wasn't, but each and every piece they added was a treasure. My dad hoped to share the same passion with me, including the sacrifice it required. Growing up, I had to sleep with extra blankets in the winter, and I got a single pair of new shoes every year; there was never money for my clothes, unless they came from the Salvation Army. My dad didn't even own a camera. The only picture ever taken of us was at a coin show in Atlanta. A dealer snapped it as we stood before his booth and sent it to us. For years it was perched on my dad's desk. In the photo, my dad had his arm draped over my shoulder, and we were both beaming. In my hand, I was holding a 1926-D buffalo nickel in gem condition, a coin that my dad had just purchased. It was among the rarest of all buffalo nickels, and we ended up eating hot dogs and beans for a month, since it cost more than he'd expected.

But I didn't mind the sacrifices—for a while, anyway. When my dad started talking to me about coins—I must have been in the first or second grade at the time—he spoke to me like an equal. Having an adult, especially your dad, treat you like an equal is a heady thing for any young child, and I basked in the attention, absorbing the information. In time, I could tell you how many Saint-Gaudens double eagles were minted in 1927 as compared with 1924 and why an 1895 Barber dime minted in New Orleans was ten times more valuable than the same coin minted in the same year in Philadelphia. I still can, by the way. Yet unlike my dad, I eventually began to grow out of my passion for collecting. It was all my dad seemed able to talk about, and after six or seven

years of weekends spent with him instead of friends, I wanted out. Like most boys, I started to care about other things: sports and girls and cars and music, primarily, and by fourteen, I was spending little time at home. My resentment began to grow as well. Little by little, I began to notice differences in the way we lived when I compared myself with most of my friends. While they had money to spend to go to the movies or buy a stylish pair of sunglasses, I found myself scrounging for quarters in the couch to buy myself a burger at McDonald's. More than a few of my friends received cars for their sixteenth birthday; my dad gave me an 1883 Morgan silver dollar that had been minted in Carson City. Tears in our worn couch were covered by a blanket, and we were the only family I knew who didn't have cable television or a microwave oven. When our refrigerator broke down, he bought a used one that was the world's most awful shade of green, a color that matched nothing else in the kitchen. I was embarrassed at the thought of having friends come over, and I blamed my dad for that. I know it was a pretty crappy way to feel—if the lack of money bothered me so much, I could have mowed lawns or worked odd jobs, for instance—but that's the way it was. I was as blind as a snail and dumb as a camel, but even if I told you I regret my immaturity now, I can't undo the past.

My dad sensed that something was changing, but he was at a loss as to what to do about us. He tried, though, in the only way he knew how, the only way his father knew. He talked about coins—it was the one topic he could discuss with ease—and continued to cook my breakfasts and dinners; but our estrangement grew worse over time. At the same time, I pulled away from the friends I'd always known. They were breaking into cliques, based primarily on what movies they were going to see or the latest shirts they bought from the mall, and I found myself on the outside looking in. Screw them, I thought. In high school, there's always a place for everyone, and I began falling in with the wrong sort of crowd, a crowd that didn't give a damn about anything,

which left me not giving a damn, either. I began to cut classes and smoke and was suspended for fighting on three occasions.

I gave up sports, too. I'd played football and basketball and run track until I was a sophomore, and though my dad sometimes asked how I did when I got home, he seemed uncomfortable if I went into detail, since it was obvious he didn't know a thing about sports. He'd never been on a team in his life. He showed up for a single basketball game during my sophomore year. He sat in the stands, an odd balding guy wearing a worn sport jacket and socks that didn't match. Though he wasn't obese, his pants nipped at the waist, making him look as if he were three months pregnant, and I knew I wanted nothing to do with him. I was embarrassed by the sight of him, and after the game, I avoided him. I'm not proud of myself for that, but that's who I was.

Things got worse. During my senior year, my rebellion reached a high point. My grades had been slipping for two years, more from laziness and lack of care than intelligence (I like to think), and more than once my dad caught me sneaking in late at night with booze on my breath. I was escorted home by the police after being found at a party where drugs and drinking were evident, and when my dad grounded me, I stayed at a friend's house for a couple of weeks after raging at him to mind his own business. He said nothing upon my return; instead, scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon were on the table in the mornings as usual. I barely passed my classes, and I suspect the school let me graduate simply because it wanted me out of there. I know my dad was worried, and he would sometimes, in his own shy way, broach the subject of college, but by then I'd made up my mind not to go. I wanted a job, I wanted a car, I wanted those material things I'd lived eighteen years without.

I said nothing to him about it one way or the other until the summer after graduation, but when he realized I hadn't even applied to junior college, he locked himself in his den for the rest of the night and said nothing to me over our eggs and bacon the next morning. Later that evening, he tried to engage me in another

discussion about coins, as if grasping for the companionship that had somehow been lost between us.

"Do you remember when we went to Atlanta and you were the one who found that buffalo head nickel we'd been looking for for years?" he started. "The one where we had our picture taken? I'll never forget how excited you were. It reminded me of my father and me."

I shook my head, all the frustration of life with my dad coming to the surface. "I'm sick and tired of hearing about coins!" I shouted at him. "I never want to hear about them again! You should sell the damn collection and do something else. Anything else."

My dad said nothing, but to this day I'll never forget his pained expression when at last he turned and trudged back to his den. I'd hurt him, and though I told myself I hadn't wanted to, deep down I knew I was lying to myself. From then on my dad rarely brought up the subject of coins again. Nor did I. It became a yawning gulf between us, and it left us with nothing to say to each other. A few days later, I realized that the only photograph of us was gone as well, as if he believed that even the slightest reminder of coins would offend me. At the time, it probably would have, and even though I assumed that he'd thrown it away, the realization didn't bother me at all.

Growing up, I'd never considered entering the military. Despite the fact that eastern North Carolina is one of the most militarily dense areas of the country—there are seven bases within a few hours' driving time from Wilmington—I used to think that military life was for losers. Who wanted to spend his life getting ordered around by a bunch of crew-cut flunkies? Not me, and aside from the ROTC guys, not many people in my high school, either. Instead, most of the kids who'd been good students headed off to the University of North Carolina or North Carolina State, while the kids who hadn't been good students stayed behind, bumming around from one lousy job to the next, drinking beer and hanging

out, and pretty much avoiding anything that might require a shred of responsibility.

I fell into the latter category. In the couple of years after graduation, I went through a succession of jobs, working as a busboy at Outback Steakhouse, tearing ticket stubs at the local movie theater, loading and unloading boxes at Staples, cooking pancakes at Waffle House, and working as a cashier at a couple of tourist places that sold crap to the out-of-towners. I spent every dime I earned, had zero illusions about eventually working my way up the ladder to management, and ended up getting fired from every job I had. For a while, I didn't care. I was living my life. I was big into surfing late and sleeping in, and since I was still living at home, none of my income was needed for things like rent or food or insurance or preparing for a future. Besides, none of my friends was doing any better than I was. I don't remember being particularly unhappy, but after a while I just got tired of my life. Not the surfing part—in 1996, Hurricanes Bertha and Fran slammed into the coast, and those were some of the best waves in years—but hanging out at Leroy's bar afterward. I began to realize that every night was the same. I'd be drinking beers and bump into someone I'd known from high school, and they'd ask what I was doing and I'd tell them, and they'd tell me what they were doing, and it didn't take a genius to figure out we were both on the fast track to nowhere. Even if they had their own place, which I didn't, I never believed them when they told me they liked their job as ditch digger or window washer or Porta Potti hauler, because I knew full well that none of those were the kinds of occupations they'd grown up dreaming about. I might have been lazy in the classroom, but I wasn't stupid.

I dated dozens of women during that period. At Leroy's, there were always women. Most were forgettable relationships. I used women and allowed myself to be used and always kept my feelings to myself. Only my relationship with a girl named Lucy lasted more than a few months, and for a short time before we inevitably

drifted apart, I thought I was in love with her. She was a student at UNC Wilmington, a year older than me, and wanted to work in New York after she graduated. "I care about you," she told me on our last night together, "but you and I want different things. You could do so much more with your life, but for some reason, you're content to simply float along." She'd hesitated before going on. "But more than that, I never know how you really feel about me." I knew she was right. Soon after, she left on a plane without bothering to say good-bye. A year later, after getting her number from her parents, I called her and we talked for twenty minutes. She was engaged to an attorney, she told me, and would be married the following June.

The phone call affected me more than I thought it would. It came on a day when I'd just been fired—again—and I went to console myself at Leroy's, as always. The same crowd of losers was there, and I suddenly realized that I didn't want to spend another pointless evening pretending that everything in my life was okay. Instead, I bought a six-pack of beer and went to sit on the beach. It was the first time in years that I actually thought about what I was doing with my life, and I wondered whether I should take my dad's advice and get a college degree. I'd been out of school for so long, though, that the idea felt foreign and ridiculous. Call it luck or bad luck, but right then two marines jogged by. Young and fit, they radiated easy confidence. If they could do it, I told myself, I could do it, too.

I mulled it over for a couple of days, and in the end, my dad had something to do with my decision. Not that I talked to him about it, of course—we weren't talking at all by then. I was walking toward the kitchen one night and saw him sitting at his desk, as always. But this time, I really studied him. His hair was mostly gone, and the little that was left had turned completely silver by his ears. He was nearing retirement, and I was struck by the notion that I had no right to keep letting him down after all he'd done for me.

So I joined the military. My first thought was that I'd join the

marines, since they were the guys I was most familiar with. Wrightsville Beach was always packed with jarheads from Camp Lejeune or Cherry Point, but when the time came, I picked the army. I figured I'd be handed a rifle either way, but what really closed the deal was that the marines recruiter was having lunch when I swung by and wasn't immediately available, while the army recruiter—whose office was right across the street—was. In the end, the decision felt more spontaneous than planned, but I signed on the dotted line for a four-year enlistment, and when the recruiter slapped my back and congratulated me as I went out the door, I found myself wondering what I'd gotten myself into. That was in late 1997, and I was twenty years old.

Boot camp at Fort Benning was just as miserable as I thought it would be. The whole thing seemed designed to humiliate and brainwash us into following orders without question, no matter how stupid they might be, but I adapted more quickly than a lot of the guys. Once I got through it, I chose the infantry. We spent the next few months doing a lot of simulations in places like Louisiana and good old Fort Bragg, where we basically learned the best ways to kill people and break things; and after a while, my unit, as part of the First Infantry Division—aka the Big Red One—was sent to Germany. I didn't speak a word of German, but it didn't matter, since pretty much everyone I dealt with spoke English. It was easy at first, then army life set in. I spent seven lousy months in the Balkans—first in Macedonia in 1999, then in Kosovo, where I stayed until the late spring of 2000. Life in the army didn't pay much, but considering there was no rent, no food expenses, and really nothing to spend my paychecks on even when I got them, I had money in the bank for the first time. Not a lot, but enough.

I spent my first leave at home completely bored out of my mind. I spent my second leave in Las Vegas. One of my buddies had grown up there, and three of us crashed at his parents' place. I blew through pretty much everything I'd saved. On my third leave, after coming back from Kosovo, I was desperately in need of a break and

decided to head back home, hoping the boredom of the visit would be enough to calm my mind. Because of the distance, my dad and I seldom talked on the phone, but he wrote me letters that were always postmarked on the first of every month. They weren't like the ones my buddies got from their moms or sisters or wives. Nothing too personal, nothing mushy, and never a word that suggested he missed me. Nor did he ever mention coins. Instead, he wrote about changes in the neighborhood and a lot about the weather; when I wrote to tell him about a pretty hairy firefight I'd been in in the Balkans, he wrote back to say that he was glad I survived, but said no more about it. I knew by the way he phrased his response that he didn't want to hear about the dangerous things I did. The fact that I was in peril frightened him, so I started omitting the scary stuff. Instead, I sent him letters about how guard duty was without a doubt the most boring job ever invented and that the only exciting thing to happen to me in weeks was trying to guess how many cigarettes the other guard would actually smoke in a single evening. My dad ended every letter with the promise that he would write again soon, and once again, the man didn't let me down. He was, I've long since come to believe, a far better man than I'll ever be.

But I'd grown up in the previous three years. Yeah, I know, I'm a walking cliché—go in as a boy, come out as a man and all that. But everyone in the army is forced to grow up, especially if you're in the infantry like me. You're entrusted with equipment that costs a fortune, others put their trust in you, and if you screw up, the penalty is a lot more serious than being sent to bed without supper. Sure, there's too much paperwork and boredom, and everyone smokes and can't complete a sentence without cursing and has boxes of dirty magazines under his bed, and you have to answer to ROTC guys fresh out of college who think grunts like me have the IQs of Neanderthals; but you're forced to learn the most important lesson in life, and that's the fact that you have to live up to your responsibilities, and you'd better do it right. When

given an order, you can't say no. It's no exaggeration to say that lives are on the line. One wrong decision, and your buddy might die. It's this fact that makes the army work. That's the big mistake a lot of people make when they wonder how soldiers can put their lives on the line day after day or how they can fight for something they may not believe in. Not everyone does. I've worked with soldiers on all sides of the political spectrum; I've met some who hated the army and others who wanted to make it a career. I've met geniuses and idiots, but when all is said and done, we do what we do for one another. For friendship. Not for country, not for patriotism, not because we're programmed killing machines, but because of the guy next to you. You fight for your friend, to keep him alive, and he fights for you, and everything about the army is built on this simple premise.

But like I said, I had changed. I went into the army as a smoker and almost coughed up a lung during boot camp, but unlike practically everyone else in my unit, I quit and hadn't touched the things in over two years. I moderated my drinking to the point that one or two beers a week was sufficient, and I might go a month without having any at all. My record was spotless. I'd been promoted from private to corporal and then, six months later, to sergeant, and I learned that I had an ability to lead. I'd led men in firefights, and my squad was involved in capturing one of the most notorious war criminals in the Balkans. My commanding officer recommended me for Officer Candidate School (OCS), and I was debating whether or not to become an officer, but that sometimes meant a desk job and even more paperwork, and I wasn't sure I wanted that. Aside from surfing, I hadn't exercised in years before I joined the service; by the time I took my third leave, I'd put on twenty pounds of muscle and cut the flab from my belly. I spent most of my free time running, boxing, and weight lifting with Tony, a musclehead from New York who always shouted when he talked, swore that tequila was an aphrodisiac, and was far and

away my best friend in the unit. He talked me into getting tattoos on both arms just like him, and with every passing day, the memory of who I once had been became more and more distant.

I read a lot, too. In the army, you have a lot of time to read, and people trade books back and forth or sign them out from the library until the covers are practically worn away. I don't want you to get the impression that I became a scholar, because I didn't. I wasn't into Chaucer or Proust or Dostoevsky or any of those other dead guys; I read mainly mysteries and thrillers and books by Stephen King, and I took a particular liking to Carl Hiaasen because his words flowed easily and he always made me laugh. I couldn't help but think that if schools had assigned these books in English class, we'd have a lot more readers in the world.

Unlike my buddies, I shied away from any prospect of female companionship. Sounds weird, right? Prime of life, testosterone-filled job—what could be more natural than searching for a little release with the help of a female? It wasn't for me. Although some of the guys I knew dated and even married the locals while stationed in Würzburg, I'd heard enough stories to know that those marriages seldom worked out. The military was hard on relationships in general—I'd seen enough divorces to know that—and while I wouldn't have minded the company of someone special, it just never happened. Tony couldn't understand it.

"You gotta come with me," he'd plead. "You never come."

"I'm not in the mood."

"How can you not be in the mood? Sabine swears her friend is gorgeous. Tall and blond, and she loves tequila."

"Bring Don. I'm sure he'd like to go."

"Castelow? No way. Sabine can't stand him."

I said nothing.

"We're just going to have a little fun."

I shook my head, thinking that I'd rather be alone than revert to the kind of person I'd been, but I found myself wondering whether I would end up being as monkish as my dad.