

The Best of Me

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For Dawson Cole, the hallucinations began after the explosion on the platform, on the day he should have died.

In the fourteen years he'd worked on oil rigs, he thought he'd seen it all. In 1997, he'd watched as a helicopter lost control as it was about to land. It crashed onto the deck, erupting in a blistering fireball, and he'd received second-degree burns on his back as he'd attempted a rescue. Thirteen people, most of them in the helicopter at the time, had died. Four years later, after a crane on the platform collapsed, a piece of flying metal debris the size of a basketball nearly took his head off. In 2004, he was one of the few workers remaining on the rig when Hurricane Ivan slammed into it, with winds gusting over a hundred miles an hour and waves large enough to make him wonder whether to grab a parachute in case the rig collapsed. But there were other dangers as well. People slipped, parts snapped, and cuts and bruises were a way of life among the crew. Dawson had seen more broken bones than he could count, two plagues of food poisoning that sickened the entire crew, and two years ago, in 2007, he'd watched a supply ship start to sink as it pulled away from the rig, only to be rescued at the last minute by a nearby coast guard cutter.

But the explosion was something different. Because there was no oil leak—in this instance, the safety mechanisms and their

backups prevented a major spill—the story barely made the national news and was largely forgotten within a few days. But for those who were there, including him, it was the stuff of nightmares. Up until that point, the morning had been routine. He'd been monitoring the pumping stations when one of the oil storage tanks suddenly exploded. Before he could even process what had happened, the impact from the explosion sent him crashing into a neighboring shed. After that, fire was everywhere. The entire platform, crusted with grease and oil, quickly became an inferno that engulfed the whole facility. Two more large explosions rocked the rig even more violently. Dawson remembered dragging a few bodies farther from the fire, but a fourth explosion, bigger than the others, launched him into the air a second time. He had a vague memory of falling toward the water, a fall that for all intents and purposes should have killed him. The next thing he knew, he was floating in the Gulf of Mexico, roughly ninety miles south of Vermilion Bay, Louisiana.

Like most of the others, he hadn't had time to don his survival suit or reach for a flotation device, but in between swells he saw a dark-haired man waving in the distance, as if signaling Dawson to swim toward him. Dawson struck out in that direction, fighting the ocean waves, exhausted and dizzy. His clothes and boots dragged him down, and as his arms and legs began to give out he knew he was going to die. He thought he'd been getting close, though the swells made it impossible to know for sure. At that moment, he spotted a lone life preserver floating among some nearby debris. Using the last of his remaining strength, he latched on. Later, he learned that he was in the water for almost four hours and had drifted nearly a mile from the rig before being picked up by a supply ship that had rushed to the scene. He was pulled on board, carried belowdecks, and reunited with other survivors. Dawson was shivering from hypothermia, and he was dazed. Though his vision was blurred—he was later diagnosed with a moderate concussion—he recognized how

lucky he'd been. He saw men with vicious burns on their arms and shoulders, and others bleeding from their ears or nursing broken bones. He knew most of them by name. There were only so many places for people to go on the rig—it was essentially a small village in the middle of the ocean—and everyone made it to the cafeteria or the recreation room or gym sooner or later. One man, however, looked only vaguely familiar, a man who seemed to be staring at him from across the crowded room. Dark-haired and maybe forty years old, he was wearing a blue windbreaker that someone on the ship had probably lent him. Dawson thought he looked out of place, more like an office worker than a roughneck. The man waved, suddenly triggering memories of the figure he'd spotted earlier in the water—it *was* him—and all at once, Dawson felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Before he could identify the source of his unease, a blanket was thrown over his shoulders and he was ushered to a spot in the corner where a medical officer waited to examine him.

By the time he sat back down, the dark-haired man was gone.

Over the next hour, more survivors were brought aboard, but as his body began to warm, Dawson started to wonder about the rest of the crew. Men he'd worked with for years were nowhere to be seen. Later, he would learn that twenty-four people were killed. Most, but not all, of the bodies were eventually found. While he recovered in the hospital, Dawson couldn't stop thinking about the fact that some families had no real way to say good-bye.

He'd had trouble sleeping since the explosion, not because of any nightmares but because he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. He felt...*haunted*, as ridiculous as that sounded. Day and night, he occasionally caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of his eye, but whenever he turned there was never anyone or anything there that could explain it. He wondered if he was losing his mind. The doctor suggested he was having a posttraumatic reaction to the stress of the accident and

that his brain might still be healing from the concussion. It made sense and sounded logical, but it didn't feel right to Dawson. He nodded anyway. The doctor gave him a prescription for sleeping pills, but Dawson never bothered to fill it.

He was given a paid leave of absence for six months while the legal wheels began to grind. Three weeks later, the company offered him a settlement and he signed the papers. By then he'd already been contacted by a half-dozen attorneys, all of them racing to be the first to file a class action suit, but he didn't want the hassle. He took the settlement offer and deposited the check on the day it arrived. With enough money in his account to make some people think he was rich, he went to his bank and wired most of it to an account in the Cayman Islands. From there, it was forwarded to a corporate account in Panama that had been opened with minimal paperwork, before being wired to its final destination. The money, as always, was virtually impossible to trace.

He'd kept only enough for the rent and a few other expenses. He didn't need much. Nor did he want much. He lived in a single-wide trailer at the end of a dirt road on the outskirts of New Orleans, and people who saw it probably assumed that its primary redeeming feature was that it hadn't flooded during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. With plastic siding that was cracked and fading, the trailer squatted on stacked cinder blocks, a temporary foundation that had somehow become permanent over time. It had a single bedroom and bath, a cramped living area, and a kitchen with barely enough room to house a mini refrigerator. Insulation was almost nonexistent, and humidity had warped the floors over the years, making it seem as if he were always walking on a slant. The linoleum in the kitchen was cracking in the corners, the minimal carpet was threadbare, and he'd furnished the narrow space with items he'd picked up over the years at thrift stores. Not a single photograph adorned the walls. Though he'd lived there for almost fifteen years, it was less a home than a place where he happened to eat and sleep and take his showers.

Despite its age, it was almost always as pristine as the homes in the Garden District. Dawson was, and always had been, a bit of a neat freak. Twice a year, he repaired cracks and caulked seams to keep rodents and insects at bay, and whenever he prepared to return to the rig, he scrubbed the kitchen and bathroom floors with disinfectant and emptied the cupboards of anything that might spoil or mold. He generally worked thirty days on, followed by thirty days off, and anything that wasn't in a can would go bad in less than a week, especially during the summer. Upon his return, he scrubbed the place from top to bottom again while airing it out, doing his best to get rid of the musty smell.

It was quiet, though, and that was really all he needed. He was a quarter mile off the main road, and the nearest neighbor was even farther away than that. After a month on the rig, that was exactly what he wanted. One of the things he'd never gotten used to on the rig was the endless noise. Unnatural noise. From cranes continually repositioning supplies to helicopters to the pumps to the endless pounding of metal on metal, the cacophony never stopped. Rigs pumped oil around the clock, which meant that even when Dawson was trying to sleep, the clamor continued. He tried to tune it out while he was there, but whenever he returned to the trailer he was struck by the almost impenetrable silence when the sun was high in the sky. In the mornings he could hear birdsong drifting from the trees, and in the evenings he'd listen to the way the crickets and frogs sometimes synchronized their rhythm a few minutes after the sun went down. It was usually soothing, but every now and then the sound made him think of home, and when that happened he would retreat indoors, forcing the memories away. Instead, he tried to focus on the simple routines that dominated his life when he was back on solid ground.

He ate. He slept. He ran and lifted weights and tinkered on his car. He took long, wandering drives, going nowhere in particular. Now and then he went fishing. He read every night and

wrote an occasional letter to Tuck Hostetler. That was it. He owned neither a television nor a radio, and though he had a cell phone, only work numbers were listed in the contact list. He picked up groceries and essentials and stopped at the bookstore once a month, but other than that he never ventured into New Orleans. In fourteen years, he'd never been to Bourbon Street or strolled through the French Quarter; he'd never sipped coffee at the Café Du Monde or had a hurricane at Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop Bar. Instead of visiting a gym, he worked out behind the trailer beneath a weathered tarp he'd strung between his home and nearby trees. He didn't go to the movies or kick back at a friend's place while the Saints played on Sunday afternoons. He was forty-two years old and hadn't been on a date since he was a teenager.

Most people wouldn't or couldn't have lived their lives that way, but they didn't know him. They didn't know who he had been or what he had done, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Then, out of the blue on a warm afternoon in mid-June, he received a phone call, and memories of the past rose anew. Dawson had been on leave for almost nine weeks. For the first time in nearly twenty years, he was finally going home. The thought made him uneasy, but he knew he had no choice. Tuck had been more than just a friend; he'd been like a father. And in the silence, as he reflected on the year that had been the turning point of his life, Dawson saw a flash of movement once more. When he turned, there was nothing there at all, and he wondered again whether he was going crazy.



The call had come from Morgan Tanner, an attorney in Oriental, North Carolina, who informed him that Tuck Hostetler had passed away. "There are arrangements best handled in person," Tanner explained. Dawson's first instinct after hanging up was to

book his flight and a room at a local bed-and-breakfast, then call a florist and arrange for a delivery.

The following morning, after locking the front door to the trailer, Dawson walked around back, toward the tin shed where he kept his car. It was Thursday, June 18, 2009, and he carried with him the only suit he owned and a duffel bag he'd packed in the middle of the night when he hadn't been able to sleep. He unlocked the padlock and rolled up the door, watching sunlight stream onto the car he'd been restoring and repairing ever since high school. It was a 1969 fastback, the kind of car that turned heads when Nixon was president and still turned heads today. It looked as if it had just rolled off the assembly line, and over the years countless strangers had offered to buy it from him. Dawson had turned them down. "It's more than just a car," he told them, without further explanation. Tuck would have understood exactly what he meant.

Dawson tossed the duffel bag onto the passenger seat and laid the suit on top of it before sliding behind the wheel. When he turned the key, the engine came to life with a loud rumble, and he eased the car onto the gravel before hopping out to lock the shed. As he did, he ran through a mental checklist, making sure he had everything. Two minutes later, he was on the main road, and a half hour after that he was parking in the long-term lot at the New Orleans airport. He hated leaving the car but had no choice. He collected his things before starting toward the terminal, where a ticket was waiting for him at the airline counter.

The airport was crowded. Men and women walking arm in arm, families off to visit grandparents or Disney World, students shuttling between home and school. Business travelers rolled their carry-ons behind them, jabbering on cell phones. He stood in the slow-moving line and waited until a spot opened at the counter. He showed his identification and answered the basic security questions before being handed his boarding passes.

There was a single layover in Charlotte, a little more than an hour. Not bad. Once he landed in New Bern and picked up his rental car, he had another forty minutes on the road. Assuming there weren't any delays, he'd be in Oriental by late afternoon.

Until he took his seat on the plane, Dawson hadn't realized how tired he was. He wasn't sure what time he'd finally fallen asleep—the last time he'd checked, it had been almost four—but he figured he'd sleep on the plane. Besides, it wasn't as though he had much to do once he got to town. He was an only child, his mom had run off when he was three, and his dad had done the world a favor by drinking himself to death. Dawson hadn't talked to anyone in his family in years, nor did he intend to renew their acquaintance now.

Quick trip, in and out. He'd do what he had to do and didn't plan on hanging around any longer than he had to. He might have been raised in Oriental, but he'd never really belonged there. The Oriental he knew was nothing like the cheery image advertised by the area Visitors' Bureau. For most people who spent an afternoon there, Oriental came across as a quirky little town, popular with artists and poets and retirees who wanted nothing more than to spend their twilight years sailing on the Neuse River. It had the requisite quaint downtown, complete with antiques stores, art galleries, and coffee shops, and the place had more weekly festivals than seemed possible for a town of fewer than a thousand people. But the real Oriental, the one he'd known as a child and young man, was the one inhabited by families with ancestors who had resided in the area since colonial times. People like Judge McCall and Sheriff Harris, Eugenia Wilcox, and the Collier and Bennett families. They were the ones who'd always owned the land and farmed the crops and sold the timber and established the businesses; they were the powerful, invisible undercurrent in a town that had always been theirs. And they kept it the way they wanted.

Dawson found that out firsthand when he was eighteen, and

then again at twenty-three, when he finally left for good. It wasn't easy being a Cole anywhere in Pamlico County, Oriental in particular. As far as he knew, every Cole in the family tree going back as far as his great-grandfather had spent time in prison. Various members of the family had been convicted of everything from assault and battery to arson, attempted murder, and murder itself, and the rocky, wooded homestead that housed the extended family was like a country with its own rules. A handful of ramshackle cabins, single-wide trailers, and junk barns dotted the property that his family called home, and unless he had no choice, even the sheriff avoided the place. Hunters gave the land a wide berth, rightly assuming that the TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT sign wasn't simply a warning but a promise. The Coles were moonshiners and drug dealers, alcoholics, wife beaters, abusive fathers and mothers, thieves and pimps, and above all, pathologically violent. According to an article that had been published in a now defunct magazine, they were at one point regarded as the most vicious, revenge-driven family east of Raleigh. Dawson's father was no exception. He'd spent most of his twenties and early thirties in prison for various offenses that included stabbing a man with an ice pick after the man had cut him off in traffic. He'd been tried and acquitted twice for murder after witnesses had vanished, and even the rest of the family knew enough not to rile him up. How or why his mom had ever married him was a question that Dawson couldn't begin to answer. He didn't blame his mom for running off. For most of his childhood, he'd wanted to run off, too. Nor did he blame her for not taking him. Men in the Cole family were strangely proprietary about their offspring, and he had no doubt his father would have hunted his mom down and taken him back anyway. He'd told Dawson as much more than once, and Dawson had known better than to ask his dad what he would have done had his mom refused to give him up. Dawson already knew the answer.

He wondered how many members of his family were still living on the land. When he'd finally left, in addition to his father, there'd been a grandfather, four uncles, three aunts, and sixteen cousins. By now, with the cousins grown up and having kids of their own, there were probably more, but he had no desire to find out. That might have been the world he'd grown up in, but like Oriental, he'd never really belonged to them, either. Maybe his mom, whoever she was, had something to do with it, but he wasn't like them. Alone among his cousins, he never got in fights at school and he pulled down decent grades. He stayed away from the drugs and the booze, and as a teenager he avoided his cousins when they cruised into town looking for trouble, usually telling them that he had to check on the still or help disassemble a car that someone in the family had stolen. He kept his head down and did his best to maintain as low a profile as he could.

It was a balancing act. The Coles might have been a band of criminals, but that didn't mean they were stupid, and Dawson knew instinctively that he had to hide his differences as best he could. He was probably the only kid in his school's history who studied hard enough to fail a test on purpose, and he taught himself how to doctor his report cards so they appeared worse than they really were. He learned how to secretly empty a can of beer the moment someone had his back turned by poking it with a knife, and when he used work as an excuse to avoid his cousins, he often toiled until the middle of the night. That was successful for a while, but over time, cracks appeared in the facade. One of his teachers mentioned to a drinking buddy of his dad's that he was the best student in his class; aunts and uncles began to notice that he alone among the cousins was staying within the bounds of the law. In a family that prized loyalty and conformity above all else, he was different, and there was no worse sin.

It infuriated his father. Though he'd been beaten regularly since he was a toddler—his father favored belts and straps—by the time he was twelve the beatings became personal. His father

would beat him until Dawson's back and chest were black and blue, then return an hour later, turning his attention to the boy's face and legs. Teachers knew what was happening, but, afraid for their own families, they ignored it. The sheriff pretended that he couldn't see the bruises and welts as Dawson walked home from school. The rest of the family had no problem with it. Abee and Crazy Ted, his older cousins, jumped him more than once, beating him as bad as his father—Abee because he thought Dawson had it coming, Crazy Ted just for the hell of it. Abee, tall and broad with fists the size of ham bones, was violent and short-tempered but smarter than he let on. Crazy Ted, on the other hand, was born mean. In kindergarten, he stabbed a classmate with a pencil in a fight over a Twinkie, and before he was finally expelled in the fifth grade he'd sent another classmate to the hospital. Rumor had it that he'd killed a junkie while still a teenager. Dawson figured out it was best not to fight back. Instead, he learned to cover up while absorbing the blows, until his cousins finally grew bored or tired or both.

He didn't, however, follow in the family business and grew more resolute that he never would. Over time, he learned that the more he screamed, the more his father beat him, so he kept his mouth shut. As violent as his father was, he was also a bully, and Dawson knew instinctively that bullies fought only the battles they knew they could win. He knew there would come a time when he'd be strong enough to fight back, when he would no longer be afraid of his father. As the blows rained down on him, he tried to imagine the courage his mom had shown by cutting all ties to the family.

He did his best to hasten the process. He tied a sack filled with rags to a tree and punched it for hours a day. He hefted rocks and engine parts as often as he could. He did pull-ups, push-ups, and sit-ups throughout the day. He put on ten pounds of muscle before turning thirteen, and another twenty by fourteen. He was growing taller as well. By fifteen, he was nearly as tall as his father.

One night, a month after he turned sixteen, his father came at him with a belt after a night of drinking, and Dawson reared up and ripped it from his father's grasp. He told his father that if he ever touched him again, he'd kill him.

That night, with nowhere else to go, he took refuge in Tuck's garage. When Tuck found him the following morning, Dawson asked him for a job. There was no reason for him to help Dawson, who was not only a stranger but a Cole as well. Tuck wiped his hands on the bandanna he kept in his back pocket, trying to read him before reaching for his cigarettes. At the time, he was sixty-one years old, a widower for two years. When he spoke, Dawson could smell the alcohol on his breath, and his voice was raspy with the residue of the unfiltered Camels he'd been smoking since he was a child. His accent, like Dawson's, was pure country.

"I figure you can strip 'em, but you know anythin' about puttin' 'em back again?"

"Yes, sir," Dawson had answered.

"You got schoolin' today?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you be back here right afterwards and I'll see how you do."

Dawson showed up and did his best to prove his worth. After work, it rained most of the evening, and when Dawson sneaked back into the garage to take refuge from the storm, Tuck was waiting for him.

Tuck didn't say anything. Instead, he drew hard on his Camel, squinting at Dawson without speaking, and eventually went back into the house. Dawson never spent another night on the family land. Tuck didn't make him pay rent and Dawson bought his own food. As the months rolled on, he began to think about the future for the first time in his life. He saved as much as he could, splurging only to buy the fastback from a junkyard and gallon-size jugs of sweet tea from the diner. He repaired the car in the evenings after work while drinking the tea, and he fantasized

about going to college, something no Cole had ever done. He considered joining the military or just renting his own place, but before he could make any decisions his father showed up unexpectedly at the garage. He'd brought Crazy Ted and Abee with him. Both of them carried baseball bats, and he could see the outline of a knife in Ted's pocket.

"Gimme the money you been earning," his father said without preamble.

"No," Dawson answered.

"I knew you'd say that, boy. That's why I got Ted and Abee here. They can beat it out of you and I'll take it anyway, or you can gimme what you owe for running off."

Dawson said nothing. His father picked at his gums with a toothpick.

"See, all it would take for me to end this little life of yours is a crime out there in town. Maybe a burglary, maybe a fire. Who knows? After that, we just plant some evidence, place an anonymous call to the sheriff, and let the law do the work. You're alone out here at night and you ain't gonna have no alibi, and for all I care, you can just rot away for the rest of your life surrounded by iron and concrete. Won't bother me none at all. So why don't you just hand it over?"

Dawson knew his father wasn't bluffing. Keeping his face expressionless, he took the money from his wallet. After his father counted the bills, he spat the toothpick onto the ground and grinned.

"I'll be back next week."

Dawson made do. He managed to squirrel away a little bit of the money he earned to continue his repairs on the Fastback and buy the sweet tea, but most of his money went to his father. Though he suspected that Tuck knew what was going on, Tuck never said anything directly to him. Not because he was afraid of the Coles, but because it wasn't his business. Instead, he began cooking dinners that were just a bit too large for him to eat on

his own. "Got some left, if you want it," he'd say after walking a plate out to the garage. More often than not, he'd go back inside without another word. That was the kind of relationship they had, and Dawson respected it. Dawson respected Tuck. In his own way, Tuck had become the most important person in his life, and Dawson couldn't imagine anything that would change that.

Until the day Amanda Collier entered his world.

Though he'd known of Amanda for years—there was only one high school in Pamlico County and he'd gone to school with her most of his life—it wasn't until the spring of his junior year that they exchanged more than a few words for the first time. He always thought she was pretty, but he wasn't alone in that. She was popular, the kind of girl who sat surrounded by friends at a table in the cafeteria while boys vied for her attention, and she was not only class president but a cheerleader as well. Throw in the fact that she was rich, and she was as inaccessible to him as an actress on television. He never said a word to her until they were finally paired as lab partners in chemistry.

As they labored over test tubes and studied together for tests that semester, he realized that she was nothing like he'd imagined she would be. First, that she was a Collier and he a Cole seemed to make no difference to her, which surprised him. She had a quick, unbridled laugh, and when she smiled there was a mischievous hint about it, as though she knew something that no one else did. Her hair was a rich honey blond, her eyes the color of warm summer skies, and sometimes as they scribbled equations into their notebooks, she would touch his arm to get his attention and the feeling would linger for hours. In the afternoons, as he worked in the garage, he often found he couldn't stop thinking about her. It took him until spring before he finally worked up the courage to ask if he could buy her an ice cream, and as the end of the school year approached they began to spend more and more time together.

That was 1984, and he was seventeen years old. By the time

summer ended, he knew he was in love, and when the air turned crisp and autumn leaves drifted to the ground in ribbons of red and yellow, he was certain that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, as crazy as that sounded. They stayed together the following year, growing even closer and spending every possible moment together. With Amanda, it was easy for him to be himself; with Amanda, he was content for the first time in his life. Even now, that final year together was sometimes all he could think about.

Or more accurately, Amanda was all he could think about.



On the airplane, Dawson settled into the flight. He had a window seat about halfway back, next to a young woman: red hair, midthirties, long-limbed, and tall. Not exactly his type, but pretty enough. She leaned into him as she searched for her seat belt and smiled in apology.

Dawson nodded, but sensing that she was about to strike up a conversation, he stared out the window. He watched the luggage cart pull away from the aircraft, drifting as he often did into distant memories of Amanda. He pictured the times they went swimming in the Neuse that first summer, their bodies slick as they brushed up against each other; or how she used to perch on the bench while he worked on his car in Tuck's garage, arms wrapped around her drawn-up knees, making him think that he wanted nothing more than to see her sitting just like that forever. In August, when he finally got his car to run for the first time, he took her to the beach. There they lay on their towels, fingers intertwined as they talked of their favorite books, the movies they enjoyed, their secrets and dreams for the future.

They argued as well, and then Dawson caught a glimpse of her fiery nature. Their disagreements weren't constant, but they weren't infrequent, either; remarkably, no matter how quickly things flared up, they almost always ended equally fast.

Sometimes it was about little things—Amanda was nothing if not opinionated—and they'd bicker furiously for a while, usually without any sort of resolution. Even in those instances where he became truly angry, he couldn't help admiring her honesty, an honesty rooted in the fact that she cared more about him than anyone else in his life.

Aside from Tuck, no one understood what she saw in him. Though they initially tried to conceal the relationship, Oriental was a small town, and people inevitably began to whisper. One by one, her friends withdrew, and it was only a matter of time before her parents found out. He was a Cole and she was a Collier, and that was more than enough cause for dismay. At first, they clung to the hope that Amanda was simply going through a rebellious phase, and they tried to ignore it. When that didn't work, things got harder for Amanda. They took away her driver's license and prohibited her from using the phone. In the fall, she was grounded for weeks at a time and forbidden to go out on weekends. Never once was Dawson allowed into their home, and the only time her father ever spoke to him he called Dawson "a worthless piece of white trash." Her mother begged Amanda to end it, and by December her father had stopped speaking to her altogether.

The hostility surrounding them only drew Amanda and Dawson closer together, and when Dawson began to take her hand in public, Amanda held tight, daring anyone to tell her to let go. But Dawson wasn't naive; as much as she meant to him, he always had the sense that they were on borrowed time. Everything and everyone seemed stacked against them. When his father found out about Amanda, he would ask about her when he came by to collect Dawson's wages. Though there was nothing overtly menacing in his tone, simply hearing him say her name left Dawson feeling sick to his stomach.

In January, she turned eighteen, but as furious as her parents were about the relationship, they stopped short of throw-

ing her out of the house. By then Amanda didn't care what they thought—or at least that was what she always told Dawson. Sometimes, after yet another bitter argument with her parents, she would sneak out her bedroom window in the middle of the night and strike out for the garage. Often he would be waiting for her, but sometimes he'd awaken to her nudging him as she joined him on the mat he'd unrolled on the floor of the garage office. They'd wander down to the creek and Dawson would slip his arm around her while they sat on one of the low-slung branches of an ancient live oak. In the moonlight, as the mullets were jumping, Amanda would rehash her arguments with her parents, sometimes with a quaking voice and always careful to protect his feelings. He loved her for that, but he knew exactly how her parents felt about him. One evening, while tears spilled from beneath her lids after yet another argument, he gently suggested that it might be better for her if they stopped seeing each other.

"Is that what you want?" she whispered, her voice ragged.

He pulled her closer, slipping his arms around her. "I just want you to be happy," he whispered.

She'd leaned into him then, resting her head on his shoulder. As he held her, he'd never hated himself more for being born a Cole.

"I'm happiest when I'm with you," she finally murmured.

Later that night they made love for the first time. And for the next two decades and beyond, he carried those words and the memories of that night inside him, knowing that she had been speaking for them both.



After landing in Charlotte, Dawson flung his duffel bag and suit over his shoulder and walked through the terminal, barely registering the activity around him as he sifted through memories of his final summer with Amanda. That spring, she'd received notice of her acceptance to Duke, a dream of hers since she'd

been a little girl. The specter of her departure, coupled with the isolation from her family and friends, only intensified their desire to pass as much time together as possible. They spent hours at the beach and took long drives while the radio blasted, or they simply hung around Tuck's garage. They swore little would change after she left; either he'd drive to Durham or she'd come back to visit. Amanda had no doubt that they'd find a way to somehow make it work.

Her parents, however, had other plans. On a Saturday morning in August, a little more than a week before she was supposed to leave for Durham, they cornered her before she was able to escape the house. Her mom did all the talking, though she knew her father stood firmly in agreement.

"This has gone on long enough," her mother began, and in a voice that was surprisingly calm, she told Amanda that if she continued to see Dawson, she would have to move out of the house in September and start paying her own bills, and they wouldn't pay for her to attend college, either. "Why should we waste money on college when you're throwing your life away?"

When Amanda started to protest, her mother talked right over her.

"He'll drag you down, Amanda, but right now you're too young to understand that. So if you want the freedom of being an adult, you'll also have to assume the responsibilities. Ruin your life by staying with Dawson—we're not going to stop you. But we're not going to help you, either."

Amanda ran straight out of the house, her only thought to find Dawson. By the time she reached the garage, she was crying so hard she couldn't speak. Dawson held her close, letting bits and pieces of the story trickle out as her sobs finally subsided.

"We'll move in together," she said, her cheeks still damp.

"Where?" he asked her. "Here? In the garage?"

"I don't know. We'll figure it out."

Dawson remained silent, studying the floor. "You need to go to college," he finally told her.

"I don't care about college," Amanda protested. "I care about you."

He let his arms fall to his sides. "I care about you, too. And that's why I can't take this from you," he said.

She shook her head, bewildered. "You're not taking anything from me. It's my parents. They're treating me like I'm still a little girl."

"It's because of me, and we both know that." He kicked at the dirt. "If you love someone, you're supposed to let them go, right?"

For the first time, her eyes flashed. "And if they come back, it's meant to be? Is that what you think this is? Some sort of cliché?" She grabbed his arm, her fingers digging into him. "We're not a cliché," she said. "We'll find a way to make it work. I can get a job as a waitress or whatever, and we can rent a place."

He kept his voice calm, willing it not to break. "How? You think my dad is going to stop what he's doing?"

"We can move somewhere else."

"Where? With what? I have nothing. Don't you understand that?" He let the words hang, and when she didn't answer, he finally went on. "I'm just trying to be realistic. This is your life we're talking about. And... I can't be part of it anymore."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying your parents are right."

"You don't mean that."

In her voice, he heard something almost like fear. Though he yearned to hold her, he took a deliberate step backward. "Go home," he said.

She moved toward him. "Dawson—"

"No!" he snapped, taking a quick step away. "You're not listening. It's over, okay? We tried, it didn't work. Life moves on."

Her expression turned waxy, almost lifeless. "So that's it?"

Instead of answering, he forced himself to turn away and walk toward the garage. He knew that if he so much as glanced at her he'd change his mind, and he couldn't do that to her. He wouldn't do that to her. He ducked under the open hood of the fastback, refusing to let her see his tears.

When she finally left, Dawson slid to the dusty concrete floor next to his car, remaining there for hours, until Tuck finally came out and took a seat beside him. For a long time, he was silent.

"You ended it," Tuck finally said.

"I had to." Dawson could barely speak.

"Yep." He nodded. "Heard that, too."

The sun was climbing high overhead, blanketing everything outside the garage with a stillness that felt almost like death.

"Did I do the right thing?"

Tuck reached into his pocket and pulled out his cigarettes, buying time before he answered. He tapped out a Camel.

"Don't know. There's a lot of magic between you, ain't no denying that. And magic makes forgettin' hard." Tuck patted him on the back and got up to leave. It was more than he'd ever said to Dawson about Amanda. As he walked away, Dawson squinted into the sunlight and the tears started again. He knew that Amanda would always be the very best part of him, the self he would always long to know.

What he didn't know was that he would not see or speak to her again. The following week Amanda moved into the dorms at Duke University, and a month after that Dawson was arrested.

He spent the next four years behind bars.

2



Amanda stepped out of her car and surveyed the shack on the outskirts of Oriental that Tuck called home. She'd been driving for three hours and it felt good to stretch her legs. The tension in her neck and shoulders remained, a reminder of the argument she'd had with Frank that morning. He hadn't understood her insistence on attending the funeral, and looking back, she supposed he had a point. In the nearly twenty years that they'd been married, she'd never mentioned Tuck Hostetler; had their roles been reversed, she probably would have been upset, too.

But the argument hadn't really been about Tuck or her secrets, or even the fact that she would be spending another long weekend away from her family. Deep down, both of them knew it was simply a continuation of the same argument they'd been having for most of the past ten years, and it had proceeded in the typical fashion. It hadn't been loud or violent—Frank wasn't that type, thank God—and in the end Frank had muttered a curt apology before leaving for work. As usual, she'd spent the rest of the morning and afternoon doing her best to forget the whole thing. After all, there was nothing she could do about it, and over time she'd learned to numb herself to the anger and anxiety that had come to define their relationship.

During the drive to Oriental, both Jared and Lynn, her two

older children, had called, and she'd been thankful for the distraction. They were on summer break, and for the past few weeks the house had been filled with the endless noise typical of teenagers. Tuck's funeral couldn't have been better timed. Jared and Lynn already had plans to spend the weekend with friends, Jared with a girl named Melody and Lynn with a friend from high school, boating at Lake Norman, where her friend's family owned a house. Annette—their “wonderful accident,” as Frank called her—was at camp for two weeks. She probably would have called as well were cell phones not prohibited. Which was a good thing, otherwise her little chatterbox would no doubt have been calling morning, noon, and night.

Thinking about the kids brought a smile to her face. Despite her volunteer work at the Pediatric Cancer Center at Duke University Hospital, her life largely revolved around the kids. Since Jared was born, she'd been a stay-at-home mom, and while she'd embraced and mostly relished that role, there'd always been a part of her that chafed at its limitations. She liked to think she was more than just a wife and mother. She'd gone to college to become a teacher and had even considered pursuing a PhD, with thoughts of teaching at one of the local universities. She'd taken a job teaching third grade after graduation... and then life had somehow intervened. Now, at forty-two, she sometimes found herself joking to people that she couldn't wait to grow up so she could figure out what she wanted to do for a living.

Some might call it a midlife crisis, but she wasn't sure that was exactly it. It wasn't as though she felt the need to buy a sports car or visit a plastic surgeon or run off to some island in the Caribbean. Nor was it about being bored; Lord knows, the kids and the hospital kept her busy enough. Instead, it had more to do with the sense that somehow she'd lost sight of the person she'd once meant to be, and she wasn't sure she'd ever have the opportunity to find that person again.

For a long time, she'd considered herself lucky, and Frank had

been a big part of that. They'd met at a fraternity party during her sophomore year at Duke. Despite the chaos of the party, they'd somehow managed to find a quiet corner where they'd talked until the early hours of the morning. Two years older than her, he was serious and intelligent, and even on that first night she knew he'd end up being successful at whatever he chose to do. It was enough to get things started. He went off to dental school at Chapel Hill the following August, but they continued to date for the next two years. An engagement was a foregone conclusion, and in July 1989, only a few weeks after she'd finished her degree, they were married.

After a honeymoon in the Bahamas, she started her teaching job at a local elementary school, but when Jared came along the following summer, she took a leave of absence. Lynn followed eighteen months later, and the leave of absence became permanent. By then, Frank had managed to borrow enough money to open his own practice and buy a small starter house in Durham. Those were lean years; Frank wanted to succeed on his own and refused to accept offers of help from either family. After paying the bills, they were lucky if they had enough money left over to rent a movie on the weekend. Dinners out were rare, and when their car died, Amanda found herself stranded in the house for a month, until they could afford to get it fixed. They slept with extra blankets on the bed in order to keep the heating bills down. As stressful and exhausting as those years had sometimes been, when she thought back on her life, she also knew they'd been some of the happiest years of their marriage.

Frank's practice grew steadily, and in many respects their lives settled into a predictable pattern. Frank worked while she took care of the house and kids, and a third child, Bea, followed just as they sold their starter house and moved into the larger one they had built in a more established area of town. After that, things got even busier. Frank's practice began to flourish while she shuttled Jared to and from school and brought Lynn to parks

and playdates, with Bea strapped in a car seat between them. It was during those years that Amanda began to revisit her plans to attend graduate school; she even took the time to look into a couple of master's programs, thinking she might enroll when Bea started kindergarten. But when Bea died, her ambitions faltered. Quietly, she set aside her GRE exam books and stowed her application forms in a desk drawer.

Her surprise pregnancy with Annette cemented her decision not to go back to school. Instead, if anything, it awakened a renewed commitment in her to focus on rebuilding their family life, and she threw herself into the kids' activities and routines with a single-minded passion, if only to keep the grief at bay. As the years passed and memories of their baby sister began to fade, Jared and Lynn slowly regained a sense of normalcy, and Amanda was grateful for that. Bright-spirited Annette brought a new kind of joy into their home, and every now and then Amanda could almost pretend that they were a complete and loving family, untouched by tragedy.

She had a hard time pretending the same about her marriage.

She wasn't, nor ever had been, under the illusion that marriage was a relationship characterized by endless bliss and romance. Throw any two people together, add the inevitable ups and downs, give the mixture a vigorous stir, and a few stormy arguments were inevitable, no matter how much the couple loved each other. Time, too, brought with it other challenges. Comfort and familiarity were wonderful, but they also dulled passion and excitement. Predictability and habit made surprises almost impossible. There were no new stories left to tell, they could often finish each other's sentences, and both she and Frank had reached the point where a single glance was filled with enough meaning to make words largely superfluous. But losing Bea had changed them. For Amanda, it spurred a passionate commitment to her volunteer work at the hospital; Frank, on the other

hand, changed from someone who drank occasionally into a full-blown alcoholic.

She knew the distinction, and she'd never been a prude about drinking. There'd been several occasions in college when she'd had one too many at a party, and she still enjoyed a glass of wine with dinner. Sometimes she might even follow that with a second glass, and that almost always sufficed. But for Frank, what started as a way to numb the pain had morphed into something he could no longer control.

Looking back, she sometimes thought she should have seen it coming. In college, he'd liked to watch basketball games while drinking with his friends; in dental school, he'd often wanted to unwind with two or three beers after his classes had finished for the day. But in those dark months when Bea was sick, two or three beers a night gradually became a six-pack; after she died, it became a twelve-pack. By the time they reached the second anniversary of Bea's death, with Annette on the way, he was drinking to excess even when he had to work the following morning. Lately, it was four or five nights a week, and last night had been no different. He'd staggered into the bedroom after midnight, as drunk as she'd ever seen him, and had begun to snore so loudly that she'd had to sleep in the guest room. His drinking, not Tuck, had been the real reason for their argument this morning.

Over the years, she'd witnessed it all, from a simple slurring of his words at dinnertime or at a barbecue to drunk and passed out on the floor of their bedroom. Yet because he was widely regarded as an excellent dentist, rarely missed work, and always paid the bills, he didn't think he had a problem. Because he didn't become mean or violent, he thought he didn't have a problem. Because it was usually only beer, it couldn't possibly be a problem.

But it was a problem, because he'd gradually become the kind of man she couldn't have imagined marrying. She couldn't count the number of times that she'd cried about it. And talked to

him about it, exhorting him to think of the kids. Begged him to attend couples counseling to find a solution, or raged about his selfishness. She'd given him the cold shoulder for days, forced him to sleep in the guest room for weeks, and had prayed fervently to God. Once a year or so, Frank would take her pleas to heart and stop for a while. Then, after a few weeks, he'd have a beer with dinner. Just one. And it wouldn't be a problem that night. Or maybe even the next time he had one. But he'd opened the door and the demon would enter and the drinking would spiral out of control again. And then she'd find herself asking the same questions she'd asked in the past. Why, when the urge struck, couldn't he simply walk away? And why did he refuse to accept that it was destroying their marriage?

She didn't know. What she did know was that it was exhausting. Most of the time, she felt she was the only parent who could be trusted to take care of the kids. Jared and Lynn might be old enough to drive, but what would happen if one of them got into some kind of accident while Frank was drinking? Would he hop in the car, strap Annette into the backseat, and race to the hospital? Or what if someone got sick? It had happened before. Not to the kids, but to her. A few years ago, after eating some spoiled seafood, Amanda had spent hours throwing up in the bathroom. At the time, Jared had his learner's permit and wasn't allowed to drive at night, and Frank had been on one of his binges. When she was nearing dehydration, Jared ended up taking her to the hospital around midnight while Frank lolled in the backseat and pretended to be more sober than he really was. Despite her near delirium, she noticed Jared's eyes flicking constantly to the rearview mirror, disappointment and anger warring in his expression. She sometimes thought that he shed a large part of his innocence that night, a child confronting his parent's awful shortcomings.

It was a constant, exhausting source of anxiety, and she was tired of worrying what the kids were thinking or feeling when

they saw their dad stumbling through the house. Or worrying because Jared and Lynn no longer seemed to respect their father. Or worrying that, in the future, Jared or Lynn or Annette might begin to emulate their father, escaping regularly into booze or pills or God knows what else, until they ruined their own lives.

Nor had she found much in the way of help. Even without Al-Anon, she understood that there was nothing she could do to make Frank change, that until he admitted he had a problem and focused on getting better, he would remain an alcoholic. And yet what did that mean for her? That she had to make a *choice*. That she had to *decide* whether or not she would continue to put up with it. That she had to form a list of *consequences* and stick to them. In theory, that was easy. In practice, though, all it did was make her angry. If he was the one with the problem, why was she the one who had to take responsibility? And if alcoholism was a disease, didn't that mean he needed her help, or at least her loyalty? How, then, was she—his wife, who'd taken a vow to remain with him in sickness and in health—supposed to justify ending the marriage and breaking up their family, after everything they had been through? She'd either be a heartless mother and wife or a spineless enabler, when all she really wanted was the man she'd once believed him to be.

That's what made every day so hard. She didn't want to divorce him and break up the family. As compromised as their marriage might be, part of her still believed in her vows. She loved the man he'd been, and she loved the man she knew he could be, but here and now, as she stood outside Tuck Hostetler's home, she felt sad and alone, and she couldn't help wondering how her life had come to this.



She knew that her mother was expecting her, but Amanda wasn't ready to face her just yet. She needed a few more minutes, and as dusk began to settle in she picked her way across the overgrown

yard to the cluttered garage where Tuck had spent his days restoring classic cars. Parked inside was a Corvette Stingray, a model from the 1960s, she guessed. As she ran her hand over the hood, it was easy to imagine that Tuck would return to the garage any minute, his bent figure outlined against the setting sun. He would be dressed in stained overalls, his thinning gray hair would barely cover his scalp, and the creases of his face would be so deep they'd almost resemble scars.

Despite Frank's probing questions about Tuck this morning, Amanda had said little, other than to describe him as an old family friend. It wasn't the whole story, but what else was she supposed to say? Even she admitted that her friendship with Tuck was a strange one. She'd known him in high school but hadn't seen Tuck again until six years ago, when she was thirty-six. At the time, she'd been back in Oriental visiting her mother, and while lingering over a cup of coffee at Irvin's Diner she'd overheard a group of elderly men at a nearby table gossiping about him.

"That Tuck Hostetler's still a wizard with cars, but he's sure gone crazy as a loon," one of them said, and laughed, shaking his head. "Talking to his dead wife is one thing, but swearing that he can hear her answer is another."

The old man's friend snorted. "He was always an odd one, that's for sure."

It sounded nothing like the Tuck she'd known, and after paying for her coffee, she got into her car and retraced the almost forgotten dirt drive that led to his house. They ended up spending the afternoon sitting in rockers on his collapsing front porch, and since then she'd made a habit of dropping by whenever she was in town. At first it was once or twice a year—she couldn't handle visiting her mother any more than that—but lately she'd visited Oriental and Tuck even when her mother was out of town. More often than not, she cooked dinner for him as well. Tuck was getting on in years, and though she liked to tell herself that she was

simply checking in on an old man, both of them knew the real reason she kept coming back.

The men in the diner had been right, in a way. Tuck had changed. He wasn't the mostly silent and mysterious, sometimes gruff figure she remembered, but he wasn't crazy, either. He knew the difference between fantasy and reality, and he knew his wife had died long ago. But Tuck, she eventually decided, had the ability to make something real simply by wishing it into existence. At least it was real for him. When she'd finally asked him about his "conversations" with his dead wife, he'd told her matter-of-factly that Clara was still around and always would be. Not only did they talk, he confessed, but he saw her as well.

"Are you're saying she's a ghost?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "I'm just sayin' she don't want me to be alone."

"Is she here now?"

Tuck peered over his shoulder. "Don't see her, but I can hear her puttering around inside the house."

Amanda listened but heard nothing other than the squeak of the rockers on the floorboards. "Was she around...back then? When I knew you before?"

He drew a long breath, and when he spoke, his voice sounded weary. "No. But I wasn't trying to see her then."

There was something undeniably touching, almost romantic, about his conviction that they loved each other enough to have found a way to stay together, even after she was gone. Who wouldn't have found that romantic? Everyone wanted to believe that endless love was possible. She'd believed in it once, too, back when she was eighteen. But she knew that love was messy, just like life. It took turns that people couldn't foresee or even understand, leaving a long trail of regret in its wake. And almost always, those regrets led to the kinds of *what if* questions that could never be answered. *What if* Bea hadn't died? *What if*

Frank hadn't become an alcoholic? *What if* she'd married her one true love? Would she even recognize the woman who now looked back at her in the mirror?

Leaning against the car, she wondered what Tuck would have made of her musings. Tuck, who ate eggs and grits at Irvin's every morning and dropped dry-roasted peanuts into the glasses of Pepsi that he drank; Tuck, who'd lived in the same house for almost seventy years and had left the state only once, when he'd been called to serve the country in World War II. Tuck, who listened to the radio or phonograph instead of watching television, because that's what he'd always done. Unlike her, Tuck seemed to embrace the role that the world had laid out for him. She recognized that there was probably wisdom in that kind of unflinching acceptance, even if she'd never be able to achieve it.

Of course, Tuck had Clara, and maybe that had something to do with it. They'd married at seventeen and had spent forty-two years together, and as Tuck talked to Amanda, she'd gradually learned the story of their lives. In a quiet voice, he'd told her about Clara's three miscarriages, the last of which came with serious complications. According to Tuck, when the doctor informed her that she'd never be able to have children, Clara had cried herself to sleep for almost a year. Amanda learned that Clara kept a vegetable garden and had once won a statewide competition for growing the largest pumpkin, and she saw the faded blue ribbon that was still tucked behind the mirror in the bedroom. Tuck told her that after he'd established his business, they built a small cottage on a small plot of land on the Bay River near Vandemere, a town that made Oriental seem like a city, and they spent weeks there every year, because Clara thought it was the most beautiful spot in the world. He described the way Clara used to hum to the radio when she was cleaning the house, and he revealed that every now and then he used to take her dancing at Red Lee's Grill, a place that Amanda frequented during her own teenage years.

It was a life, she eventually concluded, that had been lived in the middle ground, where contentment and love were found in the smallest details of people's lives. It was a life of dignity and honor, not without sorrows yet fulfilling in a way that few experiences ever were. She knew Tuck understood that more than anyone.

"With Clara, it was always good," was how he'd once summed it up.

Maybe it was the intimate nature of his stories, or maybe her growing loneliness, but over time, Tuck became a sort of confidant to her as well, something Amanda could never have predicted. It was with Tuck that she shared her pain and sadness about Bea's death, and it was on his porch that she was able to unleash her rage at Frank; it was to him that she confessed her worries about the kids, and even her growing conviction that she'd somehow made a wrong turn in her life somewhere along the line. She shared with him stories about the countless anguished parents and impossibly optimistic children she met at the Pediatric Cancer Center, and he seemed to understand that she found a kind of salvation in her work there, even if he never said as much. Mostly, he just held her hand in his gnarled, grease-stained fingers, soothing her with his silence. By the end, he'd become her closest friend, and she'd come to feel that Tuck Hostetler knew her, the real her, better than anyone in her current life.

Now, though, her friend and confidant was gone. Missing him already, she ran her gaze over the Stingray, wondering if he'd known it was the last car he'd ever work on. He'd said nothing to her directly, but thinking back, she realized that he'd probably had his suspicions. On her last visit, he'd given her an extra key to his house, telling her with a wink "not to lose it, or you might have to break a window." She'd tucked it in her pocket, not thinking much of it, because he'd said other curious things that night. She could remember rummaging through his cupboards, looking for something to make for dinner while he sat at the table, smoking a cigarette.

“You like red wine or white wine?” he suddenly asked, apropos of nothing.

“It depends,” she answered, sorting through cans. “Sometimes I have a glass of red wine with dinner.”

“I got me some red wine,” he announced. “Over yonder, in that cabinet over there.”

She turned. “Do you want me to open a bottle?”

“Never did much care for it. I’ll stick with my Pepsi and peanuts.” He tapped ashes into a chipped coffee cup. “I always got fresh steaks, too. Have ’em delivered from the butcher every Monday. Bottom shelf of the icebox. Grill’s out back.”

She took a step toward the refrigerator. “Do you want me to make you a steak?”

“No. Usually save those for later in the week.”

She hesitated, unsure where this was leading. “So . . . you’re just telling me?”

When he nodded and said nothing more, Amanda chalked it up to age and fatigue. She ended up making him eggs and bacon and tidied up the house afterward while Tuck sat in the easy chair near the fireplace with a blanket over his shoulders, listening to the radio. She couldn’t help noticing how shriveled he looked, immeasurably smaller than the man she’d known as a girl. As she prepared to leave, she adjusted the blanket, thinking that he’d fallen asleep. His breaths were heavy and labored-sounding. She bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

“I love you, Tuck,” she whispered.

He shifted slightly, probably dreaming, but when she turned to leave she heard him exhale. “I miss you, Clara,” he mumbled.

Those were the last words she would ever hear him say. There was an ache of loneliness in those words, and all at once she understood why Tuck had taken Dawson in so long ago. Tuck, she figured, had been lonely, too.



After calling Frank to let him know that she'd arrived—his voice already sounded slurry—Amanda hung up with a curt few words and thanked God that the kids were otherwise engaged this weekend.

On the workbench she found the garage clipboard and wondered what to do about the car. A quick perusal showed the Stingray was owned by a defenseman for the Carolina Hurricanes, and she made a mental note to discuss the matter with Tuck's estate lawyer. Setting the clipboard aside, she found her thoughts drifting to Dawson. He, too, had been part of her secret. Telling Frank about Tuck would have entailed telling him about Dawson, and she hadn't wanted to do that. Tuck had always understood that Dawson was the real reason she'd come to visit, especially in the beginning. He didn't mind, for Tuck more than anyone understood the power of memory. Sometimes, when the sunlight slanted through the canopy, bathing Tuck's yard in a liquid, late summer haze, she could almost sense Dawson's presence beside her and she was reminded again that Tuck had been anything but crazy. Like Clara's, Dawson's ghost was everywhere.

Although she knew it was pointless to wonder how different her life might have been if she and Dawson had stayed together, lately she'd felt the need to return to this place with increasing regularity. And the more she'd visited, the more intense the memories had become, long-forgotten events and sensations resurfacing from the depths of her past. Here it was easy to remember how strong she'd felt when she was with Dawson, and how unique and beautiful he'd always made her feel. She could recall with utter clarity her certainty that Dawson was the only person in the world who really understood her. But most of all, she could remember how completely she'd loved him and the single-minded passion with which he'd loved her back.

In his own quiet way, Dawson had made her believe that anything was possible. As she drifted through the cluttered garage, with the smell of gasoline and oil still lingering in the air, she

felt the weight of the hundreds of evenings she'd spent here. She trailed her fingers along the bench where she used to sit for hours, watching as Dawson leaned over the open hood of the fastback, occasionally cranking the wrench, his fingernails black with grease. Even then, his face had held none of the soft, youthful naïveté she saw in others their age, and when the rosy muscles of his forearm flexed as he reached for another tool, she saw the limbs and form of the man he was already becoming. Like everyone else in Oriental, she knew that his father had beaten him regularly, and when he worked without his shirt, she could see the scars on his back, no doubt inflicted by the buckle end of a belt. She wasn't sure whether Dawson was even aware of them anymore, which somehow made the sight of them even worse.

He was tall and lean, with dark hair that fell over darker eyes, and she'd known even then that he would become only more handsome as he grew older. He looked nothing like the rest of the Coles, and she'd asked him once whether he resembled his mother. At the time, they were sitting in his car while raindrops splashed over the windshield. Like Tuck's, his voice was almost always soft, his demeanor calm. "I don't know," he said, rubbing the fog from the glass. "My dad burned all her pictures."

Toward the end of their first summer together, they'd gone down to the small dock on the creek, long after the sun went down. He'd heard there was going to be a meteor shower, and after spreading out a blanket on the planks of the dock, they watched in silence as the lights streaked across the sky. She knew her parents would be furious if they knew where she was, but at the time nothing mattered but shooting stars and the warmth of his body and the gentle way he held her close, as if he couldn't imagine a future without her.

Were all first loves like that? Somehow she doubted it; even now it struck her as being more real than anything she'd ever known. Sometimes it saddened her to think that she'd never experience that kind of feeling again, but then life had a way of

stamping out that intensity of passion; she'd learned all too well that love wasn't always enough.

Still, as she looked out into the yard beyond the garage, she couldn't help wondering whether Dawson had ever felt such passion again, and whether he was happy. She wanted to believe he was, but life for an ex-con was never easy. For all she knew, he was back in jail or hooked on drugs or even dead, but she couldn't reconcile those images with the person she'd known. That was part of the reason she'd never asked Tuck about him; she'd been afraid of what he might have told her, and his silence only reinforced her suspicions. She'd preferred the uncertainty, if only because it allowed her to remember him the way he used to be. Sometimes, though, she wondered what he felt when he thought of that year they spent together, or if he ever marveled at what they'd shared, or even whether he thought of her at all.