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— The girl was dying, and she knew it. Strange. Even with the grisly wounds inflicted on her, all she could feel was the warmth of the sun. Her eyes followed an osprey flying free in the darkening sky.

As far back as her memory stretched, she had daydreamed, and even as her breathing grew shallow, she fell into a reverie. All the cruelty and indignity the man she knew as her master had inflicted on her couldn't destroy her love for the island she had always called home. She could escape in her mind into the forest, gliding like a bird over the trees and ocean, far out of reach. It was where she was free to nourish her imagination, far from the relentless work and the brutality of her daily life.

The end was coming, like the onset of one of her daydreams. Yet, in her heart, she knew a part of her would remain as another aspect of the island she loved, the secret island that belonged to no one. A place that would long outlive the wickedness and hatred she knew so well.

She was gone.

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Astride my twelve-speed Fuji, I headed to my friend Carlo's house by taking the back roads of Sheltered Harbour. Whenever possible, I avoided the direct route, utilizing a maze of concealed pathways as shortcuts between the residential cul-de-sacs and single-lane roads dotting the southern end of Leggatts, the island I called home. Flat and marshy, Leggatts is much like the other hundred-plus Sea Islands that line the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Often referred to as the first line of defense against storms and hurricanes that regularly pound the region, they provide a buffer between the Atlantic and the mainland. This stretch of South Carolina is known as the Low Country.

The Sea Islands were first occupied, seasonally, by Native American tribes: the Chicora, Kiawah, Catawba, Cusabo, Creek, and Yamasee, among many others. These tribes hunted and fished the forests, lagoons, and shores until these islands became important to settlers from across the ocean. Industry and defense of this newly acquired territory became of paramount importance, leading to the assimilation or destruction of the native peoples. The bedrock of the new industry of labor-intensive cotton plantations was slaves. By the late 18th century, what is referred to as long-staple cotton was developed on these Sea Islands, and soon slaveholding planters had amassed fortunes on what pro-secessionists termed "King Cotton."

The Sunday morning mid-April breeze enveloped me in warmth

without the humidity that would join it by early afternoon. Never as free and wild as a Saturday breeze, the Sunday breeze felt threaded with mild caution, holding me back ever so slightly as if trying to lessen the impact of the coming school week. Monday lurked just a sunrise away.

My bike shot out from a hidden path between oleander bushes, tires spitting sand as I turned sharply onto Nighthawk Road, a newer street lined with houses that dwarfed the traditional one-story stucco homes. The families living there were recent island transplants, and with new residents also came new ideas that rubbed uneasily with “the old ways.” Like the rest of Leggatts, fishing, shrimping, and farming had fueled Sheltered Harbour’s economy for generations. Unlike the pragmatic mindset most long-time islanders held, not dissimilar to the tans that darkened their skin, this new blood brought in a love of golf, houses with huge decks, vast windows, and skylights, along with cars that cost more than most natives had in their life insurance policies.

Pedaling down Nighthawk, I glanced to my left out over Mungen Cove and the wide marsh surrounding it. Dark rain clouds were moving in fast. A few fat drops of rain splatted onto my forehead, and just when I had convinced myself that I could stay one step ahead, a wind-lashed thunderstorm engulfed me. Finally reaching the driveway in front of Carlo’s house, I dismounted my bike, balancing on one pedal as I coasted up to the front door. His mom, watering the large potted plants in the foyer, saw me through the wide bay window.

“Come on in, Ash,” Mrs. Spinetta chirped.

Carlo’s mom always wore a smile. To have a classmate of her son’s show up at their house wanting only his friendship seemed to make her truly happy. I had sensed this in her expression when I once caught her eyes settling warmly on Carlo as he and I were sipping Cokes, zoning out to a movie in the living room. Carlo was my best friend and, like me, had trouble fitting in at school.

I stood inside the door, quite soaked, as Carlo appeared at the top of the short staircase leading to the house’s upper two levels. Chuckling, he threw his arms out before him. “Get a little wet?”

Shaking my head like a dog drying itself, I feigned an ashamed voice, “Naw, I just sweat too much. Why d’ya always have to bring up my embarrassing condition?”

It would have taken more than a bit of water to dampen my good spirits that day because Carlo and I were going over to the abandoned lighthouse on Declaration Island. The trip was far from ordinary because the island could be reached only by a land bridge at low tide. My discovery of the place had given me somewhere to escape, be alone, daydream, and do things I shouldn’t be doing, like smoking cigarettes and a bit of grass. Declaration was avoided by most locals. Concerned parents insisted that their children avoid the dilapidated buildings, most prominent among them the lighthouse, at all costs. The skeletal framework tower of cast iron, ninety-five feet high, was an adult’s nightmare. Parents imagined morbid scenarios in which the 112 steps leading to the cypress watch room were booby traps that led to everything from broken bones to death. If visitors reached the top, they found two rickety galleries to tumble from. I always found the galleries solid and completely stable, but adults hinted at other more mysterious reasons I had yet to uncover. While we waited for the showers to pass, Carlo led me into the living room, where we sat for a few minutes drinking Coke and watching a George Carlin stand-up special on HBO.

Our first stop was the General Store in Sheltered Harbour to pick up water and some chicken necks, as we hoped to do some crabbing. I had equipped the rear of my bike with a cargo rack that allowed me to attach a small styrofoam cooler for any crabs we might catch. Inside it, I had stored a couple of ring nets. By securing a chicken neck in the center of the circular net and letting it lay flat on the sea floor, we only needed to pull up the strings attached to the metal ring holding the net to trap any crabs feeding on the neck. Carlo wore an empty backpack for whatever we picked up at the store. Although his frame was stocky, Carlo’s broad dimpled face made him look like a three-year-old kid whenever he smiled. I was always trying to coax him to laugh, to see that smile, so at odds with his tough-guy bearing.

We had become friends almost immediately when we met a year

and a half earlier. Our bond was aided by the T-shirts we were wearing. In the school cafeteria at lunchtime, one's chosen uniform spoke loudly of otherwise invisible boundaries and castes. The guys who wore football jerseys talked loudly in small groups and huddled closely over their lunch tables before leaning back in exaggerated open-mouthed laughter and a hail of high-fives as if they had mapped out a play. At nearby tables, other guys wore khaki pants and Polo or Izod shirts, differentiated only by color: yellow, pink, red, and green, collars upturned, and hair parted conservatively on the side and cut to such a precise length that I often wondered if there was a secret hair fairy who made the rounds on moonless nights, cutting each head of hair with magical machine-like precision.

In this atmosphere, it was easy for me to spot the new guy with shoulder-length hair and a Riot *Fire Down Under* T-shirt, the unmistakable band mascot, a furry white harp seal with lightning bolts as pupils staring at me. It was a shirt I knew well, having one in my collection. Later, Carlo would tell me that the lanky guy wearing the Black Sabbath *Heaven and Hell* T-shirt clued him in but quick, like a flare fired over the assembled throng, to the strong possibility that he had found a friend in the sea of conformity that surrounded us.

Side by side, our arms hanging free, we rode into Sheltered Harbour. Still unincorporated in the early 1980s, the town was on the cusp of receiving its charter from the state. The community consisted mainly of one-story and two-story buildings with brown, salmon, or burnt yellow stucco façades with a few older tin-roof clapboard houses and stores. Interspersed among this traditional island architecture were a few late-twentieth-century incursions, including strip malls, fast-food restaurants, and gas stations. Like the clashing architecture, the town's population comprised a strange amalgamation of fishermen and shrimpers whose families went back generations and newer residents tied to the incipient tourist-driven infrastructure and economy. As we whizzed past the rehabbed tin-roof house that served as the Sheltered Harbour Real Estate offices, Carlo waved at his dad, whose balding head we saw through the sash window, hunched over his desk, talking to a couple of prospective clients. Oblivious to the greeting, Mr.

Spinetta focused on pointing out something in a brochure he held out before him.

Carlo's dad had moved his family to Leggatts a year and a half earlier from New Jersey. He'd had something to do with a big stock brokerage firm up there, but while on vacation with his family, he became engrossed with the idea of getting in on the ground floor of the budding real estate market on the island. The ever-increasing influx of tourists that locals had to contend with had opened new opportunities for ambitious outsiders. After years of relative isolation, the island suddenly had a tourist season, commonly referred to by locals as the "Northern Invasion." When crowds from primarily northern states descended, they clogged the small island roads, acting as far as locals were concerned as if they had never driven a car before, seen traffic signs, or for that matter, encountered pedestrians. I don't know how often a car with a license plate from New York or Pennsylvania turned in front of me without a blinker, nearly running me over.

Carlo's dad was right, of course. He was perceptive in sensing that the island was on a trajectory that would radically shift the established fishing and farming economy into one based mainly on recreational tourism and leisure, with houses and condominiums constructed to take advantage of the ocean and golf course views. Hotels, condos, golf courses, and ostentatious houses sprang up like fleas on a dog's itchy back. Property, mainly oceanfront lots, went for staggering sums, and Carlo's dad was already making more money as a realtor than most people on Leggatts could even dream of. The "Northern Invasion" wasn't limited to just vacationers. Once Leggatts was deemed one of the premier commercial islands of the Low Country, wealthy, primarily white developers added exponentially to well-lined pockets with resorts and property—the new King Cotton.

Hands now firmly gripping the handlebars, I swiftly edged past Carlo, hanging a left onto Merganser Drive. I could easily leave Carlo in the dust on a twisting asphalt road like this with a twelve-speed bike made for just such surfaces. Glancing over my shoulder, I caught a glimpse of him, his long black hair billowing like a flag straight out behind him. Riding his fat-wheeled Schwinn King Sting put him at a

disadvantage on this flat, smooth surface. I could waste him here. Both of us pedaled furiously, Carlo instantly picking up on the challenge.

In my cracking teenage voice, I half sang, half yelled the words to “Speed King” in a poor approximation of Deep Purple’s Ian Gillan.

From far behind me, I could just make out Carlo laughing. “I blew my engine, man.”

At the end of Merganser, with the harbor in full view, I balanced my weight on one pedal and dismounted the still-rolling bike. Several seconds later, red-faced, sweating but smiling, Carlo pulled up alongside me as I parked my bike in the bicycle rack at the side of The General Store. The General Store, sometimes called Jemcraw’s after the owner, was a one-story mustard yellow building with a stucco façade. If a photo had been taken only of “Jemcraw’s,” one would never guess at the rather splendid view of a horizon full of masts and nets that lay just a few short yards beyond. Originally just a modified bay, the harbor had been dredged and expanded, with many docks added to accommodate not only commercial fishing and shrimp boats but also a growing demand by new residents for recreational boats and yachts. Always overhead were seagulls that wheeled, laughed, and cried, mixing with bells from boats and buoys. The sounds etched into my mind, along with the ever-present smell of fish, fresh and decayed, wafting in on the wind.

Laughing, Carlo and I rounded the store building, loudly discussing our contenders for the best song from Iron Maiden’s newly released *The Number of the Beast*. We’d had a bit of concern in our circle before the album came out, as the former lead singer, Paul Di’Anno, had just been replaced with a guy who’d been the front man in Samson. In Carlo’s and my estimation, Di’Anno was the singer of choice for Maiden, bringing with him a punkish attitude and swagger. That said, the two of us instantly accepted the new guy, Bruce Dickinson, with no qualms. Our conversation quickly transformed us into two impassioned politicians in debate. Carlo’s arms shot up and down like he had decided to do jumping jacks without informing his legs as he blurted in rapid-fire, staccato, “The title track is definitely the best song on the album. Dickinson’s scream is from another planet,

man.” Before I could say anything, he added, “That or ‘Hallowed Be Thy Name’...or maybe ‘Run to the Hills.’”

Nodding at his choices, I answered, “‘The Prisoner’ is my top pick. It’s got everything you want in a Maiden song—Bruce screaming like a banshee, Adrian and Dave dueling it out, Burr pummeling the drums, and Steve Harris turning his bass into a galloping horse.”

“‘Children of the Damned’ is great too,” Carlo interrupted.

Like a young Abraham Lincoln, I stood my ground, tight-lipped and stoic. “So is ‘22 Acacia Avenue.’”

“They’re all fucking great, though,” Carlo concluded, a Stephen Douglas to my Lincoln.

“I think we can agree that the whole album will go down in metal history as the classic it is.” Satisfied with our choices, we nodded at each other.

As the bell over the door jingled sharply, announcing our arrival, Carlo and I cast our eyes to the floor, hating the unasked-for attention. Nudging my arm, Carlo looked me squarely in the eyes. “I’ll get some water; you pick up some necks.” His voice, clipped and sober as if we were on a delicate mission that needed to be expedited with precision. Nodding in agreement, I set off down an aisle towards the back of the store. By unspoken understanding, we invariably aimed to complete our shopping as quickly as possible. Bottled water was necessary, as the island’s tap water was always sour with sulfur.

Under thick brows and weighted eyelids, Jemcraw’s eyes watched us suspiciously. Our long hair and heavy metal T-shirts presented an affront to his deeply ingrained idea of order. The domain of long hair was reserved for females, while males were supposed to have short hair (except, of course, for the one long-haired guy in The Oak Ridge Boys). The logic at play was just a few stops down the road from gauging superiority by the pigmentation in the skin. Jemcraw’s creased, meaty forehead was a visible manifestation of gravity, pushing down on the two narrow slits that were his eyes, fighting a losing battle under the constant strain.

Usually talkative and ready with an opinion or anecdote with other locals, he was always withdrawn and reticent with Carlo and me,

ringing up goods without acknowledgment of our presence, looking through us as if we were semitransparent or insubstantial—but always looking. Grabbing our money coarsely and grumbling was his recognition that we did indeed exist as something more than fleeting ghosts. On the days Jemcraw was absent, the younger employees stared after us wherever we moved, their eyes mocking with a young, fresh fire, more focused, alive, and threatening than the glare of the older man.

As we exited the store, Mr. Turnbull, who ran the bait and tackle shop a few doors down, brushed past us as if we were part of the doorway. Through the sound of the tinkling bell and the squeaking of the door's rusty hinges, as it swung closed, we heard robust laughter as Jemcraw said something unintelligible to Turnbull. At once, I felt a recurring sensation of being separated from the world, caught in a paralyzing light reserved just for me. Although this light kept me from seeing beyond it, I was sure that the key to a broader understanding I knew must exist was locked in a drawer behind the counter with Jemcraw. So how would Carlo and I ever know anything more?

Patting my friend's shoulder, I safely locked away that thought with an imaginary key of my own, far away from Jemcraw's drawer. I smiled to myself, seeing an opportunity to use a line from a John Wayne film I'd watched a couple of weeks earlier. Breaking into the stereotypical Wayne accent, I leaned toward Carlo as we approached our bikes. "Slap some bacon on a biscuit, and let's go; we're burnin' daylight."

His face lighting up, Carlo let out a sharp, loud laugh. "Lead the way, partner. I need a change of scenery."

We quickly rebounded from the shop's suffocating atmosphere, stowing the water in the backpack and the chicken necks in the cooler. Lifting his bike, Carlo swung it around and dropped it roughly, bouncing it on its fat tires. Settled on his seat, he squinted in the now-bright sunshine. "And you know exactly how to get there?"

Momentarily standing up off my seat as we started pedaling, I glanced at him. "Sure do, but it took me a while. It wasn't until my third trip there that I caught a glimpse of the light, but there are these inter-

locking lagoons towards the center of the island, and I was on one side of one of 'em, and it was on the other." I smiled, "So damn close, but so far. Finally, a few weeks later, Mike and I ran into this kid named Abe, who was coming across the land bridge that connects to Declaration. He pointed across the inlet at these two huge oaks and said that between 'em was a path, something I had never noticed before, and he said to follow it."

"And you finally found it, huh?"

"Yup. The damn forest is so thick that we didn't see it until it just loomed up over us when we rounded a turn in the road."

The path that Abe had pointed out ended at what was just discernible as the remains of a blacktop road threading its way through the green and amber hues of the forest. Decades earlier, before the government decommissioned the Declaration lighthouse in the early 1930s, this road connected the lighthouse compound to a long-vanished pier on the island's west end. A single-lane track of asphalt made up of crushed oyster shells had allowed for easy transport of provisions for the lightkeepers and lamp oil for the lighthouses because, at one time, there had been two.

Mike had been my best friend three years earlier when I was twelve. From my perspective, Mike and I were destined to be buddies for life. We'd go out into the woods surrounding our houses to explore and have make-believe adventures that seemed as real to us as anything else we experienced. We created imaginary characters so woven into our friendship that we could use mannerisms and phrases particular to them as shorthand, a coded language to convey thoughts in class when we were supposed to be acting more mature.

Like a lot of kids at that age, taboo diversions intrigued us: smoking cigarettes, sampling the hard alcohol from our parent's liquor cabinets, sneaking out to engage in some light vandalism, shoplifting candy bars and comics from the Piggly Wiggly, and if we were feeling cultured, stealing horror and pulp fiction novels from a local bookstore. The diversion that trumped all others, though, was stealing cigarettes, more for the thrill of taking them than for any immediate or long-term smoking purposes because, as our boldness grew, so did