

The Man In The Moon

by

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Prologue

Dirt

Heather awakens. When she opens her eyes, the damp earth above her collapses, lodging her lids open. She screams, but the sound dies in a clump of earth that tumbles into her throat and clogs her windpipe.

Heather flails for her life—but the movements are only imagined, the fantasy of a mind going quickly mad. In truth, Heather can neither see, breathe, nor move—so complete is the embrace of her freshly dug grave.

Heather swallows more soil; she inhales it, ingests it. Her stomach wrenches. In Heather's final moments, an image of Alan appears in the darkness. He's smiling.

It is Thursday evening, May 1st, 1952, Heather's 18th birthday.

1

Pleasant Bay, July 12th, 1987

People don't get murdered in Pleasant Bay. It's partly why I chose the place. No, I didn't go there to recalibrate the little town's murder clock. I went to distance myself from the mayhem at home. Too many people parked together too close for too long inevitably begets bloodshed. My recent attempt to intervene in such madness had damaged my psyche, maybe even my soul.

So, I went north to heal.

Pleasant Bay is a settlement on the western shores of Cape Breton Island, about as far north as you can go in Nova Scotia. In Pleasant Bay, Red River Road is, literally, *the end of the road*. It's mostly hard-packed dirt that snakes along the cliffs above the ocean and past places with calming names: Cathedral Rock, Moonlight Bay, Gampo Abbey. The Abbey is a Buddhist monastery, home to a colony of bald monks dressed in flowing maroon robes.

Maybe I should have recuperated there.

Red River Road meanders for ten miles along precipitous stone cliffs that overhang the sea and ends abruptly in the middle of Nowhere. Nowhere is a field of tall grass, dense woods that seem to climb forever, and a brook that comes out of the mountains, sluices past the field, rushes over the cliffs, and tumbles into the sea.

There's a trail that starts there, and it's on the other side of that brook. If you follow the trail—go even further north through the woods for a few miles—you'll emerge atop gently rolling hills of grass high above a green valley: a scene that brings *The Sound of Music* to your heart. Here, another stream carves its way through the middle of this valley. It, too, ends up in the sea. Otter Creek is the most magnificent place I've ever seen—the first time we hiked out there and gazed down upon the valley, Paula burst into tears.

If you continue north along the trail, humping more heart-thumping miles, you'll come to another other-worldly place called Pollet's Cove. On the cove's beach, there are enough stones to build a castle, enough driftwood logs to build a cabin, and a few wild horses to calm your troubled soul.

If you're truly adventurous, you can go even further north of Nowhere, as long as you don't mind climbing up and down more mountains or walking along more crumbling cliffs where one misstep could be your last. And hopefully you'll have enough strength left to bushwhack through wild beach roses so dense they'll shred your pants and then shred your legs. You can indeed go further north, where you'll eventually wind up at more cliffs, more stony beaches, and an ocean that keeps going till it thunders into Newfoundland.

You can do it, but you may have trouble getting back.

According to the travel agent, the only place available for rent was a rambling old three-story farmhouse on a thirty-acre plot that bordered the sea. He told us there are barely twenty other houses along the entire ten-mile length of Red River Road. The nearest neighbor to McKenzie Farm is a jumble of ramshackle outbuildings, a huge old barn, and a crumbling farmhouse with sagging eaves and a collapsed front porch—a tattered blue tarp is nailed to a section of its roof. It's hard to imagine that the place is actually occupied.

It all sounded perfect to me.

In one photo, our rental farmhouse sat in the middle of a field of long grass, a good-sized plot carved out of the surrounding density of woods. Perched atop a gentle rise, the late-day sun bathed the house in a soft yellow glow, amplifying its well-worn, fire-in-the-hearth, cornbread-in-the-oven look.

Interior pictures showed a living room with warm wood floors, hand-made hooked rugs, and comfortably stuffed, comfortably outdated WW II era furnishings. A huge stone fireplace beckoned.

Maritime-themed knick-knacks seemed to cover most surfaces—ceramic whales, fish-shaped little rocks, and miniature lobster pots sat atop the hearth, lined the edges of side-tables, and occupied almost every windowsill. Cute.

In the kitchen, a small, apartment-sized electric stove sat next to an immense black-iron wood stove. According to the brochure, the ancient stove could still be used for cooking and heating the downstairs.

In other pictures we could see that that the house's lone bathroom hadn't been updated in decades, but the clawfoot tub appeared clean and the view of the ocean through the large window was spectacular.

Because all four of the equally sized bedrooms had wood floors and wood-slatted walls, the upstairs seemed dark and uninviting—precisely the opposite feeling of the downstairs. But for two grand a month, you can't have everything.

In those pictures, McKenzie Farm seemed the perfect place to rest, open my head, and let the demons out. In reality, the place turned out to be less than what I'd hoped for. And something quite a bit more.

* * *

There is an expansive feeling to lightly occupied spaces. It's as if the barometric pressure in a community drops in accordance with the sparsity of its population. When we'd arrived in our rental car at the end of our fifteen-hour drive and idled through the tiny

center of Pleasant Bay, the air pressure had felt light, as if we were gliding through the atmosphere on a moon.

Our first night there—after folding our clothes into the misaligned drawers of the old dressers and hanging them in closets crisscrossed with cobwebs—we got our first surprise when I turned on the faucet in the single downstairs bathroom. Mud.

After letting it run for some time, the mud gradually turned to a brown ooze, then to a silty muck, and eventually into something much clearer that looked almost drinkable. We had water, but we were not encouraged.

The second surprise came at about two o'clock in the morning, when the house itself woke me.

I felt the bed shift beneath me, as if the house were sitting atop a rug that someone had just gently tugged. I was instantly awake, having been barely under the surface of the traveler's sleep. I was certain something had happened—that the movement I'd felt had not occurred in a dream—although I cannot tell you how I knew this. I watched Paula for a moment, her back to me, her shoulders rising and falling slowly, then slipped quietly out of bed.

Despite my unfamiliarity, I found my way downstairs easily. The moon was nearly full, and its warmth-less light seemed to glow within the walls of the house. Pausing in the cold kitchen, I looked out through clouded windowpanes, watched as the long blades of sepia-toned grass were bent by a wind that I could almost visualize gliding in from across the water, climbing the craggy cliffs, and cat-walking across the field.

As if in acknowledgement, a great gust of that stealthy wind rustled the trees on the margins of the field, then rushed in again and rattled the windowpanes, so close to my eyes. I could have sworn that the house sighed, an ancient exhalation, a weariness born of unyielding time.

It was then that I heard the hammer. Its banging was measured and precise, the steady, rhythmic beat of an accomplished carpenter. I shook my head, but the sound continued. Opening the French doors, I stepped out onto the back porch. The hammering stopped. The wind died.

Across the empty field, off beyond the far cliff, the moon hung high and white in the gray sky, its reflection in the waters below warped by the motion of the sea, its presence amplified in the deathly quiet.

I held my breath. I waited.

The hammering sounds had been distinct, sharp, *real*—of that I had no doubt. What I did doubt was our decision to rent such an old house, its age and history relatively unchanged by renovation or renewal.

It was apparent that the porch was an addition, built at least a decade or more ago. It offered various choices for relaxation: an old cane-back chair, a wooden rocker, a rusting metal glider, and a huge hammock suspended between ropes in the far-left corner. I half-expected the hammock to start swaying.

I chose the rocker. Sat utterly still. Listened.

I heard nothing, save the creak of a far-off branch and the rustle of the grass under intermittent wisps of breeze. Even though I knew Paula was just thirty feet from me, I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so alone.

Then I saw the flower.

It had worked its way up through a joint in the floorboards in the far-left corner of the porch. Full, pinkish petals atop a long stem—a mirror image of the lone flower that had

captured my attention while sitting on the deck at Butler, the psychiatric hospital where only weeks before they'd done their best to piece me back together.

I'd been in the psych ward because I'd watched a man put a gun under his chin and pull the trigger. Eldrick Creech and I had been so close to each other that when the bullet exploded inside Creech's skull, chunks of him splattered across my face. Minutes later, after guiding two kidnapped women out of Creech's underground prison, one of them helped pick pieces of his meat and bone from my hair.

Paula and I had chosen the remoteness of Pleasant Bay for its calm and quiet, and because it put more than a thousand miles between us and the horror that had been Creech. Yet all it took to draw me back to him was that little flower.

Imagining the eruption of Creech's head for the thousandth time, I gripped the arms of the rocker and braced myself, fearing the vertigo that I knew would come if I couldn't make the image go away.

Then something happened that obliterated the crippling memory. Not five feet away, the rusted seat of the glider began to move . . . and as it did, there came a spine-sawing shriek, like a banshee screaming that's being slowly ripped in two.

2

Mr. Know-It-All

"What time is it?" I said.

Paula smiled as we stepped out onto the porch. "What an absolutely lovely day! After we have our coffees, we should go for a walk."

I sat in the rocker, the same chair I'd chosen five hours before, when I'd heard that terrible scream. Paula placed our cups on the low table next to the rocker and sat down in the glider. It was 7am, five hours since the scream, after which I'd hallucinated a little boy sitting on that same glider, his head cranked painfully toward me, his face, hands, and clothes streaked with dirt and mud.

"You're right. We should walk," I said. But in truth, I was exhausted, and I didn't want to move. While at Butler Hospital, I'd been diagnosed with Acute Panic Disorder, manifesting as nightmares, vertigo, and a particularly disturbing condition—a recurring lassitude that sapped my strength and left me feeling like I'd aged thirty years. But none of those symptoms could account for what I'd heard and seen on the porch at two o'clock that morning.

Paula took a sip of her coffee and gazed across the field toward the water. "Look at that ocean. It's so . . . magnificent."

"I know it looks like the ocean, but it's actually the Bay of Saint Lawrence."

Paula chuckled. "Thank you, Mr. Know-It-All. It might as well be the ocean. Just look at it! It goes on forever. And listen," she raised a hand. "All you can hear are those waves and the occasional bird. There's not another sound. I don't think I've ever been in such a peaceful place."

"Well," I said. "It *is* Pleasant Bay."

Paula's laugh swept lightly over me—I could almost feel it tickling my skin.

“Okay,” I said, setting my cup down on the small table between our chairs. “If we get up right now, I’ll walk with you. Otherwise, I’ll probably stay here and fall sleep. For the whole day. The drive up here wore me out.”

Paula turned sideways on the glider and looked at me, her blue eyes soft and true. “It’s not just the drive that’s making you tired and you know it. We took our time getting here, and you’ve been sleeping pretty well.”

“I’ve been sleeping, thanks to the pills,” I said. “Speaking of which . . . I guess I should tell you. I decided yesterday not to take them anymore.” I looked away and began counting blades of grass in my head. Backwards. 99. 98. 97.

“Is that why you got out of bed last night?”

Staring straight ahead, I could feel Paula’s concern gently shifting over to me—I imagined it merging into my cells, like osmosis.

“Will? You should talk to Dr. Stuart before you stop taking those meds.”

When I didn’t respond, Paula returned to her original position, looking once again at the beauty, constant and unfolding before us.

“I didn’t know you knew I got up,” I said.

Paula waggled her head. “Sometimes you can be quite frustrating.”

“Mm,” I said.

“Was it bad?”

“Was what bad?”

“Don’t play games, Will.” I could hear the hurt in her voice.

“It wasn’t . . .” I thought a moment before finishing. “It wasn’t too bad. The house moved sideways. And there was some hammering. That’s about all.” I didn’t tell her what I’d seen after that horrible screech had hacked into my nerves.

“And?”

I felt Paula’s eyes on me again.

“And, um . . . that was about it. No hallucinations. No exploding heads. Just those noisy rails.” I pointed to the rails underneath her glider.

Paula set her feet down and pushed. The glider moved back and forth. Soundlessly. “Quiet as a mouse,” she said. She lifted her eyebrows, then brought the glider to a stop.

I twisted my head like there was a kink in my neck. “That’s because your weight is on it, Paula. Last night the glider was empty. You know what I’m saying? No pressure, no noise?”

Christ.

Paula stood abruptly. Relieved of her weight, the glider swayed a couple times then came to rest. Quiet as a mouse.

“Huh,” I said.

She smiled and reached out to me. “Come on, silly man. Let’s walk.”

Having no destination, we kept our pace casual. Save the crunching of our shoes in the dirt, the only sound was the incessant shushing of the waves on the shore. The air was soft, clear, warm. The sky was bright blue, cloudless, immense, the feeling of expansiveness remarkable.

We walked north and didn’t speak until we came to a mailbox on the left side of the road. Rusty and dented out of shape, the box bore a name so faded it was barely recognizable. Leaning in close, I read the name. “Walters.”

The driveway into the property was little more than two deep ruts in the grass with a considerable hump in the middle. For no apparent reason, it wound in lazy turns across a

small field and ended next to an old farmhouse with a sagging front porch. A large barn sat well beyond the house, tilting so precariously it would have fallen over if not for a half-dozen extended four-by-sixes propping it up on one side at a forty-five-degree angle. I saw no vehicles.

There were a number of outbuildings in varying states of decay all over the property, between which were numerous piles of junk—tires, machinery parts, woodpiles, and trash that had probably accumulated over decades.

I felt something. It was more than just the urge to stop.

Paula glanced at me. “What’s up?”

“I don’t know. Looking at this place I feel . . .” I abruptly shut my mouth.

Paula surveyed the property slowly. “It’s a shame. At one time, it was probably quite nice. They have a wonderful view of the ocean.” She paused, her eyes flitting from one pile of junk to the next. “It’s sad.”

“Feels creepy,” I said, instantly wishing I hadn’t.

Paula took a step backward and looked at me.

“William Snow. Do not tell me you’re getting some kind of weird vibe here. Please don’t tell me that. Because if you *do* tell me that, I’m going to walk back to our dusty little rented farmhouse, pack my bags, and call a cab.”

I tried my best to sound playful, though I felt anything but. “There’s no cab service in Pleasant Bay.”

“Details,” she said. “Don’t placate me with details.”

I didn’t know if she was playing or being serious. I couldn’t tell because of what was happening to me—a low vibration down in the marrow of my bones, and the feeling that my feet were being sucked into the earth.

I stepped away from the collapsing earth and grabbed Paula’s hand. “Not to worry. It’s nothing like that.”

Paula’s eyes weren’t quite so soft anymore.

“Nothing’s happening to me,” I lied. “I promise. Let’s keep walking. I need the exercise.”

Paula let out a breath. “Okay. I’m taking you at your word, Will. We didn’t come all the way up here to ferret out some aberration that’s invisible to everyone but you.”

I smiled.

“Get that kind of stuff out of your head.”

I held the smile.

“You need plenty of room inside that head.” She reached up and lightly tapped my temple. “Empty space and minimal stimulation. Let the brain heal. That’s the ticket. We’re going to be here for two months. We’re going to lie in bed and read. We’re going to sit on the porch and read. We’re going to sit on the beach and read.”

I moved a step closer. “We’re going to swim in the ocean and read.”

Paula chuckled. “Keep it up, smart ass. We came to this place, not just because it’s beautiful, but because there are so few people. So few *children*. And because we were told that almost nothing untoward ever happens in Pleasant Bay. We came here to do nothing more challenging than to read.”

I tilted my head to the right.

Paula smiled. “Okay. In the ocean.”

I tilted my head to the left.

She held the smile. “If that’s what you want.”

I nodded. "Sounds good to me."

"Sounds good *for* you," Paula's voice was steady, her eyes bright and clear. "Listen to me, Mr. Snow. I've come here with you so we can give our relationship one more go. But it's with the understanding that you will rest so you can heal." Giving me a wide grin, she reached out and squeezed my cheeks together, forcing my lips into an 'O'. "And you *are* going to heal, William Snow, or I'll kill you."

3

Piper

The jostling wakes Piper, the feeling that she's being lifted, tossed sideways, then dropped. She's only 4' 11", barely 90 pounds. Her bones are tiny—"like a bird's", her mom says—and those bones hurt when her body slams into the hard surface. Drowsy, she feels her eyelashes brush against cloth. She sees nothing but darkness.

She wonders if she's dreaming, but the pain that throbs in her ankles, hips, wrists, and mouth makes her think not.

The smell of grease and the acerbic stink of gas irritates her lungs. She coughs. It is the reverberation of this cough within the confines of the metallic space that ignites the horror in her heart.

In a bolt of panic, she rises up and smashes her forehead. Dropping her head back, she feels more pain in her wrists and ankles. When she lifts her arms to probe the darkness, ropes cut into her skin.

Unable to open her mouth against the tightness of the gag, Piper's pulse rockets.

She identifies sounds—tires whirring beneath her, the thrum of an engine, the staccato of stones pinging off the underside of the frame. And screeching sounds, like steel claws being dragged along metal.

Piper starts to hyperventilate. She tries to control her breathing, but instead of slowing down, it accelerates. Her mind is a frantic, trapped animal, Her body is a lead weight strapped to a sled, hurtling down the side of a hill.

She feels the vehicle's slow turn.

The bouncing becomes brutal. Her body slams up and down. She can almost feel her skin turning purple.

When the jostling suddenly stops, Piper rolls and slams into the wall. The vibration of the engine ceases. She senses the vehicle's suspension being relieved of weight. Hears the slam of a door. Feels a sudden surge of hope.

Then the sound of something being dragged. Metal on metal. Close. She doesn't know why, but she thinks: tools, truck bed.

Piper listens.

Footsteps. The crunch of snapping twigs.

Then nothing.

Crickets. Tree frogs. The lonely sound of her confinement.

Then a familiar sound that digs into her gut like a dull blade.

Chuh. . . shuu.

Chuh . . . shuu.

Digging!

Piper screams. HELP! The word detonates in the confined space. It concusses her ears. It's an explosion so far-reaching, she imagines that a swarm of birds has lifted into the air.

It is 10:30 PM, Sunday, June 29th, 1958.

4

The Tall Man

A month earlier, as I'd been preparing to leave the hospital, Paula sought the advice of a travel agent and make some phone calls, researching Nova Scotia, Cape Breton Island, and the little town of Pleasant Bay.

The town's population was just under 100. There were only eight children in the school system. There was no police force, no sheriff, and no jail cells—other than the occasional unlicensed driver, there were no criminals to put in them. If neighbors got into a fight, they had two options—call the cops in Cheticamp, which is almost an hour away, or resolve the problem themselves.

On one of her calls, Paula spoke with Carli, a woman who works at the only store in town—a market/bakery/post office. Carli said that in the last hundred years there'd been one only murder in Pleasant Bay—sweet music to Paula's ears.

Sitting on the porch that first day, I felt calm and peaceful, light and unencumbered. All jokes about reading *in* the ocean aside, that porch was where intended to spend the bulk of our vacation, *reading*.

But beneath the calm I was aware of something faintly sensory, something that seemed compressed and encapsulated—contained as it may have been, I imagined that it was also vibrant and alive and bristling with whorls of energy. The feeling was not unlike something I'd sensed while walking alone across the granite shelf of an island off the coast of Maine. Back then I'd had two thoughts, *underneath*, and *evil*.

That island should have been a peaceful place—like Pleasant Bay—but it had been quite the opposite. Beneath my feet, the granite cliffs had quaked with the terror.

Stop, I thought. *Don't do this*.

I'd come to that porch to heal, not to conjure dark thoughts and energies, certainly not to re-live events I was fighting to forget.

I shook my head, purposefully summoned an image of Paula. After our walk, she'd climbed down the creaking steps to the beach at the base of our cliff, wearing her killer black bathing suit—the one that made her look like the leading lady in a Fellini film.

I smiled.

I picked up the book from the low table. Held it both hands. Stared at its cover. *One Man's Journey Into Peace*. I put it back on the table, then planted my feet on the floor and pushed. The soothing motion of the rocker was all *this* man needed.

I thought, *Dark thoughts, be gone*. (I mean, really? How ridiculous was that?) Then I remembered something I'd read long ago—*Wherever you go, there you are*. Which I took to mean, *You can't outrun yourself*.

I closed my eyes, welcomed the warmth of the sun on my skin, felt the soft caress of the wind.

I fell into a deep sleep.

At some point, a movie began playing in the theater of my mind:

I'm sitting on a beach. The sun is bright. I shade my eyes as I watch Paula. She's a hundred yards away, back to me as she ascends a narrow trail etched into the face of a cliff. Even though the trail is tricky and the drop deadly, her climbing is sure-footed, confident.

I close my eyes, give them a rest from the glare. When I open them, Paula is no longer on the trail. She's standing at the top of the cliff, her silhouette like an image stamped into the sky. I can't make out her face, but I can see that she's waving. I wave back.

That's when the tall man appears. Coming up behind her.

I burst out of my sand chair and scream at Paula. She doesn't hear me.

The tall man is almost upon her.

Frantic, I jump up and down and wave my arms.

Paula!

The man reaches for her.

I run for the stairs.

Just as the man touches Paula, she spins to face him. They struggle. In the sun's blinding glare, I can't tell them apart. One hundred feet above the rocks, their bodies merge.

Lungs burning, I run harder.

Reaching the landing at the bottom of the stairs, I look up just as a body is launched off the cliff. For an agonizing second the body falls, then it strikes an outcrop and begins flipping end over end through the air.

Bursting from my dream, I jerked out of the rocker, stumbled and fell to my knees. Sweat poured from me. It ran from my armpits and trickled down my back. My shirt was soaked with it.

I crawled along the porch to the stairs. Sat at the top and stared out at the field. I put my head in my hands and willed my heart to slow. My body trembled with the helplessness, the fear of it.

Years ago I'd had a similar vision. Why was I being haunted like this? Why now?

I stood. Did my best to shake it off as the questions ground through me. Just then, Paula appeared at the top of the cliff. She stepped off the wooden landing into the field, beach bag hanging from her left hand, towel draped over her opposite shoulder. Her golden hair fluttered in the wind as she walked toward me.

I left the stairs. Met her in the middle of the field. Relieved her of the beach bag.

"Thanks," she said. As we ambled toward the porch, our shoulders brushed together. "How was your afternoon?"

"Perfect," I lied. "And yours?"

"Oh my, God, Will." Paula faced me and took my free hand. "You have to come to that beach with me tomorrow. It's magnificent. I was completely alone. I don't think I've ever been to a beach where I didn't see another soul all day. It was so relaxing. I know it sounds corny, but I feel like we've found Paradise."

I smiled. Had I ever seen her so happy?

"I know the old farmhouse is a little dusty, but I think we were lucky to find it."

“Yeah,” I said, looking up at the gray bulk of the house. With its faded shakes, overhanging roof, and rusting drainpipes, it looked a little sad. “It has a few kinks here and there, but I guess you could say it has its own, um . . . charm.”

“I’m going to take a shower,” Paula said, sprinting up the porch steps. She paused at the sliding doors to the kitchen. “Why don’t you get cleaned up, too. We can grab dinner somewhere. If you don’t mind,” she smiled. “I don’t feel like cooking.”

I joined her at the door. “You do know that there are like *three* restaurants in a thirty-mile radius, right?”

“Right,” Paula said, and tapped the end of my nose. “Then we’ll eat at only one of them.”

I followed her into the house. Watched her climb the stairs to the second floor. Her bathing suit made me think about joining her in the shower. But there was something nagging at me. It had started with that sensation, that the earth was giving way under my feet. I’d been trying to put it out of my mind, but it kept getting stuck inside a little box inside my head, along with the sounds of the hammer, and the vision of that little boy, his face all streaked with mud.

Mud. It had oozed from the faucet when we first arrived.

I went to the stairs and closed my eyes. I’d promised Paula that while we were on vacation, there’d be no involvements with the unusual or the strange. Yet there we were, in an unusually strange house that seemed to be trying to tell me something.

Come on, Snow. Really?

5

Piper

Piper listens to the digging.

Chuh . . . shuu.

Chuh . . . shuu.

It seems to go on forever.

She asks God to save her, even though she knows no one is coming.

The digging stops.

Piper hears the shovel thrown to the ground, then footsteps approaching. She feels the suspension sway as her captor climbs up into the truck’s bed.

Hasps are undone. The lid of the metal storage box is flung open.

Unable to see through the blindfold, Piper holds her breath. For the moment, nothing happens. During these unbearably silent seconds she imagines, not a man, but some moronic “thing” hovering above her, saliva dripping from its teeth.

Something grabs her shoulders and she screams. She’s lifted into the air, like she weighs nothing. Her stomach heaves as she’s flung over a shoulder.

She can hear the thing breathing.

She’s jostled as it climbs down out of the bed.

Breath wheezes in and out of it, like a cancer-ridden dog.

She hears footsteps again, feels her body bumping up and down in rhythm.

They stop.

*Tears burn Piper's eyes.
Her body is shifted. She's afraid of the fall.
Fingers fumble behind her head.
As she's hoisted off the shoulder and heaved into the void, both blindfold and gag
are simultaneously torn away from her face.
As Piper plummets backward, she sees the silhouette of the thing floating above
her.
Her back slams into the bottom of the hole and all of her air whooshes out of her
lungs.
Piper's mind snaps.
It's 11:45 PM, Sunday, June 29th, 1958.*

6

The Boy

There hadn't been a murder in Pleasant Bay in a hundred years. Where, exactly, had I gotten that information? Who'd told me? Paula? The travel agent? It was troubling that I couldn't remember. Should a fragmented memory be added to the symptoms list for Acute Panic Disorder?

Maybe there was really something going on that needed looking into. Just a little look. Maybe if I asked a few questions at the local . . .

Stop.

Yeah, but if I just . . .

You promised her, Snow. Give it a rest.

Standing at the landing, when I heard the shower come on upstairs, I broke from my trance and continued up to the second floor. Entering the long, dark hallway, I looked at the old, grainy, black and white photographs hanging from the walls. In one picture there was a woman, maybe late thirties, billowy housedress, standing between two boys on the front porch of our rented farmhouse. The smaller boy was maybe five, the taller maybe ten. In another picture—a man in his late thirties standing on the same porch between the same boys. All were dressed in drab clothing. No one smiled. In a third photo a man and woman in their eighties stood, unsmiling, in front of a 1940's-era coupe. The fourth picture was of a small cabin at the edge of a lake. The fifth, a black and white sunset over the ocean. In the sunset photo there was a large field in the foreground that ended abruptly at the edges of a cliff. There were two outbuildings on the right side of the field—a storage shed and a decaying outhouse with a half-moon cut out of its door. That photo appeared to have been taken from the porch at the back of our house. The difference between past and present was that the shed and the outhouse were no longer there.

One photo drew my attention. I looked closer at the man and two boys. Due to the age of the picture and the darkness of the hallway, I could barely make out their faces.

Directly over my head, a bare, pull-chain bulb hung from the center of the ceiling by a single wire. When I pulled the chain, the bulb came on and it began to sway, casting daggers of light and shadow across the walls. I peered closer into the picture, watching the three faces as they were first brightened with light, then smudged in darkness.

When the bulb stopped swaying my heart surged. The younger boy was the same one I'd imagined sitting next to me on the porch at 2 am that morning, his face streaked and filthy with mud.

7

Three, Not One.

When I got up the next morning, I found Paula's note on top of the iron stove in the kitchen, propped between a matching set of glass salt and pepper shakers.

Didn't want to wake you. Figured you needed the sleep. Last night was a nice surprise. Both dinner and you! I'll be on the beach all day. Join me, read, or sleep some more. Whatever feels best. I love you! P.

Maybe I shouldn't have, but I felt relieved.

In four days, we'd spent more time together than in the past four months. We were having fun on our vacation, and I was adjusting nicely to the peace and calm of Pleasant Bay. (Dear God, it was quiet!) But it seemed that no matter how far I traveled, or how fulfilling the companionship, there was a curiosity engine inside me that refused to shut down.

I missed the bullet-proof sanctity of *Paralus*, my 100 ft. tugboat. I missed Bradley, my lovely, large, dog. My best friend for the past five years, Bradley gave me comfort and strength when I thought I had none.

For God's sake, Snow. Bradley's being well cared for. You've only been gone a few days. Snap out of it!

I dressed, downed a quick cup of coffee, and left by the front door. Overgrown with weeds and grass, a short gravel walk brought me to the hard-packed dirt of Red River Road. Leaving Paula's station wagon in the drive, I turned right and started walking south. I'm tall and a little wide—after being crammed into Paula's wagon for the last two days, I needed to stretch my legs.

It was a good day to take in the spectacle of Pleasant Bay. The air was crisp and clear, the sky a buffed porcelain bowl above me, its blue so perfect that looking at it made me dizzy.

Mountains to my left, their shoulders cloaked in green spruce and pine, flanks dotted with pink beach rose so dense, if you bushwhacked in shorts, you'd bleed a pint before reaching the top.

There were no houses or farms on the left side of the road—the vertical rise into the mountains was too steep for habitation.

Through the trees on the opposite side, occasional glimpses revealed the Bay of St. Lawrence, looking like a flat, gray, lifeless continent stretching to the horizon. Every so often, wisps of sea air passed gently over me, tickling my skin like little moths.

To my right, the area between the road and the cliffs was also heavy with trees and brush. I passed only two farmhouses. Much like our rental, they were old and stood in the middle of large, open fields that gave unobstructed views to the water. At one point, I walked past about an acre of land that might once have been another farm, but was now

a marshy expanse of sea grass, mud, and pools of clotted water, their surfaces broken by the charred husks of dead trees, burned to their stumps by fire.

After chugging along effortlessly for two miles, I crossed a small bridge that spanned the Red River, the water below as fast-running and clear as liquid crystal. Beyond the bridge, the road changed from dirt to pavement. At the end of another mile I came around a long sweeping curve and stepped straight into the 1940's.

I stopped and gave myself a moment to take in Pleasant Bay. We'd arrived just after one in the morning. Then, the town had appeared as little more than a pool of harsh light, cast upon the main street by a lone, overhead streetlamp. In the brilliance of the day it somehow managed to retain some of that darkness. And it exuded an odd, hesitant energy, as if it didn't appreciate being observed.

I could see only five structures. Two commercial buildings at street level—Timmon's general store, and a tiny shop further down the street with a crooked sign out front that boasted both *Crafts* and *Closed*—and behind the street, three ancient homesteads clinging to the sides of a hill gradually rising up into the mountains. The home's winding driveways were so long and steep, observing the owners getting their vehicles up there in winter might pass as entertainment for the locals.

Down a short road directly across from Timmon's, a modest harbor, fronted by a long jetty made of massive, car-sized boulders that protected a modest fleet of commercial fishing boats. The docks were empty. There wasn't a single person in sight.

Pleasant Bay could have been a fabrication of Alfred Hitchcock's mind, reproduced on black and white film. The air was so empty, the ether so still, I found myself searching along the sagging black telephone wires and through the spindly trees, their arms twisted and gangly. But I saw none of Hitchcock's birds.

When I opened Timmon's front door, a bell hanging from a spring above my head clanged loudly. Gritty wood floors. Two small windows—one in front, one in back. Shelves stocked with necessities—bread, water, cereal, condiments, soft drinks. A single standing cooler along the backwall—milk, cream, butter, cheese. In a congested side room filled with empty boxes, a freezer marked "ICE". In a corner behind the counter, stacks of to-go cups next to a pot of hot coffee on a warming plate.

No customers.

A woman at a register.

She stood on the other side of a counter crammed with small items—sunblock, nail clippers, postcards. She was short and round-shouldered, her posture awkwardly tilted forward, as if hers had been a life spent inspecting floors. Her eyes canted upward to compensate. They were heavy, tired eyes set in a broad face darkened by folds of wrinkled skin. Her left hand gripped the base of a cash register that might have been built before the world's first war, while her right hand clung to the counter. She seemed to be propping herself up, perhaps against the weight of the world.

I stepped up to the counter. "Good morning," I said.

She eyed me impassively.

"Could I have a cup of coffee, please?"

Yet to say a word, the woman turned and began shuffling over to the coffee pot. Her gait was notably hitched, something on her right side causing apparent pain. Her discomfort was painful to witness. I wondered why the pot wasn't on my side of the counter. Let the customers do the walking.

With her back to me, the woman slowly, deliberately filled an insulated cup, then carefully, almost reverently placed the pot back on the warmer. She pressed a lid firmly onto the cup, turned, and began limping back toward me.

Nearly spellbound by the deliberate nature of her actions. I'd forgotten to ask for cream. "Excuse me . . ."

The woman stopped. Steadfast, she held my cup of coffee in both hands. She looked first into the cup then, with infinite patience, brought her eyes up to mine.

I felt like an idiot. "That looks really good," I said, stupidly.

"Would you like some cream?"

"No, no. I'm good."

"Sugar?"

"No, thank you."

"Honey?"

I thought I detected a sparkle in her eye.

"Please," I said, with excruciating insistence. "Black is fine."

To my relief, the woman made it back to the counter without incident. She put the cup down, as one might if it contained explosives, and smiled.

"Thank you so much," I said, meaning it. I handed the woman a Canadian five-dollar bill with its glossy paper and artistic engravings. She gave me my change, then eased her weight onto the counter again.

I felt something less than good about myself. At that moment, the idyll of Peasant Bay seemed to emphasize my capacity for self-centeredness, impatience, and thoughtlessness—these unenviable traits seemed to stand out in bas-relief above the stillness of town, like the figure of the fool, sketched in black upon a sheet of pure white.

Uncomfortable, I felt the urge to apologize. I did not, reasoning that I couldn't do so without further invoking the woman's infirmity. I knew my apology would be self-serving, accomplishing little more than to smooth the niggling edges of my guilt.

"My name's William. I'm here on vacation from Rhode Island." I pointed in the direction of Red River Road. "We're renting an old farmhouse a few miles north of here. My girlfriend spoke on the phone with someone who works here. Are you Carli?"

"No." The woman's eyes ticked slowly down, as if she were counting the buttons on my shirt. "Carli works the second shift."

"What time does she get in?"

"Her shift is supposed to be two to eight. But she comes in when she pleases."

"Okay."

I nodded. Tapped a finger on the counter. "Well, I'll check back later then," I said, trying to smile, still feeling foolish.

Shifting forward, the woman put even more of her weight on the counter, as if our interchange had worn her out.

I tipped an imaginary hat. "Okay then. Thanks for the coffee. Have a good day."

She nodded, apparently to my third button.

As I opened the door to leave, the woman called out, "The place your renting. Is it the old McKenzie farm?"

Feeling a reprieve, I returned to the counter.

"It is. Why do you ask?"

There was that hint of sparkle in the eye again, but she didn't answer.

I figured there was no harm in forging ahead. Or stretching the truth while I was at it. "I'm a writer and I'm doing some research for a story. Carli said there has been just one murder in this town in the past hundred years. I'm guessing most everyone from around here would know about that. Do you live in Pleasant Bay?"

Her eyes clicked up to meet mine. "Three generation's worth," she said, with a touch of pride.

"So, do you know if it's true?"

"About the one murder?" the woman said.

"Yes"

"No. It's not true."

"Oh," I said, while I thought, *Uh-oh, Paula's not going to like this.*

"Are you certain? Um . . . Your name is?"

"Lizbeth McClain."

"Hello, Lizbeth. William Snow."

Lizbeth nodded.

"So. You were saying. Carli is wrong," I said.

"Dead wrong." The corner of Lizbeth's mouth did a tiny little twitchy, upturned thing.

"How wrong *was* she?" I said.

"There have been three murders," Lizbeth said. "Not one. They were on the same day, which is probably what Carli meant. The McKenzie family. Mother, father, and one of their two sons. The second son, Billy, he *would* have died, if not for Charlie."

"Who's Charlie?"

"Charlie Walters. He was a volunteer fireman at the time. He heard the boy."

"Heard him?"

"Screaming. The man that killed the three McKenzie's buried the boy out in the yard. As the story goes, Billy survived because the killer didn't bury him deep enough."

"Jesus," I said.

"Jesus didn't save Billy," Lizbeth said. "Charlie did."

"Indeed," I said. "Does Charlie Walters still live around here?"

"Indeed." Lizbeth said, her voice lifting in jest. "He lives out past the monastery, at the end of Red River Road."

"Thanks," I said.

"Some folks say . . ." Lizbeth hesitated and, as if in fear of recrimination, released both hands and stepped back. "They say they've seen the Billy McKenzie around his house."

"Really?" I said, thinking, *Paula's gonna love this.* "Hm. The travel agent failed to mention the McKenzie's history."

"And that surprises you?"

I smiled. "Lizbeth. If Billy McKenzie survived—I mean, if he's alive today—why would it be so unusual to see him around his own house?"

"Because." Lizbeth stepped forward and regained her awkward stance. "Billy McKenzie has been locked up ever since the murders."

I got a chill. "You mean, Billy killed his family? Then how did he...?"

"That's not at all what I mean. Billy McKenzie didn't just survive the killing of his family, he witnessed it. After the killer killed the three, he buried Billy alive, right there in the back yard. Little Billy was dug up by Charlie and saved all right, but by that time he'd already lost his mind. They put him in an institution over in Sydney and he's been there

ever since. I think your house is in some kind of trust. There are folks around here say they've seen the rest of the family out there, too."

"Indeed," I said.

"Indeed," Lizbeth said, smiling.

When I exited Timmon's, I sat at a picnic table next to the building with my coffee and tried to absorb what I'd just learned. After a few minutes, I realized my thoughts were being drowned out by a single one:

I hadn't been in Pleasant Bay two days and already I'd been visited by the lone survivor of its only murder in the past hundred years.

Sonofabitch.