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SNEAK PREVIEW!

Prologue

DAWN CAME WITH SLUGGISH PATIENCE.

It was as if Mother Nature, in a brief and uncharacteristic moment of kindness, decided to slow her pace so the residents of Crab Island could have more time to prepare for her brewing storm.

Not that any of them noticed (or cared).

As the sun reared its head over the Atlantic horizon, the sleepy island rested in dormant peace, unhurried by the hurricane whirling toward it.

Just off the island, at the base of the old wooden bridge tethering it to Florida's peninsula, the blush of dawn reflected in the silver hull of a '72 Airstream Land Yacht. Inside its rounded confines, the exquisitely crafted body of Tucker Kowaliga (a rugged form built by good genes, great metabolism, and the occasional yoga session) rested peacefully on the trailer's pull-out sofa.

Even as daylight slipped between the trailer's blinds, splashing across Tucker's dark curls and tugging at the corners of his eyes, he remained in a state of deep slumber.

Until his phone rang.

Ripped from the throes of a perfect dream (involving deep sea fishing and bikini clad models), Tucker surfaced in the reality of his tiny trailer, tangled in sweaty sheets. His arm stretched across the Airstream's center aisle to snatch the buzzing device off his built-in dresser.

"What?" He barked into the receiver.

"I've got heartburn and it ain't even seven-thirty."

"Morning, Captain," Tucker replied, softening his tone. "I take it the evacuation order was issued?"

"Just came down from the state," grunted Florida Highway Patrol Captain Frank Howey.

"Alright then." Tucker sat up in bed.

"You'll spread the word on the island?"

"I will, sir, but you know it won't mean anything."

"Do they know the definition of 'mandatory' over there?"

"I believe so. They also know a lot about the word 'stubborn.'"

"Well, tell'em we're closing the bridge at five, if they don't leave they'll be stuck out there 'til the storm passes and we clear the road."

“Yes, sir, I’ll pass the word along,” said Tucker.

“Do you think it’s possible to overdose on Tums?”

“No, sir, I don’t.”

“Good,” The sound of crunching came over the line. “The weather service says things will start getting bad in the late afternoon. Storm should be coming ashore around midnight, somewhere between your island and the state line.”

“That’s a small window.”

“They got computers, I guess it’s accurate.”

“Okay, Captain,” Tucker said. “I’ll get to work.”

“One more thing,” Captain Howey cleared his throat. “Do you know a girl, late twenties, last name something like Bryant or Bryan maybe?”

Tucker ran the name through his memory banks and came up empty. “Don’t think so,” he said.

“Well, I got a lawman from Chicago up my tail about her. She’s involved in some domestic dispute, stole her husband’s car. Just be on the lookout for her, okay?”

“Why would she be on Crab Island?”

“She’s a local, grew up there,” said the captain. “They think she might be headed home. I’ll fax you the APB with all the details.”

“Captain, I may live in the sticks, but I don’t have a fax machine. Just email it to me.”

“How do I do that?”

“You put your badge to work and order the youngest patrolman in the office to do it for you.”

“Alright, Kowaliga. Stay safe. Don’t you ride this storm out in that trailer—get your ass in a concrete building by sundown.”

“Will do, sir.”

The line went dead and Tucker tossed the phone back on the dresser.

He climbed out of bed, carefully unfolding his six-foot-two frame in the tiny trailer so as to avoid giving himself a serious concussion (a frequent occurrence, even after ten years of living in the Airstream). Following a quick morning stretch – as much as the small space would allow – he grabbed his khaki uniform pants off a hook on the bathroom door and slipped them on over his navy cotton boxers.

Tucker stumbled two steps forward, transitioning quickly from the bedroom to his combined kitchen and living space (the square footage of which was tantamount to that of a child's playhouse). Leaning over the sink to reach for his toothbrush, Tucker caught his rough reflection in the black square surface of a wall-mounted oven. He needed a shave, a haircut, and a new lifestyle – not necessarily in that order. The captain would not be pleased with his shaggy appearance, but then Tucker was never the highway patrol's model trooper. His chief appeal (aside from his dedication to upholding the law) was his willingness to take on one of the state's least favorite districts.

Tucker's little corner of northeastern Florida, just south of the Georgia line, featured a motley collection of rednecks, hillbillies, islanders, retirees, Crackers (the local word for Florida natives), college students, and especially adventurous (or terribly lost) tourists.

Fortunately, as a native of the area, he was especially equipped to keep the peace where necessary.

Once his teeth were brushed and his hair finger combed into something just short of a tangled mess, a shirtless Tucker swung open the Airstream door and squinted into the morning sun. He stumbled outside into the sand and weeds between his trailer and the only gas station within fifty miles.

Very little about the Kowaliga family property had changed since Tucker moved in a decade ago, back when he was just renting the trailer from his Uncle Kato. Except now Uncle Kato was gone (along with the rest of Tucker's maternal side of the family) and Tucker owned it all – the Kwik Stop gas station, the Airstream, and six acres of pristine, waterfront property on Oyster Bay.

That early Sunday morning, Tucker let the oppressive August air exhale its hot breath against his skin as he stepped beyond the trailer, closed his eyes, and launched into his morning yoga routine. With patience and precision, Tucker stretched his muscles through each pose in the set: downward dog, upward dog, a thirty second plank, warrior one, warrior two, and finally a sun salutation.

Upon completing his exercises, Tucker moved to the edge of the marsh overlooking the glassy bay and pine tree skyline of Crab Island beyond. Following a deep bow (and a short prayer for mercy to Mother Nature on behalf of his island) Tucker lowered himself to the sandy ground, folded his legs, and began his fifteen minutes of daily meditation.

Not thirty seconds in, however, he heard the thunk-thunk-thunk of wagon wheels rolling over the old wooden bridge.

"Morning, Happy," Tucker said without opening his eyes.

"Hey Boss!" Happy called from a distance. Tucker attempted to finish clearing his mind, but was soon interrupted by the brush of Happy's breath on his cheek.

Tucker's eyes snapped open. "Remember our talk about personal space, Happy?"

"Sorry Boss!" Happy stumbled backward, almost tripping over his little red wagon.

"Whatcha got there, Hap?" Tucker stood and peered over Happy's shoulder at the loaded wagon.

“These here are my storm supplies,” Happy said proudly. “I got me some mac-n-cheese, canned yams, and a boatload of Kool-Aid!”

Tucker bobbed his head, smiling. “I suppose you’ll be alright then.”

Happy’s face turned serious. “You reckon it’s gonna be a bad storm, Tuck?”

“Maybe a few trees down,” Tucker said, eyeing the island in the distance. “Might lose power for a day or two, but nothing catastrophic I expect.”

Happy seemed relieved. “Well, I’ll get to work then, Boss.” Happy turned and started to tug his wagon back across the sandy lot to the dusty gray cinderblock rectangle and fire red gas pumps of the Kowaliga Kwik Stop.

“Shut the store down at noon, Happy!” Tucker called to his lone employee. “We’re closing the bridge at five, let everyone know who comes by, okay?”

“You got it, Boss!” Happy shouted over his shoulder, punctuating his declaration with a salute. Tucker watched him – a twelve year-old boy trapped in a thirty-seven year old man’s body – as he rustled through a heavy ring of keys outside the gas station’s back door.

Tucker dusted the sand off his khakis and returned to the Airstream for the rest of his uniform.

CRAB ISLAND’S SOLE MEANS OF ENTRY and exit – the old wooden bridge – was laughably unsuitable for the traffic and weather conditions it was expected to endure.

At least three dozen times in the span’s hundred year history, the state attempted to tear it down and replace it with something built of concrete and steel. Though it was a common sense approach to a civic necessity, their plan was met with fiery contention and death threats from the “Crabbers” (a self-proclaimed moniker of pride for natives of the tiny island).

Believing the bridge to be a sacred part of their rich history, residents railed against the authorities with each attempt to remove even one sliver of wood from the old span. During the most recent clash, both parties involved came to blows when a daring crew from the Department of Transportation arrived with a bulldozer to take out the old bridge.

In the midst of the heated debacle, one of the Crabbers’ fearless leaders tripped over a loose board and fell to his knees, where he subsequently picked up a nasty splinter. He threatened to sue. The state’s lawyers advised a concession in the form of a painstakingly slow, multi-million dollar restoration project (which rang in at three times the cost of a brand new bridge).

Even with the new reinforcements, however, Tucker knew it wouldn’t take much of a storm to wipe out island’s only connection to the outside world. At least the bridge wouldn’t have to endure the wear and

tear of a frantic evacuation – in that regard, Tucker was actually thankful the stubborn Crabbers were so rooted to their beloved island.

Just across the bridge's final plank, a stop sign (faded pink and lazily canted at a sixty degree angle) marked the second-busiest intersection on Crab Island. Tucker paused, scanning the empty lanes of Bay Road to the north and south before continuing forward. Cracked, gray asphalt snaked beneath a canopy of moss-draped live oaks as it bisected the long, pie-shaped slice of island at its midpoint.

Tucker's tan cruiser emerged from the nature-made tree tunnel on the western edge of Crab, the island's only semblance of a town. Along the narrow village side streets, beach cottages with colorful clapboard siding rubbed elbows with pristine white Mediterranean bungalows and gray-shingled Cape Cod houses, all equally worn by the rough, salty air. It was very clear that Crab Island's architectural review committee operated off a thin rule book.

Really the only laws they sought to uphold were those that kept the island free of the towering condominiums and massive oceanfront resorts that dominated the rest of Florida's shoreline. (There was also a chapter or two of statutes specifically written about bridges.)

Tucker approached the center of Crab, where Main Street circled a beautiful green park before breaking off in two spokes, giving access to the island's other north-south passageway.

About a dozen folks, a mix of visitors and residents, enjoyed a leisurely stroll around the town's center. Most of them were working off a heavy breakfast at The Crispy Pig (a little white bungalow with lime green awnings tucked against the circle's northern curve) with a little window shopping. Patrons drifted counterclockwise from the diner, browsing the six pastel-hued cottages (home to a kitschy boutique, bait shop, fish market, grocery store, post office, and real estate broker) lined up like Easter eggs along the circle's perimeter.

Beyond the band shell and grove of palms along the eastern edge of the circle, storm-driven waves from the Atlantic roared a foreboding alarm.

Barely hiding his grin, Tucker goosed the siren on his cruiser. A few people jumped, startled, and all eyes turned his way. He flipped the switch on the public announcement system, sending his voice echoing across the circle.

"You have been commanded by the state to leave this island immediately and seek shelter on higher ground," he said. "Please proceed to your homes with caution and make preparations to evacuate."

From their rocking chairs on the covered porch outside the grocery store, three people waved at Tucker and called out a friendly morning greeting in response to his announcement. Everyone else returned to their previous activities. Unsurprised, Tucker cruised around the circle and parked at the curb in front of The Crispy Pig.

Behind the counter, Wanda Grady spotted Tucker's patrol car. Before he was out of the driver's seat, she turned and hollered to the kitchen, "Sergeant special!" Her husband, Hank, acknowledged the order with a grunt from behind the grill.

"Morning, Wanda," Tucker tipped his hat in a greeting to the head waitress and owner of the seafood and Southern delicacies diner at the heart (or, more appropriately, the stomach) of Crab Island.

Tucker took the last available seat at the counter. Wanda zipped over on her roller skates (dye'd a lovely shade of lavender to match her ruffled socks and uniform) to deliver his coffee. Despite her seventy-nine years, two hip surgeries, and one knee replacement she was pretty swift on eight wheels.

"Cream and two sugars, Sugar," she said as she set his cup on a napkin.

"Thanks," Tucker took a sip. "Wanda, do you mind if I make a quick announcement to everyone?"

"Not at all." She jammed two fingers into her mouth and let out a shrill whistle so loud it roused dozing dogs two miles away. "Listen up!" Wanda shouted. "Tucker has something to say."

Tucker rose from his stool and met the curious gazes of every eyeball in the room. He cleared his throat.

"I don't know if you heard me outside, but Crab Island is under a mandatory evacuation order from the state," he said. "The hurricane is going to make landfall tonight, somewhere very close to the island. This is a serious storm. All of you should take the proper precautions and head to higher ground."

"Says who?" Asked a sandy-haired fisherman in the back corner.

"The governor," Tucker replied.

"Well, I didn't vote for him," the fisherman said, "so I don't have to take his orders."

"That's not how it works," Tucker said with a sigh. "Listen, we're closing the bridge at five o'clock. If you're not off the island by then, you'll be stuck here until the storm passes."

A family of tourists (as evident by the lobster red hue of their skin) threw a wad of cash on their table and skittered out of the building, leaving their half-eaten breakfast behind. Two locals at the counter claimed the booth before the front door swung shut.

"Thanks, Tuck! We been waiting on them to leave for a whole hour."

"Y'all should be right behind them," Tucker said earnestly. He panned the room slowly, addressing the faces of every patron in the diner. "All of you."

"Sugar, your breakfast is ready. Give it up now." Wanda put a plate of eggs, bacon, and a mile-high stack of pancakes in front of Tucker's seat. He looked longingly at the food as the sound of cutlery on porcelain rose in the tiny space.

"You've all been warned!" He told the crowd before he sat down and tucked into his meal.

Halfway through his pancakes, he felt the buzz of his cellphone. He took it out of his pocket to read the new email from Captain Howey.

Tucker scanned the APB on the Chicago woman. It seemed, at first, utterly unremarkable – she was twenty-eight, with auburn hair and blue eyes, last seen in a white Lexus SUV with her five year-old son headed south on I-75 in Kentucky.

Tucker scrolled through the whole document before running back to the top to look at the woman's name. The captain was wrong – her last name wasn't Bryan or Bryant, it was Ryan, and that was her married name. Tucker didn't know anything about the woman in the email, named Jacqueline Ryan, but he knew everything about the girl she used to be, named Jac Dawson.

"What's that big smile all about?" Wanda zipped up to the counter with a steaming pot of coffee to refill Tucker's mug.

"She's coming home, Wanda." Tucker stuffed his face with a big bite of pancake.

"Who?"

"Jac. Jac Dawson."

"Jackie? Oh, my!" Wanda clapped her hands. "She's practically your little sister, no wonder you're excited!"

Tucker blushed. Jac was like a little sister to him for a long time, but after their last encounter it was quite inappropriate to use that term. "We're older now – just friends," Tucker clarified.

Wanda raised her painted-on eyebrows, but didn't press for more information.

"I imagine Coach and Bear will be over the moon," she said, speaking of Jac's parents. "That girl hasn't come around this island in quite a while. Too busy with that husband of hers and his baseball career, I guess."

"Yeah, I guess," Tucker mumbled into his last bite of food. Wanda zipped off to give someone else a refill and Tucker left a ten on the counter, waving his goodbyes before dipping back outside into the heat.

TUCKER LEFT TOWN AND CRUISED north on Beach Road, catching a peek at the churning ocean through breaks in the sand dunes. The waves would pick up throughout the day, leading a storm surge that would roar in just ahead of the hurricane. Tucker hoped the surge would hit at low tide, minimizing potential damage to the dunes and the island they protected.

On the opposite side of the road, a wide swath of mangrove swamps and saw palmettos separated the town of Crab from its largest employer, tucked away on the wide pie-crust curve at the top of the island.

Tucker eased off the gas as the two-lane road swung away from the ocean. A narrow brick lane suddenly appeared to his right, flanked by even rows of towering palms. Tucker turned, passing between the swaying trees and under a white stucco arch topped with hand-painted tiles announcing his arrival on the Florida University campus.

From the arch, twenty acres of exquisitely manicured grounds stretched right to the white sand beaches of the water's edge in three directions. Palms, oaks, and magnolias mingled to create shady corridors and courtyards (landscaped with a colorful assortment of tropical flowers and shrubs) along the interior portions of the sweeping acreage.

Interspersed with the breathtaking natural landscape, clusters of crisp white stucco buildings with red tile roofs gave the university the air of a Mediterranean enclave. Larger classroom structures with wrought-iron balconies and sweeping tile staircases sat alongside the eggshell edifices of the school's prized dormitories and a few dozen cozy staff cottages.

In the distance, tucked into the northeast corner of campus and boasting a stunning ocean view from almost every seat, the campus's most popular structure rose over the treetops.

Florida University was (like many of its larger public school counterparts in the state) an institution built by football. Funds from the Fightin' Crabs favorite fall sport supported ten other elite athletic programs as well as the school's academics and appearance (secondary needs as far as the administration and students were concerned).

Tucker turned off the entrance road a few blocks short of the towering concrete sports temple and rolled by the student union. He spotted a handful of undergraduates shuffling along the sidewalks, but with the fall semester still two weeks away, campus was largely quiet. Tucker was relieved the storm chose to take aim on Crab Island before the dorms were full of students.

The campus road wound past two empty classroom buildings before dead-ending at the ocean. To Tucker's left, the street gave access to a dazzling row of the university's most exclusive (and coveted) oceanfront residence halls.

To the right, however, the street abruptly narrowed at the mouth of a tall wooden fence fortified with iron strapping and rivets. Tucker rolled slowly between the fence posts and followed the crushed shell drive until bowed into a broad U-shape outside a home-and-garden-magazine-worthy three-story Mediterranean estate.

A wrought-iron gate topped with beautiful handmade scrollwork kept unwanted trespassers from a small courtyard and the house beyond. Tucker swung the gate open and called out to the school chancellor. From an arcade to the left, a tall, rotund figure clad in his usual Hawaiian shirt and bib overalls bobbed in Tucker's direction.

"About time!" The man said, struggling to sling his thick arms into a neon orange windbreaker. "We've got a lot to do before this storm gets here."

“Settle down, Bobby Lee,” Tucker said calmly, “Everything’s fine.”

“They issue the evacuation order?”

“Yes sir, first thing this morning.”

“Did you turn the bridge? Get all the traffic flowing onto the mainland?”

“You know the people of this island as well as I do,” Tucker said. “They’re not going anywhere.”

Bobby Lee – short for Robert E. Lee (no relation to the Civil War general, much to Bobby’s dismay) – shook his head hard enough to make his jowls tremble. “Fools,” he said. “All fools.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that bad,” Tucker told him.

“Well, I’ve done my part to ready the campus,” Bobby said, jamming his thumbs into the straps of his overalls. “All the students will be off the island or settled into our shelter inside the gymnasium by noon.”

“Great work,” Tucker said, offering the man a smile. Bobby Lee beamed with pride.

“As a fellow law enforcement officer, is there anything else I can do to help?” Bobby asked. Tucker winced, but tried to recover quickly. Fortunately, Bobby Lee didn’t see it because he was too busy straightening the gold-plated badge pinned to the center pocket on his chest.

In addition to being chancellor of the university, Bobby Lee was also Crab Island’s volunteer sheriff. He policed the area with aid from his two volunteer deputies – his youngest sons, twins Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis Lee. Tucker hated to think about what questionable activities those two were likely involved in that morning (probably scoping out ideal places for looting after the storm).

“I think everything is covered,” said Tucker. “I’m closing the bridge this afternoon. You can pass that word along for me in case anyone is thinking about leaving.”

“Will do,” Bobby Lee said, trying not to look disappointed. Tucker started toward the front gate and Bobby Lee followed him.

“I’ll let you know if I need help,” Tucker said, offering the man an olive branch. Bobby Lee accepted it eagerly—maybe a little too eagerly.

“Why don’t you hop in and I’ll run you over to the gym to check out the shelter set-up?” He asked, gesturing to a covered, electric golf cart he used to scoot around campus. Tucker shook his head.

“I don’t have time,” He said. “I have to go see Coach Dawson.”

Bobby Lee’s face twisted and his shoulders sank. “What do you want with him?”

“I’ve got some news to share, that’s all,” Tucker said.

“Fine,” Bobby Lee waved a dismissive hand. “Go on then. Maybe come by the gym later?”

“I will if I can,” Tucker said, and then as an afterthought he added, “Stay safe, Dad.”

Bobby Lee grunted a response to his oldest son, heading back through the iron gates into the courtyard. Tucker climbed in his cruiser, taking one last glance at the home he grew up in before motoring away toward the opposite end of campus.

IN THE SHADOWS OF THE Fightin’ Crabs’ football stadium, Tucker left his car and followed the shrill shriek of Coach Dawson’s whistle through the tunnel and out onto the field. Eighty young men in pads and helmets dripped with sweat as they executed their morning drills under the watchful eye of Coach and his assistants.

Tucker weaved between the lines of players performing jumping jacks to meet Coach Dawson, hidden beneath the broad brim of his straw hat at mid-field. Spotting Tucker’s approach, Coach dropped the whistle from his lips and offered his visitor a broad, white smile.

“Hey, son,” Coach said. He clapped Tucker on the shoulder. “You’re not here to yell at me are you?”

Tucker grinned. “No sir.”

“Good,” Coach said. “Because I promise I’ll get these boys off campus as soon as practice is over.”

“Sounds good,” Tucker said. “Listen, I have a quick question for you.”

“Shoot,” Coach told him, his eyes still leveled on the field.

“You heard from Jac lately?”

Coach’s head jerked in Tucker’s direction. “Jackie? No, I haven’t. Why? Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” Tucker said. “We got word from the police in Chicago that she might be headed this way.”

“The police? Is she in danger?” Coach snatched off his wraparound sunglasses, concern flashing across his dark brown eyes.

“No, but she might have stolen her husband’s vehicle,” Tucker said, quickly adding, “But that’s probably just a misunderstanding.”

Coach laughed. “Knowing Jac, it’s probably not.” He shook his head and popped the sunglasses back on. Tucker smiled in agreement.

“So you don’t know anything about her having plans to come home?”

“Nope,” Coach said. “If anyone knows anything about Jac’s plans, it’s Bear.”

“I figured,” Tucker said. “I’m headed there next.”

“Tell my wife I said hello and thanks to the storm, I’ll be home for dinner tonight.”

Coach picked up his whistle and resumed barking orders to his players as Tucker crossed the field and returned to his car.

UNLIKE THE WIDE CURVE OF Crab Island’s northernmost end, the southern tip of its elongated wedge shape sliced into the Atlantic with a sharp point of white sand.

Tucked right into the apex of that point – miles from town (and all other signs of life) – The Pink Mermaid Motel mimicked the angles of the narrowing coastline with two stories of ten rooms each, stacked and folded into a V-shape pointing southward. All twenty doors faced the kidney-shaped pool at the center of the motel’s asphalt parking lot.

Painted an appropriate shade of magenta and topped with a collection of bright, teal shingles, the motel was considered an eyesore by some folks and an art installation by others, but it was a Crab Island landmark to all.

With a wide turn of the wheel, Tucker swung his cruiser under the old motel’s arched carport and slipped out of the driver’s seat. Sweat instantly began to drip in uncomfortable places beneath Tucker’s uniform. He adjusted his heavy utility belt, and approached the motel’s glistening turquoise pool.

Stepping through the waist-high gate and onto the blistered yellow pool deck, Tucker was glad to see the Mermaid’s residents and staff were preparing for the coming storm. An assortment of patio furniture was submerged in the pool, where the hurricane’s winds wouldn’t be able to turn the tables and chairs into flying projectiles.

Tucker crossed the open deck and cautiously approached a fire-wielding figure in the far corner. Clad in sneakers, bib overalls, and a welding helmet, Bear looked like anything but a fifty-seven year-old grandmother. Tucker watched (at a safe distance) as she used her kitchen torch to meld colorful aluminum half-circles to her latest creation. After completing a full row of new additions, Bear took a step back and lifted her helmet visor to evaluate her work.

“Hey Mama Bear,” Tucker said.

Startled, Hannah Dawson swung around with the lit torch pointed toward her surprise visitor. When she saw Tucker’s familiar face, she lowered her weapon with a chuckle.

“Hey boy! Get over here!” She called in her Alabama accent, setting the torch down beside her newest art project.

Tucker approached her with a wide smile and accepted a hug from the closest thing to a mother he ever had (by far).

“You don’t come ‘round here nearly enough,” she said as she let him go. He looked down at her tiny frame, always amazed at what powerful hugs such a small woman could give. She grinned up at him, but Tucker couldn’t hold her gaze for long without thinking about how she shared her sparkling blue eyes with both her daughters.

“What are you working on?” Tucker asked, gesturing to the work in progress.

“Oh! I’m branching out from my mermaid paintings. You’re looking at my first life-size mermaid sculpture,” she said proudly. “It’s made entirely from recycled materials. See these scales? They’re all cut from aluminum cans!”

“Wow,” Tucker was impressed.

“I’m trying to get as much done as I can before this silly storm,” Bear rolled her eyes. “Big bunch of nothing, don’t you think?”

“Probably, but better to take it seriously just in case,” he said.

Bear pulled off her gloves and helmet, tossing them aside. “Are you hungry? Thirsty? I’ve got some tea over here and I think Junie’s frying up some bologna sandwiches for lunch.”

“Fried bologna sandwiches? My favorite!” Tucker patted his stomach.

“I know.” Bear winked. Before he could protest, she gently took hold of his forearm and steered him toward the lone table left on the deck, covered in Bear’s art supplies. “Come sit for a spell, we need to catch up!”

Tucker got so excited about Bear’s sister making his favorite meal he forgot why he came out to the Mermaid in the first place. The two of them settled into warm plastic chairs and Bear lifted a glistening pitcher of sweet tea from the cluttered table. She poured two mason jars to the lip and passed one Tucker’s way.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Where you gonna ride out the storm tonight?” She asked him, reaching back to tighten the knot of flaming red hair at the nape of her neck.

“Don’t know,” Tucker said after a long swig of tea. “I’ll probably just drag a mattress into the store room at the Kwik Stop.”

Bear slammed both palms down on the glass table, rattling the ice in their jars. “You will do no such thing!” She barked. “You can come down here for the night. I’ll make up the bed in Jacqueline’s old room for you.”

“Jac!” Tucker snapped his fingers. “That’s what I came to ask you!”

“Oh?”

“Have you heard from her lately?”

“Sunday night, same as always,” Bear said.

“Did she say anything about coming home?” Tucker asked.

“I wish,” Bear said, shaking her head. “I hate going to Chicago, but it’s the only way I get to see her and my grandson.”

“You might get your wish. I think she’s headed this way.”

“What?” Bear leaned in. “Are you sure?”

“Yes ma’am.” Tucker told her about the APB from his captain, Bear’s jaw dropped.

“Well I’ll be,” she said. “My Jackie girl’s finally found herself.”

“Huh?” Tucker arched an eyebrow, but Bear’s mind was flying away from Crab Island, chasing a thought. He started to press for more information, but was interrupted by the buzz of his cellphone. He glanced down at the screen and skimmed an updated forecast for the hurricane forwarded by the captain. The storm was speeding up.

“Something wrong?” Bear asked, noticing Tucker’s worried face.

“The storm is getting closer,” he said. “I’ve got to go close the bridge.”

“Not before Jacqueline gets here, though, right?” Bear asked, concerned.

“I hope not,” Tucker said.

“I know you’ll make sure she’s safe,” Bear said softly. Tucker nodded, finishing his tea and rising to go.

“I’ll try to get them here before the storm, if I can,” said Tucker.

“Let me wrap up some sandwiches for you to take along,” Bear stood on her tiptoes to kiss Tucker’s cheek before rushing off to the kitchen.

TUCKER CRUISED BACK TO THE mainland with a packed cooler of sweet tea, macaroni salad, and four fried bologna sandwiches. He reluctantly left his delicious lunch in the car while he checked on the Kwik Stop. Happy followed instructions and closed up early, his handwritten sales record was left on the counter by the cash register. Tucker emptied the store’s meager earnings into a zippered bank deposit bag and secured it in a back room safe.

Out front, he pulled down the storm shutters and locked them in place. He wasn’t concerned about protecting the Kwik Stop from the storm so much as keeping it safe from looters (possibly in the form of his delinquent half-brothers).

By the time Tucker finished with the store and headed to his trailer for overnight provisions, the skies were turning gray. A wall of clouds hovered off to the east, like an army lining up its troops before a charge. Tucker tossed a few clothes and toiletries into a duffle bag and locked the Airstream door, returning to the comfort of his air conditioned cruiser.

Sitting behind the wheel, he flung open the cooler and dove into his long-awaited lunch.

Two sandwiches and several mouthfuls of macaroni salad later, Tucker leaned back in his seat to watch the road. He just about nodded off when Captain Howey called.

"You got everybody off the island?" He asked.

"If by everybody you mean a family of tourists and the university football team, then yes."

"Stubborn island-dwelling hillbillies," Captain retorted. "Oh well. Any sign of that Ryan girl?"

"No, nothing yet," said Tucker.

"Maybe she saw the news and decided to stay north."

"Maybe, but I doubt it," said Tucker. "A storm won't scare her away."

"So you do know her?"

"I did, haven't seen her in years."

"Well, either way I want you to close that bridge," Captain ordered. "If she shows up later, she'll have to turn around and head for the city."

"Yes sir."

"How's the weather over there?"

"Wind's picking up," Tucker said. "Clouds are moving in."

"It won't be long," Captain said. "Stay in touch with HQ tonight and be ready for a long day tomorrow."

"Have a good night, Captain."

Tucker disconnected and reached for another sandwich, even though his belt was already cleaving him in two. He was halfway through it when he saw the white dot way down the highway, steadily growing larger. He put the sandwich down and stepped out of the cruiser, approaching the edge of the road and squinting into the distance.

When she was close enough for him to make out the emblem on the front of the SUV, Tucker stepped out into the road and planted his feet on either side of the dotted yellow line. She began to slow, but didn't come to a complete stop until the grill of the Lexus was touching his belt buckle.

Jac hung her head out the window, "You should know better than to play chicken with me, boy!"

Tucker grinned as he stepped around the car and approached the driver's side. Jac hopped out and flung her arms around his neck. When she stepped back, he drank in the gorgeous woman who he used to know as a freckle-faced kid. Beneath her tomboy t-shirt and jeans, she was the perfect ratio of curves and angles. Her wild auburn hair (a little darker than her mama's) whipped around her like dancing flames.

"You look...great," Tucker heard himself say against the mounting sound of the wind.

"Back at ya!" Jac said cheerfully, giving one of his chin-length dark curls a tug. "Tucker you don't know how glad I am to be back home."

"Are you okay?" Tucker asked. She broke his gaze, her blue eyes were wet.

"Yes, we're okay now," she said.

At the word, "we" the back door of the SUV opened and a little boy popped out, followed by a mangy puppy.

"Are we there yet?" The boy whined.

"Milo, come here and meet your Uncle Tucker," Jac said. The boy, who also had his mother and grandmother's red hair plus a smattering of freckles across his nose and cheeks, slumped over to the two adults standing in the middle of the road.

"Hey, buddy," Tucker knelt and offered his hand for a high-five. Milo reluctantly returned the gesture.

"Hi," he said. "I'm hungry."

"You'll get plenty to eat at Bear's," Jac told him.

"Who's this?" Tucker reached out to pet the puppy's soft fur.

"That's Otis!" Milo said, suddenly excited. "We got him up in Tennessee, right Mom?"

"Yeah, baby. He was hitching down the road, looking for a new home, just like us."

"Milo, why don't you run and check my patrol car," said Tucker. "I think there might be a bologna sandwich in there with your name on it."

"What's bologna?" Milo asked with a wrinkled nose.

"What's bologna?" Tucker asked incredulously. "Boy, your mama has kept you away from the South for too long."

"You'll like it," Jac assured him. He took her word for it, bounding for the car with Otis on his heels.

“Jac, um, I don’t know how to ask this but...is this car...well, is it yours?” Tucker asked when Milo was out of earshot.

“He reported it stolen, didn’t he?” She asked. Her shoulders sagged.

Tucker nodded. “This morning. Chicago called us, figured you were headed this way.”

“Well, he can have it back now. I just need to get to the Mermaid and unload my stuff.”

“You know there’s a storm coming, right?”

“I figured it out when I was the only car headed south on the interstate, passing all the fools in gridlock headed north.”

“I’m supposed to be closing the bridge right now.”

“Can’t you let one more car over?”

“Not a stolen one.” Tucker said.

“Come on,” Jac rolled her eyes. “It’s not stolen. It’s borrowed.”

“Jac,” Tucker smiled. “Nice try.”

“So you’re going to leave me and my son out here to face this storm alone?”

“You’re the one who drove into it.”

“Maybe there’s a bigger storm behind me,” she said quietly.

“Anything I need to know about?”

“Not unless you know the name of a good divorce lawyer.”

“Oh,” Tucker fell silent, amplifying the sound of a rapidly thumping heart in his ears.

Jac reached up to smooth her hair back into an elastic tie. Having dispensed with the remains of the bologna sandwich, Milo and Otis came racing back toward the Lexus.

“We need to get to safety,” said Tucker, eyeing the sky.

“You’re going to let us pass, gatekeeper?”

“Not in that car, I can’t.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“Leave the car here, I’ll take you to the Mermaid.” Tucker said. “I can report it tomorrow, I’ll say we found the car after the storm and didn’t see a driver.”

Jac grinned. "You're a lifesaver. Help me get our stuff."

Tucker followed Jac around behind the SUV. She lifted the rear hatch. Tucker expected to see an enormous pile of all Jac and Milo's life possessions. He was shocked to discover just two duffle bags and a small suitcase lying in the back of the Lexus.

"Where is everything?" Tucker asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You're moving back to the island, right?"

"Yeah."

"So where's your stuff?"

"We're starting over, brand new, right, Milo?" Jac said to her son. He bobbed his head.

"Jac," Tucker whispered so the boy wouldn't hear. "What the hell are you running from?"

"I'm not running away from anything anymore," Jac said in a level voice. "I'm coming home."