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SEE ME



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PROLOGUE

He hadn't been in Wilmington for more than a day before he knew it was the kind of city he'd never settle in for good. It was too touristy, and the whole place seemed as though it had grown willy-nilly, without any planning. While the historic district had the kind of porch-fronted homes he'd anticipated, with columns and detailed wainscoting and sprawling magnolia trees in the yards, those lovely neighborhoods gradually gave way to a commercial area of strip malls, convenience stores, chain restaurants, and car dealerships. Endless traffic snaked through the district, growing even more unbearable in the summers.

But the grounds of UNC Wilmington had been a pleasant surprise. Somehow, he'd imagined a campus heavy on the ugly architecture of the sixties and seventies. There were a few of those buildings, especially at the fringes of the university, but the central quads had proved to be an oasis of sorts—shaded walkways and manicured lawns, the Georgian columns and brick façades of Hoggard and Kenan Halls gleaming in the late-afternoon sunlight.

He admired the commons as well. There was a clock tower there and when he'd first arrived, he'd stared at the image reflected in the pond behind it, time itself mirrored and unreadable at a glance. As long as he had an open textbook in his lap, he could sit and watch the activities, almost invisible to the students who wandered around in their self-absorbed trances.

It was warm for late September, students lounging in shorts and tank tops, skin evident everywhere. He wondered if they dressed the same way for class. Like them, he'd come to the campus to learn.

He'd visited three times in three days, but there were still too many people around; too many possible memories, and he didn't want to be remembered. He debated whether to move to another area before finally deciding there was no reason. As far as he could tell, no one cared that he was here.

He was close, so very close, but for now it was important to remain patient. He drew a long breath, holding it in before finally releasing it. On the walkways, he saw a pair of students walking to their classes, backpacks slung over their shoulders, but at this time of day, they were outnumbered by those classmates who were getting an early start to the weekend. Here and there, students were clustered in groups of three or four, talking and sipping from water bottles he suspected were filled with alcohol, while a couple of Abercrombie-model lookalikes were tossing a Frisbee back and forth, their girlfriends chatting off to the side. He spotted a young man and woman arguing, the woman's face flushed. He watched as she pushed at her boyfriend, creating space between them. He smiled at that, respecting her anger and the fact that unlike him, she wasn't compelled to hide the way she was feeling. Beyond the couple, another group of students played a game of touch football with the carefree abandon of those without real responsibility.

He figured that many of the students he saw were planning to go out tonight and tomorrow night. Fraternity houses. Sorority houses. Bars. Clubs. For many of them, the weekend would start tonight, since many classes didn't even meet on Fridays. He'd been surprised when he'd first learned that; with the cost of a college education so high, he would have thought that students would have been demanding more time in class with their professors, not three-day weekends. Then again, he supposed the schedule suited both the students and the professors. Didn't everyone want things to be easy these days? To expend the least effort possible? To take shortcuts?

Yes, he thought. That's exactly what students were learning here. They were learning that hard decisions weren't necessary, that making the right choice was unimportant, especially if it entailed extra

work. *Why study or try to change the world on a Friday afternoon when you could be out enjoying the sun?*

Shifting his eyes from left to right, he wondered how many of these students even gave much thought to the lives they were going to lead. Cassie used to, he remembered. She thought about the future all the time. She had plans. She'd mapped out her future by seventeen, but he could remember thinking that there was something tentative about the way she'd talked about it, and he'd had the sense that she didn't quite believe in herself or the face she showed to the world. Why else would she have made the decisions that she had?

He'd tried to help her. He'd done the right thing, followed the law, filed reports with the police, even talked to the assistant district attorney. And up until that point, he'd believed in society's rules. He'd held the naïve view that good would triumph over evil, that danger could be corralled, that events could be controlled. Rules would keep a person safe from harm. Cassie had believed that, too—after all, wasn't that what kids were taught when they were young? Why else would parents say the things they did? Look both ways before you cross the road. Don't get into a car with a stranger. Brush your teeth. Eat your vegetables. Put on your seat belt. The list went on and on, rules to protect and save us.

But rules could be dangerous, too, he'd learned. Rules were about averages, not specifics, and since people were conditioned since childhood to accept rules, it was easy to follow them blindly. To trust in the system. It was easier not to worry about random possibilities. It meant that people didn't have to think about potential consequences, and when the sun was shining on Friday afternoons, they could play Frisbee without a care in the world.

Experience was the most painful of teachers. For nearly two years, the lessons he'd learned had been all he could think about. They had nearly consumed him, but slowly a clarity had begun to emerge. She had known about the danger. He had warned her what would happen. And in the end, she'd cared only about following the rules, because it was convenient.

Checking his watch, he saw it was finally time to go. He closed the textbook and rose from his spot, pausing to see if his movement had caused others to notice him. It hadn't. He set off then, crossing the commons, textbook beneath his arm. In his pocket was a letter he'd written, and he veered toward the mailbox just outside the science building. He dropped the envelope through the slot and waited; a few minutes later, he spotted Serena emerging from the doors, precisely on time.

He already knew much about her. These days, it seemed that every young person had Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and Snapchat, their lives on display for anyone who cared to put the pieces together. What they liked, who their friends were, where they spent their time. He already knew from a Facebook post that she'd be having brunch at her parents' house with her sister this Sunday, and as he watched her walking ahead of him, her dark brown hair tumbling past her shoulders, he noted again how beautiful she was. There was a natural grace about her, and she drew appreciative smiles from the guys she passed, though lost in conversation, she didn't seem to notice. She was walking with a short, heavy blonde, a friend from class. They'd been in an education seminar together; he knew she wanted to become an elementary school teacher. Making plans, just like Cassie used to do.

He kept his distance, energized by the power he felt in her presence. The power he'd been husbanding for the last two years. She had no idea how close he was or what he could do. She never so much as glanced over her shoulder, but why should she? He was no one to her, just another face in the crowd . . .

He wondered whether she was telling the blonde about her weekend plans, rattling off places to go or the people she intended to see. For his part, he planned to join the family for brunch on Sunday, though not as a guest. Instead, he would watch them from a nearby house, located in a neighborhood that was solidly middle class. The house had been empty for a month, the owners having lost it to foreclosure, but it was not yet up for sale. Though the locks on the doors

were solid, he'd been able to gain entry through a window along the side of the house without much trouble. He already knew that from the master bedroom, he could see onto their back porch and into the kitchen. On Sunday, he'd watch the close-knit family laugh and joke at the table on the porch.

He knew something about each of them. Felix Sanchez was the classic immigrant success story; the newspaper article that was proudly laminated and on display at their restaurant chronicled how he'd arrived in the country illegally as a teenager without speaking a word of English and begun working as a dishwasher in a local restaurant. Fifteen years later, after becoming an American citizen, he'd saved enough money to open his own place in a strip mall—La Cocina de la Familia—serving his wife Carmen's recipes. While she cooked, he did everything else, especially in the early years of the business. Little by little, their restaurant had expanded, and it was now regarded as one of the best Mexican restaurants in the city. Though there were more than fifteen employees, many were relatives, retaining the restaurant's family character. Both parents still worked there, and Serena waited tables three times a week, just as her older sister, Maria, once had. Felix was a member of both the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club, and he and his wife attended the seven a.m. mass at St. Mary's every Sunday, where he also served as a deacon. Carmen was a bit more of a mystery; he knew only that she was still more comfortable speaking Spanish than English and, like her husband, was proud of the fact that Maria had become the first college graduate in the family.

As for Maria . . .

He hadn't yet seen her in Wilmington. She'd been out of town for the last few days at a legal conference, but he knew her best of all. In the past, when she'd lived in Charlotte, he'd seen her many times. He'd talked to her. He'd tried to convince her she was wrong. And in the end, she'd made him suffer as no one should ever suffer, and he hated her for what she'd done.

When Serena waved good-bye to her friend and headed toward

the parking lot, he continued walking straight. There was no reason to follow her, and he was content knowing that he'd see the small but happy family on Sunday. Especially Maria. Maria was arguably even more beautiful than her sister, though frankly, both had been winners in the genetic lottery, with their dark eyes and nearly perfect bone structure. He tried to imagine them sitting close together at the table; despite the seven-year age difference, many people might assume they were twins. And yet they were different. Where Serena was outgoing to a fault, Maria had always been quieter and driven, the more serious and studious of the two. Even so, they were close, best friends as well as sisters. He speculated that perhaps Serena saw traits in her sister that she wanted to emulate, and vice versa. He felt a frisson of excitement at the thought of the weekend, knowing it might be one of the last times the family would all be together with any semblance of normalcy. He wanted to see how they would act before tension began to infect their sweet happy family . . . before the fear took hold. Before their lives were slowly—and then furiously—brought to ruin.

He'd come here, after all, for a purpose, and that purpose had a name.

Its name was vengeance.

CHAPTER I



Colin

Colin Hancock stood over the sink in the bathroom at the diner, his shirt raised to better examine the bruise on his ribs. He guessed that it would deepen to a dark purple by the time he woke tomorrow. Even grazing the bruise made him wince, and while he knew from experience that the pain could be overridden for a while, he wondered whether it would hurt to breathe in the morning.

His face, though...

That might end up being a problem—not for him, but for others. Certainly his college classmates would stare at him with wide, frightened eyes and whisper about him behind his back, though he doubted that any of them would actually ask him what had happened. During the first few weeks at the university, most of his classmates had seemed nice enough, but it had been clear that none of them knew what to make of him, nor had any tried to speak to him. Not that it bothered him. For one thing, virtually all of them were six or seven years younger than he was, all were female, and he suspected that as far as recent life experiences went, they had little in common with him. In time, like everyone else, they'd end up drawing their own conclusions about him. Frankly, it wasn't worth worrying about.

Still, he had to admit that he was particularly ghoulish right

now. His left eye was swollen and the white of his right eye was a bloody red. There was a gash in the center of his forehead that had been glued back together, and the lead-colored bruise on his right cheekbone resembled a birthmark. His split, swollen lips completed the picture. What he really needed was to put an ice pack on his face as soon as possible if he wanted the girls in his classes to be able to concentrate at all. But first things first; right now, he was starved and he needed fuel. He hadn't eaten much in the last two days, and he'd wanted something fast, convenient, and—if possible—not entirely unhealthy. Unfortunately, at this time of night most places were already closed, so he'd ended up at a run-down diner just off the highway with bars on the windows, water stains on the walls, peeling linoleum on the floor, and booths held together with duct tape. But if the place had one saving grace, it was that none of the other customers cared how he looked when he made his way to the table. People who came to dives like this late at night were good at minding their own business. As far as he could tell, half the people here were trying to sober up after a night of hard drinking, while the other half—designated drivers, no doubt—were sobering up, too, only marginally less intoxicated.

It was the kind of place where it would have been easy to get in trouble, and after he'd turned into the gravel lot with Evan following in his Prius, he'd half expected Evan to keep going. But Evan must have suspected the same thing about possible trouble. It was the only reason he'd ever set foot in an establishment like this, especially at this time of night. Evan didn't exactly blend in with the late-evening crowd here, what with his pink shirt, argyle socks, leather loafers, and neatly parted sandy blond hair. In fact, his Prius might as well have been a neon sign announcing that his goal was to get beaten up by the good old boys in pickup trucks who'd just spent most of the night getting wasted.

Colin turned on the faucet and wet his hands before bringing them to his face. The water was cold, exactly what he wanted.

His skin felt like it was on fire. The marine he'd fought had hit a lot harder than he'd expected—and that didn't count the illegal blows—but who would have known by looking at him? Tall and thin, jarhead haircut, goofy eyebrows... He shouldn't have underestimated the guy, and he told himself he wouldn't let it happen again. Either that, or he'd end up scaring his classmates all year long, which just might ruin the whole college experience for them. *There's this super scary guy in my class with bruises all over his face and these crazy tattoos, Mom!*, he could imagine them saying on the phone. *And I have to sit right next to him!*

He shook the water from his hands. Leaving the restroom, he spotted Evan in the corner booth. Unlike him, Evan would have fit right in at the college. He still had a baby face, and as he approached, Colin wondered how many times a week he even had to shave.

"That took you long enough," Evan said as Colin slid into the booth. "I was wondering if you got lost."

Colin slouched against the vinyl cushion. "I hope you weren't too nervous all alone out here."

"Ha, ha."

"I have a question for you."

"Go ahead."

"How many times a week do you shave?"

Evan blinked. "You were in the bathroom for ten minutes and that's what you were thinking about?"

"I wondered about it while I was walking to the table."

Evan stared at him. "I shave every morning."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? For the same reason you do."

"I don't shave every morning."

"Why are we even talking about this?"

"Because I was curious and I asked and then you answered," Colin said. Ignoring Evan's expression, he nodded toward the menus. "Did you change your mind and decide to order?"

Evan shook his head. "Not a chance."

"You're not going to eat anything?"

"No."

"Acid reflux?"

"Actually, it has more to do with my suspicion that the last time the kitchen was inspected, Reagan was president."

"It's not that bad."

"Have you seen the cook?"

Colin glanced toward the grill behind the counter; the cook was right out of central casting, with a greasy apron straining to cover his ample gut, a long ponytail, and tattoos covering most of his lower arms.

"I like his tats."

"Gee, there's a surprise."

"It's the truth."

"I know. You always tell the truth. That's part of your problem."

"Why is it a problem?"

"Because people don't always want the truth. Like when your girlfriend asks if a particular outfit makes her look fat, you should tell her she looks beautiful."

"I don't have a girlfriend."

"That's probably because you told the last one she looked fat without adding the beautiful part."

"That's not what happened."

"You get my point, though. Sometimes, you need to . . . stretch the truth to get along with people."

"Why?"

"Because that's what normal people do. That's the way society works. You can't just tell people whatever pops into your mind. It makes them uncomfortable or hurts their feelings. And just so you know, employers hate it."

"Okay."

"You don't believe me?"

"I believe you."

“But you don’t care.”

“No.”

“Because you’d rather tell the truth.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It’s what I’ve learned works for me.”

Evan stayed silent for a moment. “Sometimes I wish I could be more like that. Just tell my boss what I really think of him without caring about the consequences.”

“You can. You choose not to.”

“I need the paycheck.”

“That’s an excuse.”

“Maybe.” Evan shrugged. “But it’s what I’ve learned works for me. Sometimes lying is necessary. For instance, if I told you that I saw a couple of roaches under the table while you were in the bathroom, you might feel the same way about eating here that I do.”

“You know you don’t have to stay, right? I’ll be okay.”

“So you say.”

“You need to worry about yourself, not me. And besides, it’s getting late. Aren’t you heading to Raleigh with Lily tomorrow?”

“First thing in the morning. We’ll go to service at eleven with my parents, and have brunch right afterwards. But unlike you, I won’t have any trouble getting out of bed tomorrow morning. You look terrible, by the way.”

“Thanks.”

“Your eye, especially.”

“It won’t be as swollen tomorrow.”

“Your other one. I think you popped a few blood vessels. Either that, or you’re actually a vampire.”

“I noticed that.”

Evan leaned back, spreading his arms slightly. “Do me a favor, okay? Keep yourself hidden from the neighbors tomorrow. I’d hate for them to think I had to get rough on you for being late

on the rent or whatever. I don't want to get a bad reputation as a landlord."

Colin smiled. He outweighed Evan by at least thirty pounds, and he liked to joke that if Evan had ever set foot in a gym, it was probably to conduct an audit.

"I promise to stay out of sight," Colin offered.

"Good. Considering my reputation and all."

Just then, the waitress came by, dropping off a plate loaded with scrambled egg whites and ham, along with a gelatinous bowl of oatmeal. As Colin pulled the bowl closer, he glanced at Evan's mug.

"What are you drinking?"

"Hot water with lemon."

"Seriously?"

"It's past midnight. If I had coffee, I'd be up all night."

Colin scooped a bit of oatmeal into his mouth before swallowing. "Okay."

"What? No snide comment?"

"I'm just surprised they have lemon here."

"And I'm surprised they do scrambled egg whites. You're probably the first person in history who's ever even attempted to eat a healthy meal here." He reached for his water. "By the way, what *are* you planning to do tomorrow?"

"I have to change the ignition switch in my car. It's not starting the way it should. After that, I'll do the lawn and then hit the gym."

"Do you want to come with us?"

"Brunch isn't really my thing."

"I wasn't inviting you to brunch. I doubt they'd even let you in the country club looking the way you do. But you could see your parents in Raleigh. Or your sisters. It's on the way to Chapel Hill."

"No."

"I just thought I'd ask."

Colin scooped a spoonful of oatmeal. "Don't."

Evan leaned back in his seat. "There were a few great fights tonight, by the way. The one after yours was awesome."

"Yeah?"

"A guy named Johnny Reese had a submission in the first round. Took the guy down like a stud, maneuvered him into a choke hold, and it was lights out. The dude moves like a cat."

"Your point is?"

"He's way better than you."

"Okay."

Evan drummed his fingers on the table. "So...are you okay with how your fight went tonight?"

"It's over."

Evan waited. "And?"

"That's it."

"Do you still think that what you're doing is a good idea? I mean...you know."

Colin scooped a bite of eggs onto his fork. "I'm still here with you, aren't I?"



Half an hour later, Colin was back on the highway. The clouds that had been threatening a storm for the last few hours finally obliged, releasing a torrent of wind and rain punctuated by lightning and thunder. Evan had left a few minutes before Colin did, and as Colin settled in behind the wheel of the Camaro he'd been restoring over the last few years, he found his thoughts drifting to his friend.

He'd known Evan as long as he could remember. When Colin was young, his family used to spend summers at a beach cottage in Wrightsville Beach, and Evan's family lived right next door. They'd passed long, sun-drenched days walking the beach, playing catch, fishing, and either surfing or riding boogie boards. More often than not, they'd spent the night at each other's

houses, until Evan's family moved to Chapel Hill and Colin's life went completely in the toilet.

The facts were fairly straightforward: He was the third child and only son of wealthy parents with a fondness for nannies and absolutely no desire for a third child. He was a colicky baby and then a high-energy child with a raging case of ADHD, the kind of kid who threw regular temper tantrums, couldn't focus, and found it impossible to sit still. He drove his parents crazy at home, ran off one nanny after another, and struggled endlessly in school. He had a great teacher in third grade who made things better for a while, but in fourth grade, he started going downhill again. He got in one fight after another on the playground and was nearly held back. It was around that time that he came to be regarded as having *serious issues*, and in the end, not knowing what else to do, his parents shipped him off to military school, hoping the structure would do him good. His experience that first year was horrific, and he was expelled halfway through the spring semester.

From there, he was sent to another military school in a different state, and over the next few years, he expended his energies in combat sports—wrestling, boxing, and judo. He took his aggression out on others, sometimes with too much enthusiasm, often just because he wanted to. He cared nothing about grades or discipline. Five more expulsions and five different military schools later, he graduated, just barely, as an angry and violent young man with no plans for his life and no interest in finding any. He moved back in with his parents and seven bad years followed. He watched his mother cry and listened to his father plead with him to change, but he ignored them. He worked with a therapist at his parents' insistence, but he continued his downward spiral, subconscious self-destruction his primary goal. The therapists' words, not his, though he now agreed with them. Whenever his parents kicked him out of the main house in Raleigh, he'd crash

at the family's beach cottage, biding his time before returning home, the cycle beginning anew. When Colin was twenty-five, he was given one final chance to make changes in his life. Unexpectedly, he did just that. And now here he was, in college with plans to spend the next few decades in the classroom, hoping to be a mentor to children, which would make no sense at all to most people.

Colin knew there was an irony to his wanting to spend the rest of his life in school—a place he'd always hated—but that's the way it was. He didn't dwell on the irony and he generally didn't dwell on the past. He wouldn't have been thinking of any of these things at all if it hadn't been for Evan's comment about visiting his parents tomorrow. What Evan still didn't grasp was that simply being in the same room as them was stressful for both Colin and his parents—especially if the visit wasn't planned well in advance. Had he shown up unexpectedly, he knew they'd sit uncomfortably in the living room trying to make small talk while memories of the past filled the air between them like a poisonous gas. He'd feel waves of disappointment and judgment radiating out from them, apparent in the things they said or didn't say, and who needed that? He didn't, and neither did they. In the last three years, he'd tried to keep his infrequent visits to about an hour, almost always on the holidays, an arrangement that seemed to suit them all.

His older sisters, Rebecca and Andrea, had tried to talk to him about making amends with his parents, but he'd shut down those conversations the same way he'd done with Evan. Their lives with their parents, after all, had been different from his. They'd both been *wanted*, while he'd been a big fat *whoops* seven years later. He knew they meant well, but he didn't have a lot in common with them. Both of them were college graduates and married with kids. They lived in the same upscale neighborhood as their parents and played tennis on the weekends. The older

he'd gotten, the more he'd come to acknowledge that the choices they'd made in their own lives had been a lot smarter than his own. Then again, they didn't have *serious issues*.

He knew that his parents, like his sisters, were essentially good people. It had taken him years in therapy to accept the fact that he'd been the one with the problems, not them. He no longer blamed his mother and father for the things that had happened to him or for what they had or hadn't done; if anything, he considered himself a lucky son of two incredibly patient people. So what if he'd been raised by nannies? So what if his folks had finally thrown in the towel and shipped him off to military school? When he'd really needed them, when other parents probably would have given up, they'd never lost hope that he could turn his life around.

And they'd put up with his crap for *years*. Serious crap. They'd ignored the drinking and the pot smoking and the music cranked way too loud at all hours; they'd put up with the parties he threw whenever they went out of town that left the house in shambles. They'd overlooked the bar fights and multiple arrests. They never contacted the authorities when he broke into the beach cottage, even though he did serious damage to that place as well. They'd bailed him out more times than he could remember and paid his legal bills, and three years ago—when Colin was facing a long prison sentence after a bar fight in Wilmington—his dad had pulled some strings to strike a deal that would clear his criminal record entirely. If, of course, Colin didn't screw it up. As part of his probation, Colin had been required to spend four months at an anger-management treatment facility in Arizona. Upon his return and because his parents wouldn't let him stay at their home, he'd crashed again at the beach cottage, which by then was for sale. He'd also been ordered to meet regularly with Detective Pete Margolis from the Wilmington police department. The man whom Colin had beaten in the bar was a longtime confidential informant of Margolis's, and as a result of

the fight, a high-profile case Margolis was working on had gone suddenly south. Consequently, Margolis hated Colin with a passion. Having argued strongly against the deal in the first place, he then insisted on monitoring Colin regularly and at random, like a makeshift probation officer. Finally, the deal stipulated that if Colin was arrested again, for *anything*, the entirety of his original record would be reinstated and he'd automatically be sentenced to prison for nearly a decade.

Despite the requirements, despite having to deal with Margolis, who plainly itched to place him in handcuffs, it was a great deal. An *unbelievable* deal, and it was all thanks to his father... even if he and Colin had trouble speaking these days. Colin was technically banned from ever setting foot in the house again, though his dad had softened on that particular stance lately. Being permanently kicked out of the house after he'd returned from Arizona and then watching from the street as new owners took possession of the beach cottage had forced Colin to reevaluate his life. He'd ended up sleeping at friends' places back in Raleigh, drifting from one couch to the next. Little by little, he'd come to the conclusion that if he didn't change his life, he'd self-destruct entirely. The environment there wasn't good for him, and his circle of friends was as out of control as he was. With nowhere else to go, he'd driven back to Wilmington and surprised himself by showing up at Evan's door. Evan had been living there after graduating from North Carolina State and had been equally surprised to see his old friend. Cautious and a bit nervous, too, but Evan was Evan, and he had no problem with Colin staying at his place for a while.

It took some time to earn Evan's trust again. By that point, their lives had diverged. Evan was a lot more like Rebecca and Andrea, a responsible citizen whose only experience with jail was what he'd seen on television. He worked as an accountant and financial planner, and in keeping with the fiscally prudent ideals of his profession, he'd also purchased a house with a first-floor

apartment and separate entrance to help lower his mortgage payments, an apartment that happened to be vacant when Colin had shown up. Colin hadn't intended to stay long, but one thing led to another and when he'd gotten a job tending bar, he'd moved in downstairs for good. Three years later, he was still paying rent to the best friend he had in the world.

So far, it was working out well. He mowed the lawn and trimmed the bushes and paid a reasonable rent in return. He had his own space with his own entrance, but Evan was right there, too, and Evan was exactly what Colin needed in his life right now. Evan wore a suit and tie to work, he kept his tastefully decorated house spotless, and he never drank more than two beers when he went out. He was also just about the nicest guy in the world, and he accepted Colin, faults and all. And—for God knows what reason—he believed in him, even when Colin knew he didn't always deserve it.

Lily, Evan's fiancée, was pretty much cut from the same cloth. Though she worked in advertising and had her own condo at the beach—her parents had bought it for her—she spent enough time at Evan's to have become an important part of Colin's life. It had taken her a while to warm up to him—when they'd first met, Colin had been sporting a blond Mohawk and had piercings in both ears, and their initial conversation had centered around a bar fight in Raleigh where the other guy had ended up in the hospital. For a while, she simply couldn't comprehend how Evan could ever be friends with him. A Charleston debutante who'd attended college at Meredith, Lily was prim and polite, and the phrases she used were a throwback to an earlier era. She was also just about the most drop-dead gorgeous girl that Colin had ever seen, and it was no wonder that Evan was putty in her hands. With her blond hair and blue eyes and an accent that sounded like honey even when she was angry, she seemed like the last person in the world who would give Colin a chance. And yet, she had. And like Evan, she had eventually come to believe in

him. It had been Lily who'd suggested that he start taking classes at the junior college two years ago, and it had been Lily who'd tutored him in the evenings. And on two separate occasions, it had been Lily and Evan who had kept Colin from making the kind of impulsive mistake that might have landed him in prison. He loved her for those things, just as he loved the relationship between her and Evan. He'd long since decided that if anyone ever threatened the two of them in any way, he would handle it, no matter what the consequences, even if it meant he'd have to spend the rest of his life behind bars.

But all good things come to an end. Isn't that what people said? The life he'd lived for the last three years was going to change, if only because Evan and Lily were engaged, with plans for a spring wedding already in the works. While they'd both insisted that Colin could continue to live in the downstairs apartment after they were married, he also knew they'd spent the previous weekend walking through model homes in a subdivision closer to Wrightsville Beach, with homes that featured the kind of double porches common in Charleston. They both wanted kids, they both wanted the whole white-picket-fence thing, and Colin had no doubt that within a year, Evan's current house would be for sale. After that, Colin would be on his own again, and while he knew it wasn't fair to expect Evan and Lily to be responsible for him, he sometimes wondered whether they were aware of how important they'd become to him in the last few years.

Like tonight, for instance. He hadn't asked Evan to come to the fight; that had been Evan's idea. Nor had he asked Evan to sit with him while he ate. But Evan probably suspected that had he not done those things, Colin might have ended up at a bar instead of the diner, unwinding with shots instead of midnight breakfast. And though Colin worked as a bartender, being on the other side of the bar didn't exactly work for him these days.

Finally exiting the highway, Colin steered onto a winding county road, loblolly pine and red oak mingling on either side,

kudzu playing no favorites between the two. It was less a shortcut than an attempt to avoid an endless series of stoplights. Lightning continued to strike, turning the clouds silver and illuminating the surroundings in otherworldly strobes. The rain and wind intensified, the wipers barely keeping the windshield clear, but he knew this road well. He eased into one of its many blind curves before instinctively stomping on the brakes.

Up ahead, a car with storage racks across the roof was halfway off the road at a cockeyed angle, its hazards flashing. The trunk stood propped open to the elements. As the Camaro slowed, Colin felt the rear fishtail slightly before the tires caught again. He merged into the oncoming lane to give the car a wide berth, thinking that the guy couldn't have picked a worse time and place to break down. Not only was the storm limiting visibility, but drunks like the ones back at the diner would be setting out for home right about now, and he could imagine one of them taking the corner too fast and plowing into the back of the car.

Not good, he thought. It was definitely an accident waiting to happen, but at the same time, it wasn't his business. It wasn't his job to rescue strangers, and he probably wouldn't be much help anyway. He understood the engine in his car, but only because the Camaro was older than he was; modern engines had more in common with computers. Besides, the driver had no doubt already called for help.

As he rolled slowly past the stopped car, however, he noticed the rear tire was flat and behind the trunk, a woman—soaked to the bone in jeans and a short-sleeved blouse—was struggling to remove the spare tire from its compartment. Lightning flashed, a long series of flickering camera strobes that captured her mascara-streaked distress. In that instant, he realized that her dark hair and wide-set eyes reminded him of one of the girls in his classes, and his shoulders slumped.

A girl? Why did it have to be a girl in trouble out here? For all he knew, it *was* the girl in his class, and he couldn't very well

pretend he hadn't noticed that she needed help. He really didn't need this right now, but what choice did he have?

With a sigh, he pulled over to the side of the road, leaving some distance between her car and his. He turned on his hazards and grabbed his jacket from the backseat. By then the rain was coming down in sheets, instantly soaking him as he exited, like the diagonal spray of an outdoor shower. Running a hand through his hair, he took a deep breath and then started toward her car, calculating how quickly he could change the tire and be on the road again.

"Need a hand?" he called.

Surprising him, she didn't say anything. Instead, staring at him with stricken eyes, she let go of the tire and began slowly backing away.