

[Prologue to Killer Shine – 2012 NaNoWriMo Entry from Shannon O’Neil]

Fingertips of daylight, long and pink, reached over the pine tree skyline of Crab Island and the bay beyond, stretching until they brushed against the silver hull of a '72 Airstream.

Inside, the six-foot-four, sweaty body of one Tucker Kowaliga (a sergeant of the Florida Highway Patrol) untwisted itself from a mess of bed sheets and grabbed the ringing cellphone on his dining room table, two feet away.

“Hello?”

“I’ve got heartburn and it ain’t even seven-thirty.”

“Morning, Captain,” Tucker replied, “I take it the evacuation order was issued?”

“Just came down from the state,” said Captain Howey with a grunt.

“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 nothing.”

“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,” Tucker heard crunching come 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’ve 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 named Jacqueline Ryan?”

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

“Well, I got a lawman from New York 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 you 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 table.

Moments later, the door of the Airstream nearly popped off its hinges as Tucker emerged from its confines and greeted the day. Standing in the weeds behind the Kwik Stop gas station, wearing only his uniform pants, tangles of dark hair brushing against his broad, brown shoulders, Tucker Kowaliga looked like he just ripped himself free of a romance novel cover.

And fell straight into the middle of nowhere, also known as Crab Island, Florida.

His lean, muscle-toned body angled into the clearing between his trailer and Kwik Stop and launched into his morning routine – five rounds of sun salutation followed by downward dog, upward dog, a thirty-second plank and warrior two. With each position he advanced closer to the edge of the marsh so that by the end, he was able to fold himself onto the sandy shore for his morning meditation.

Thirty seconds into his breathing exercises, Tucker’s carefully measured in- and exhalations were interrupted by the thunk-thunk-thunk of four wheels rolling over a wooden bridge.

“Morning, Happy,” he said, without opening his eyes.

“Hey Tuck!”

Tucker continued his patient relaxation exercise until he felt the heat of someone else’s breath against his cheek.

“What are you doing?” Happy whispered.

Tucker’s eyes shot open to find Happy’s curious face inches away from his own.

“Breathing.”

“Oh.” Happy straightened up and turned his focus to the sky beyond the island’s tall pine outline. “Do you reckon the storm’s gonna be bad?”

“Yes.” Tucker rose from his spot and knocked the sand off his perfectly sculpted rear end. “But we’ll get by. It’ll probably just be a few downed trees and power lines, nothing out of the ordinary.”

Happy bobbed his head. “Well, I’m prepared. I been picking up some supplies.” Happy gestured to the little red wagon he pulled all around the island like a caboose. Tucker glanced down to see that the wagon was filled with at least a dozen cans of sweet potatoes, two boxes of elbow macaroni and a jug of kool-aid.

“Reckon you’ll be alright then, Hap,” said Tucker. “I’m heading to the island in a bit to spread the word—we’re closing the bridge at five. You should shut down the store about noon and get back home, okay?”

Happy nodded. “You got it boss.”

Tucker watched him, a twelve year-old boy trapped in a thirty-seven year old man’s body, make his way to the front door of the Kwik Stop and wrestle with a giant ring of keys.

Since his parents disappeared ten years ago, the citizens of Crab Island had been vigilant watch dogs and protectors of Happy Lowenstein. They tended to his lawn, brought him food and made sure he didn’t burn his house down – all without him realizing it. They knew it was important for Happy to feel independent, and for the most part he did okay on his own.

Happy was Tucker’s only employee at the Kwik Stop, an inheritance from his Uncle Kato that was sadly the only remnants of his mother’s side of the family.

He left the store in Happy’s loyal (and mostly competent) hands while he returned to the Airstream to get dressed (much to the dismay of all the female wildlife in the area).

Fifteen minutes later, he climbed into his cruiser and rolled over the two hundred yards of ancient wooden boards connecting Crab Island to the northern Florida peninsula.

For half the bridge’s hundred years of life, the state had been trying in desperation to tear it down and replace it with something built of concrete and steel. A common sense approach to a civic necessity, their plan was naturally met with fiery contention and death threats from the citizens of the tiny island.

Believing the bridge to be a sacred part of their rich history, Crabbers (the official designation for a native to the area) railed against the authorities with each attempt to remove even one sliver of wood from the old bridge. They filed petitions, staged marches, held town meetings and acted just crazy enough to draw the attention of the local news media, which further exacerbated the spectacle.

Two years ago, the two parties involved came to blows when a daring crew from the Department of Transportation arrived with a bulldozer to take out the old bridge. A congregation of Crabbers, thirty people in all, shuffled onto the bridge and refused to move.

The crew's foreman directed the bulldozer onto the edge of bridge, hoping to apply enough of a threat to make the Crabbers stand down.

Unfortunately, the old bridge was, well...old.

One of the pilings beneath the dozer snapped, sending the expensive piece of state equipment tumbling into the bay. One of the crabbers at the opposite end of the bridge became so elated that he fell to his knees and subsequently picked up a nasty splinter from the old wood. He threatened to sue the state, whose lawyers told them to give in and embark on a painstakingly slow, multi-million dollar restoration of the hundred year old bridge.

As Tucker's wheels thumped over the wood planks, he wondered if this would be the storm to finally knock the old bridge out. He knew some folks at the DOT who would probably throw a party if it did.

Seventy-three seconds after leaving the parking lot of the Kwik Stop, Tucker rounded the last bend between rows of cypress knees and caught sight of the town square. Surrounded on three sides by low-slung, clapboard buildings painted in loud shades of pink, blue, green and orange, the city looked exactly as colorful and cute as you'd expect of a sleepy seaside village in Florida.

A handful of residents milled about between the shops and the band shell on the north side of the park square, carrying on their Tuesday morning business as normal. Tucker flicked on his lights and sirens to get their attention, and then took to his cruiser's P.A. system to announce the mandatory evacuation order.

"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."

Three people waved at Tucker and called out a friendly morning greeting in response to his announcement. No one else so much as acknowledged his presence.

Unsurprised, he slid into a parking spot closest to Crab Island's premiere eating spot – the Crispy Pig – and followed the scent of bacon through the front door.

Behind the counter, Wanda saw Tucker coming and turned over her shoulder to holler out his usual order to the kitchen.

"Morning Wanda, Ronda," Tucker tipped his hat in a greeting to the Walker sisters, second-generation owners of the Crispy Pig.

Identical, blue-haired twins, Wanda and Ronda had been serving up three meals a day to Crabbers and tourists alike since they were teenagers. Back then, their mother and father cooked up a storm in the kitchen while they zipped around the restaurant delivering orders on roller skates.

Now in their late seventies, Wanda and Ronda ran the restaurant with the same menu their father had created, albeit with a new chef (Wanda's husband, Hal). And though they had a few more wrinkles,

some extra pounds, three new hips and a new knee between them – they continued to use the roller skates.

On the Tuesday morning of the storm, the Crispy Pig was bustling as usual. Tucker took the last available seat at the counter where Ronda zipped over to deliver his coffee.

“Cream and two sugars,” she said as she plopped the cup on a napkin.

“Thanks,” Tucker took a sip. “Ronda, do you mind if I make a quick announcement to everyone?”

“Not at all.” Ronda jabbed two fingers into her mouth and let out a shrill whistle so loud it roused dozing dogs two miles away. “Listen up!” She 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 voice from the back corner.

“The governor.”

“Well, I didn’t vote for him,” the voice said. “So I don’t have to take his orders.”

“That’s not how it works,” said Tucker. “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! Been waiting on them to leave for a whole hour.”

“Y’all should be right behind them,” Tucker said. He spun around, meeting the eyes of every patron in the diner. “All of you.”

“Sugar, your breakfast is ready. Give it up now.” Wanda put the 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 to read the new email from Captain Howey.

On his first scan of the APB on Ms. Jacqueline Ryan he saw nothing remarkable – woman, late twenties, auburn hair and green eyes. She was last seen in a white Lexus SUV with her five year-old son headed south on I-95 in Pennsylvania.

Tucker was about to put his phone away when something made him look over the document again. The second time through it jumped out at him – her maiden name. He grinned.

“What’s that big smile all about?” Ronda zipped up to the counter with a steaming pot of coffee to refill Tucker’s cup.

“She’s coming home, Ronda.” Tucker stuffed his face with a big bite of pancake.

“Who?”

“My kid sister, Jac.”

Rhonda laughed. “Jac Dawson? Now, you know she ain’t a kid anymore, sweetheart.”

“You know what I mean,” he said. “She’ll always be a kid to me.”

“Well, I imagine Henry and Hannah will be over the moon,” said Rhonda. “She hasn’t come around in a while.”

“Yeah, guess I better go give them the good news.”

Tucker paid his bill and headed out to his cruiser.

Two narrow roads ran the length of Crab Island from north to south, one along the ocean side and one along the bay. Tucker took the sea road, glancing out his passenger window to watch the crashing waves beating against the shore. The sky was still blue, but with the winds picking up, it wouldn’t stay that way much longer.

Nestled on twenty acres of exquisitely manicured grounds at the north end of Crab Island was its largest employer and only saving grace – Florida University. A cluster of white stucco buildings topped with flaming red, Spanish tile roofs, housed most of the school’s five thousand students as well as the classrooms and athletic facilities that kept the kids occupied in between parties and beach days.

Many moons ago, the land for the school was purchased by a very distant cousin of the famous Civil War general, Robert E. Lee, following his disappointing display at the Battle of Olustee and subsequent dismissal from the Rebel forces. He headed east on his horse until he reached the island, where he exchanged all his cash and a satchel of goods with a tribe of Native Americans for a sizeable piece of their beautiful land.

Three generations later, the land fell to another Robert E. Lee (one who changed his name to honor his distant ancestor, despite the fact that said ancestor probably turned somersaults in his grave at the thought of being associated with such a nitwit) who decided to donate it for the sake of building a new university in exchange for one small request.

He had to be named chancellor.

The state authorities brokering the deal agreed to the terms, assuming they would find a way to bend the agreement later on, when it suited them (this was prior to the bridge incident, so in fairness they did not know what they were up against).

Thirty-five years later, Bobby Lee remained chancellor of Florida University.

Bobby's marketing plans for the university were shockingly successful in spite of their simplicity. Every promotional material created for the school highlighted one of two things: One, the school's gorgeous campus or two, its premiere athletic program.

Shortly after taking his position, Bobby made his most important hire by acquiring football coach Henry Dawson from Bobby Bowden's staff at Florida State. Lured by a lucrative salary and the beauty of the oceanfront campus, Henry's family relocated from Tallahassee and he went to work building a respectable football program for a small, liberal arts and sciences college.

Between the beachfront dormitories and the competitive football team, Florida University had to turn away ten times as many students as it accepted each year.

The only students uninterested in attending the university were the Crabbers themselves, who often chose to abandon the island after high school to seek out the bigger world and all that it had to offer.

Tucker was one of those students, and while he enjoyed his time at Vanderbilt and his two years of law school at Alabama, in the end, the island's tidal pull had brought him back home.

He rolled through the wrought iron gates marking the school's entrance and wondered, not for the first or last time, how things might have been different if he'd gone to the university instead of leaving for Nashville. So many lives, not just his, wouldn't have turned out the same.

Tucker shook the thoughts away as he turned into the chancellor's driveway behind a shiny white golf cart. He hadn't even pulled the keys from the ignition when the screen door flew open and the portly shape of Bobby Lee teetered down the front steps and across the lawn.

"Tuck!" The man called. "Where you been? We're losing daylight."

"It's not even noon," said Tucker, climbing out of the cruiser.

"I got a command post going in the gym, the rest of the force is securing the island."

"It's a hurricane, not an alien invasion, Bobby." Tucker took his hat off and set it on the hood.

Bobby, outfitted in a Hawaiian shirt, bib overalls and a neon orange windbreaker, nervously tugged at the gold star pinned to his lapel. He cast a worried glance toward the ocean behind his house, as if expecting the storm to rise up out of the water at any second.

"Something bad is coming," Bobby said ominously.

“It’s going to be a rough storm, but the island’s seen worse,” Tucker reassured him. Bobby jerked his gaze off the water and back to the man in uniform before him.

“You evacuating the island?” He asked.

Tucker shrugged and said, “I tried. You know how it goes around here.”

“I do,” Bobby nodded. “As the town sheriff, I can attest to your troubles.” Tucker winced.

In addition to holding his post as chancellor of the school, Bobby was also the self-appointed volunteer sheriff of Crab Island. His twin boys, Jefferson Davis and Stonewall Jackson Lee, filled out the rest of his ragtag volunteer police force.

“Well, you’re doing a great job,” Tucker forced over his gag reflex. “Have most of the students evacuated?”

“Of course,” Bobby looked at him like he’d just asked for the color of the sky. “Classes have been cancelled since yesterday, most of the ones who live within a day’s drive high-tailed it by dusk yesterday. A handful of ’em are still here, but that’s what the gym’s for – plus the townsfolk can stay there, too.”

“Great,” Tucker bobbed his head. “Sounds like you’ve got everything under control. You don’t really need me.”

“You don’t want to take a tour?” Bobby gestured to his golf cart in the driveway. “You can see what all we’ve got in place. You might want to report back to the governor on what a great job I’m doing. Maybe he’ll give me a job with FEMA.”

“FEMA is run by the federal government,” Tucker said, knowing as the words came out of his mouth that it was a lost cause. Bobby was already headed to the golf cart. “I really don’t have time for a tour, now,” he pleaded.

Bobby heaved himself into the driver’s seat. “Suit yourself. “

“Hey, do you know if Coach Dawson is around?” Tucker asked. Bobby’s hands went still on the steering wheel.

“What do you want with him?”

“I just need to share some news,” Tucker said.

“You don’t have time for me, but you’ll go see him?”

“It’s official business,” Tucker replied. It wasn’t entirely the truth, but not entirely a lie either.

Bobby shook his head. “Shouldn’t surprise me anymore that you choose them over me,” he said to no one in particular. Tucker squared his shoulders—he hated this argument, mostly for how often it came

up. He also hated how guilty it made him feel even though he wasn't the one that caused problems to begin with.

"I'll find him on my own, never mind," Tucker said as he picked up his hat off the hood.

He looked up at Bobby, feeling a pang that was maybe caused by the impending storm and the dangerous uncertainty it wielded. Whatever it was, it compelled him to say one last thing before getting back into his cruiser.

"See you later, Dad."

Tucker turned the key and backed out of the driveway to his childhood home, Bobby's golf cart followed behind him before zipping across a sidewalk and over in the direction of the gym. Tucker took another turn and headed up to the school's concrete worship center – also known as the football stadium.

He parked in the shade of the east bleachers where the visiting team's fans were forced to bake in the hot autumn sun every weekend while watching their team take on the Florida University Fighting Crabs.

Stepping outside, Tucker heard the shrill squeal of a whistle and shook his head. It was hours before the arrival of a hurricane and yet football practice was still in full swing. He passed under the bleachers and emerged onto the field where a ragtag group of fifty young men in helmets and pads were sweating through an endless set of jumping jacks.

Tucker spotted Coach Dawson near the north endzone, clipboard in hand and a whistle between his lips. Coach saw him coming up the sideline and waved, dropping the whistle and extending a hand as Tucker drew near.

"Nice to see you, Tuck," he said. "You're not here to bust my chops about holding practice today, are you?"

"No, sir," Tucker grinned.

"Good. We've got two busses standing by, ready to take the boys over to the mainland as soon as we wrap up here, I promise."

"No problem, Coach. I came to ask you about something else, actually."

"Well, shoot then."

"Do you know anything about Jac coming home?"

"Jackie?" Coach shook his head. "Not that I know of. She hasn't been down here since, oh, let me think. Milo was still a tiny thing, must've been two or three years ago, I guess. It was a quick visit."

"Oh, okay. Have you talked to her lately?"

“It’s a shame to say, but I’m not real good at keeping up with people during football season. Not even my kids—well, except for Ash.” Coach Dawson gestured across the field to his assistant, a lanky, dark-haired version of himself in a blue Crabs polo. “He might know something – Ashley!” Coach jerked a finger and his son came jogging across the field.

“Hey Tuck, Pop. What’s up?”

“You know anything about your sister coming home?” Coach Dawson asked.

Ash shook his head. “No, sir.”

“You talked to her recently?” Tucker asked.

“I got a Happy Birthday text a month ago, does that count?”

“So you don’t know anything about her coming home?” Ash’s eyes swung off the field and onto to Tucker for a split second.

“Jac? Coming home? No, I don’t know anything about that. Do you?”

“Yeah, what’s the story?” Coach Dawson added.

“I don’t know a lot,” said Tucker. “But my captain got a call from New York this morning, they think she skipped town with her husband’s vehicle, might be headed this way.”

Both men whipped around to face Tucker and gave him their undivided attention.

“What did you say?”

“She finally left that snotty bastard?”

“Is Milo with her?”

“Milo is with her,” Tucker confirmed. “But I don’t know much else. Just that there was some domestic troubles going on and she left in a hurry.”

“Sounds like Jac,” said Ash.

“You should go see Hannah,” said Coach Dawson. “If anyone’s heard from Jackie, it’s her mama.”

“I’m headed there next.”

“We’ll let you know if we hear anything else,” added Ash.

“Alright, y’all stay safe – and get these boys off the island before five, we’re closing the bridge.”

“Will do.”

Tucker tipped his hat and headed back to the car.

In the fifteen minutes it took Tucker to drive from one end of the island to the other, he watched a line of ashen clouds build along the horizon line to the west, like an army of soldiers preparing to charge. He turned on the radio and caught the latest report on the storm, which had picked up speed.

Tucker was pleased to note that residents along the ocean were busy boarding up their windows. At least they were taking the necessary precautions for riding out the storm at home even if they refused to evacuate. Just for good measure, he took another loop through town square, announcing the evacuation order over the P.A. system again. Wanda popped her head out of the Crispy Pig and waved, but otherwise Tucker's efforts went unnoticed.

He arrived at the Pink Pelican Motel right around two o'clock and parked in his old spot by Unit 4, partly for nostalgia and partly out of old habit.

Appropriately painted with a particularly violent shade of fuchsia, The Pink Pelican was part Old Florida motel and part Bohemian enclave. For three decades, the Dawson family had made their home in half of the motel's ten units, renting the other half to tourists, artists, musicians and authors who were just passing through.

Tucker lived in Unit 4 for the later part of his teenage years, a time he remembered quite fondly. He owed a lot to the Dawson family, so much so that he felt certain he would never be able to repay his debt.

"Hey, Sugar!" Hannah, the family matriarch (known to a fortunate few as Bear, short for Mama Bear) abandoned her easel by the pool as soon as she saw Tucker's cruiser. She gave him one of her famous Bear hugs, cinching in his waist by at least six inches (she was surprisingly strong for such a slight woman) and leaving a smear of wet paint from her cheeks on the chest of his uniform.

"Good to see you, Bear," he said. She produced a tissue and dabbed at the paint splatches she'd left behind.

"You don't get down here often enough."

"I know, I've been busy," he said.

"Did you eat lunch yet?" She asked. He shook his head – trying to pretend like it hadn't been his plan all along to make it to the motel just after lunch time.

Bear latched onto his arm and dragged him toward the pool. "You must be half-past starving by now," she said. "Come grab you a couple of bologna sandwiches. Junie fried up some good ones today."

"I'll fix you a plate," Bear's sister, June, called to Tucker as they approached. "You want macaroni salad or potato salad?"

"Just give'em both Junie, he's a growing boy," said Bear.

By the time Tucker arrived at his seat, a plate stacked high with two fried bologna and mayonnaise sandwiches, potato chips, macaroni salad and potato salad was waiting for him beside a tall, cold glass of sweet tea.

"Y'all are going to kill me," he said before he dove into his late lunch.

Hannah went back to her painting while June put away the rest of the food in a big blue cooler on wheels. By the time Tucker finished his food (and you better believe he ate all of it), he'd forgotten why he came down to the Pelican in the first place.

"You got somewhere to ride out the storm tonight, honey?" June asked him.

"Oh, I'll probably just drag my mattress into the store room at the Kwik Stop," he said. Bear halted progress on her painting and put her hands on her hips.

"You will do no such thing!" She commanded. "You can stay right here with us. G.R. has taken over your old room, but you can stay in Jac's room for the night."

"Oh!" Tucker suddenly remembered what brought him to visit Mama Bear in the first place. "Have y'all heard anything from Jac, lately?"

"I talked to her on Sunday," said Bear. "Always do. Why?"

"Did she say anything about coming down here?"

"No, not that I recall. We talked about Milo starting school in a few weeks, and she said she was thinking about adopting a dog. Nothing came up about the island."

"Do you know if, um, she and her husband were, uh, having problems?"

"Yeah, they got problems," June chimed in. "Like how he's a jackass."

"Junie!" Bear chided her sister behind a poorly hidden smile. "Jacqueline hasn't mentioned anything about it, but, between us three I'll say I've been sensing a problem for a while. She hasn't quite seemed herself."

"Oh," Tucker cleared his throat. "Well, I have reason to believe she's headed this way."

"Really?" Both women asked in unison.

"Yes." Tucker told them about the APB on Jac and the white Lexus.

"My goodness," said Bear. "Maybe I should try to call her." She left her painting and went inside to get the phone. June offered Tucker another sandwich, but his belt was already cleaving him in two, so he regrettably declined.

Bear re-emerged from the front office with a portable phone pressed to her ear. As she reached the pool she was leaving a message. "Jacqueline Grace, you'd best call your mother as soon as you get this."

“Oh, she’ll never call now,” June said under her breath. “That message will just scare her away.” Tucker laughed.

“I hope she gets here before the storm,” Bear said, looking out toward the growing pile of gray clouds.

“Well, I have to close the bridge at five,” said Tucker. “If she’s not here before that she’ll have to stay on the mainland.”

June suddenly sat bolt upright in her chair and grabbed her breasts, one in each hand. She closed her eyes. “She’ll be here in time,” she said. “I sense she’s around Charleston—no! Savannah, right about now. Driving like a bat out of hell.”

Tucker and Bear exchanged a glance, but said nothing. June had breast implants, the result of reconstructive surgery she had following her breast cancer diagnosis and double-mastectomy. Ever since, she’d been under the belief that her new, saline-enhanced breasts were divining rods of some sort that could help her see into the future. Due to the circumstances of her having them and people’s general love of June’s quirky personality, no one had the heart to argue anything different.

June released her grip and reached for her tea, slumping over in her chair like she was worn out from the brief episode.

“Well, I reckon I should head back to the bridge and wait for her,” said Tucker.

“Alright then, I expect to see you both back here before sundown!” Bear said, giving Tucker another hug as he stood. June shoved two extra sandwiches into his hand, and then kissed him on the cheek.

“Be safe, boy,” she whispered in his ear.

Tucker cruised north through town for a third time, then exited the island and parked his cruiser in the Kwik Stop parking lot, facing the empty highway.

For two hours, Tucker dozed on and off behind the wheel. In between naps, he watched the fast moving clouds as they dulled the blue sky to a light charcoal. The winds picked up, whipping branches and dust around the car.

At four-thirty, Tucker walked out back to his Airstream and packed an overnight bag for his stay at the Pelican. He used his keys to slip inside the Kwik Stop and fill a Styrofoam cooler with bottled water. He loaded his bag and supplies into the trunk along with some extra batteries he snagged in the store as well. He left a twenty on the counter for Happy, who kept a thorough mental inventory of the store’s contents.

Captain Howey called at four forty-five.

“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 Jacqueline girl?”

“No, nothing yet,” said Tucker.

“Maybe she saw the news and decided to stay north.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it,” said Tucker. “If she’s anything like she was as a kid, 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 at five,” Captain ordered. “If she shows up later, she’ll have to turn around and head for the city.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Stay in touch with HQ tonight and be ready for a long day tomorrow.”

“Have a good night, Captain.”

Tucker disconnected and reached for his one remaining bologna sandwich in the passenger seat. He was halfway through it when he saw the white dot on 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 yellow dotted 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 realized the little girl he’d once considered his sister was gone. In her place was a gorgeous woman – freckles hidden behind her make-up, curves beneath her t-shirt and tight jeans, and wild auburn hair tied back in a loose bun.

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

“Back at ya!” Jac said cheerfully. She hugged him again. “Tucker you don’t know how glad I am to be back home.”

“Are you okay?” Tucker asked. She pulled back, her green 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 an enormous dog.

“Are we there yet?” The boy whined.

“Milo, come here and meet your Uncle Tucker,” Jac said. The boy, who had his mother’s red hair and 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 yawned and reluctantly returned the gesture.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m hungry.”

“You’ll get plenty to eat at Grandma’s,” Jac told him.

“Who’s this?” Tucker reached out to pet the giant dog, who appeared to be a cross between a Labrador and a small horse.

“That’s Otis!” Milo said, excited. “We picked him up South Carolina, on the side of the road, right, Mom?”

“Yeah, baby. He was 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 half 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 in New York 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.

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

“Well, he can have it back tomorrow. I just need to get to the Pelican 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.”

“The storm I’m running away from is much bigger,” she said.

“Anything I need to know about?”

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

“Oh,” Tucker fell silent.

“Did you finish law school?”

“No, only made it halfway,” he said.

“Well, damn.”

Jac reached up to smooth her hair back into an elastic tie as it broke free in the wind. 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?”

“Well, do you see that dead pine tree over there?” Tucker pointed across the road. “It got struck by lightning a year or so ago, one good gust of wind and it’ll be gone.”

“Your point is...?”

“My point is, beneath that tree would make a great spot for you to abandon this stolen vehicle.”

Jac grinned. “You’re a genius. Help me get our stuff in your car and I’ll move.”

Tucker followed Jac around behind the SUV. She lifted the rear hatch and every bit of color in Tucker’s face hit the pavement.

“Holy hell—did you steal all of this stuff?”

“No!” Jac said defensively. “Well, maybe the golf clubs. And the autographed basketball. Those were collateral, but the rest is mine and Milo’s stuff”

“My God, Jac, what are you running from?” Tucker asked.

“My life.”