



shannon o'neil

**SNEAK PREVIEW!**

# Prologue

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## **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 that tethered 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 form worthy of its own romance novel cover) 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 (it involved 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 the countertop.

"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,” 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 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 counter.

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 from the rear of the trailer to the kitchen area. He leaned over the sink and reached for his toothbrush, catching his rough reflection in the small, 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 had never been the highway patrol's ideal 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, 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. Nothing about the 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 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 heat settle 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 island beyond and sat, cross-legged, to begin 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 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 Kwik Stop’s back door.

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

**ACROSS THE OLD WOODEN BRIDGE**, Tucker paused at a four-way stop for Bay Road, one of two streets that ran from one end of the long island to the other. He angled his cruiser forward, along Main Street, which bisected the island’s middle from the bay to the sea. A canopy of moss-draped live oaks provided a shady tunnel from which Tucker emerged on the western edge of Crab, the island’s only town.

Along the narrow village 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 plagued the rest of Florida’s shoreline. It was an admirable cause.

Tucker approached the center of Crab, where Main Street circled a beautiful green park before breaking off into two spokes, giving access to the island’s other north-south passageway. Just beyond the band shell on the east side of the circle, the blue expanse of the Atlantic roared a morning greeting.

About a dozen folks, a mix of visitors and residents, strolled along the sidewalks of the town square, leisurely working off a heavy breakfast at the Crispy Pig with a little window shopping.

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.”

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 pink and yellow awnings 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 (at the tender age of eighty-three) zipped over on her roller skates to deliver his coffee. She was pretty swift on eight wheels despite her two hip surgeries and knee replacement.

"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 had been 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 had been like a little sister to him for a long time, but after their last encounter it would have been 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 northernmost tip of the island.

Tucker eased off the gas as the two-lane road curved away from the ocean and approached a narrow turn-off flanked by towering palms. He passed between the two lines of swaying trees and under a white stucco arch topped with hand-painted tiles announcing he'd arrived on the campus of Florida University.

From the arch, twenty acres of exquisitely manicured grounds stretched right to the water's edge in three directions. Clusters of crisp, white stucco buildings topped with fiery red clay tiles were scattered across the land beneath palms, oaks, and even the occasional magnolia. It was a campus just perfectly made for glossy brochures.

Combined with its elite athletic program and award-winning academics, it was no surprise that the small private university turned away three times as many students as it admitted each year.

As Tucker approached the large fountain in the heart of campus and turned right, he spotted only a handful of students passing between buildings and lingering on shady benches. The official start of the fall semester was still a week away, so most kids had yet to move into the dorms – a lucky break, Tucker thought.

The campus road wound past two classroom buildings before dead-ending at the ocean. To the left, the streets and sidewalks led to the school's two biggest (and most coveted) oceanfront residence halls. To the right, it turned into a winding, crushed shell driveway. Tucker turned right, following the path to a circular drive outside a home-and-garden-magazine-worthy two-story Mediterranean estate.

A wrought-iron gate topped with beautiful handmade scrollwork kept 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 bussed out to the mainland by noon and the gym is set-up as a shelter for anyone who needs it.”

“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 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 at five, 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 turned for 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 northern tip 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 at mid-field. Spotting Tucker's approach, Coach dropped the whistle from his lips and slid his wraparounds up onto his head.

"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's face showed his deep concern.

"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. 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.

**IT TOOK TWENTY MINUTES FOR** Tucker to weave back through campus and follow Beach Road clear from one end of Crab Island to the other.

With a wide turn of the wheel, he swung into The Pink Mermaid Motel's nearly empty parking lot. Tucker rolled his cruiser beneath the motel's arched carport and climbed out into the sweltering late summer heat. Sweat instantly began to drip in uncomfortable places beneath Tucker's uniform. He adjusted his heavy utility belt, and gave in to the draw of the motel's glistening pool.

He crossed the asphalt lot separating the L-shaped building (painted an appropriate shade of magenta with perhaps the last collection of bright teal shingles left on the planet) from the rectangular pool and the rolling sand dunes beyond.

Weaving between an assortment of plastic patio furniture in various stages of disrepair, Tucker crossed the crusty tan pool deck and cautiously approached a fire-wielding figure in the far corner. In sneakers, bib overalls, and a welding helmet, Bear looked like anything but a fifty-seven year-old grandmother. Tucker watched as she used her kitchen torch to add half-circles cut from aluminum cans to her latest creation. After completing a new row of additions, Bear took a step back, lifted her helmet visor, and evaluated her work.

"Hey Mama Bear," Tucker said.

Bear turned with a jerk, but as soon as she shielded her eyes enough to make out Tucker's uniform in the bright sun she grinned.

"Hey boy! Get over here!" She called in her Alabama accent, setting the torch down beside her newest art project, a six-foot tall mermaid made from recycled materials.

Tucker approached her with a wide smile and gladly accepted a hug from Mama Bear Dawson, the closest thing he'd ever had to a mother (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.

"Been busy," he said, squinting toward the ocean.

"Well, you got here just in time," she said. "Junie is frying up bologna sandwiches for lunch."

"My favorite."

"I know." Bear patted his arm.

Tucker got so excited about Bear's sister making his favorite meal he forgot for a bit what he came for. Bear led him to the shade of an umbrella-covered table nearby and the two settled into warm plastic chairs. A pitcher of sweet tea sparkled in the sunlight between them. Bear 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 was looking off toward the ocean, lost in a thought. He started to press for more information, but was interrupted by the buzz of his cellphone. He glanced at it and read 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 had closed up early, his handwritten sales record 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 had almost 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 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 drank in the gorgeous woman who had bloomed from a freckle-faced kid. She was all curves beneath her t-shirt and tight jeans, with wild auburn hair (a little darker than her mama's) that 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 shoulder-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.

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 Pink 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.”