The Choice

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Prologue

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Stories are as unique as the people who tell them, and the best stories are those in which the ending is a surprise. At least, that's what Travis Parker recalled his dad telling him when he was a child. Travis remembered the way his dad would sit on the bed beside him, his mouth curling into a smile as Travis begged for a story.

"What kind of story do you want?" his dad would ask.

"The best one ever," Travis would answer.

Usually, his dad would sit quietly for a few moments, and then his eyes would light up. He'd put his arm around Travis and in a pitch-perfect voice would launch into a story that often kept Travis awake long after his dad had turned out the lights. There was always adventure and danger and excitement and journeys that took place in and around the small coastal town of Beaufort, North Carolina, the place Travis Parker grew up in and still called home. Strangely, most of them included bears. Grizzly bears, brown bears, Kodiak bears . . . his dad wasn't a stickler for reality when it came to a bear's natural habitat. He focused on hair-raising chase scenes through the sandy lowlands, giving Travis nightmares about crazed polar bears on Shackleford Banks until he was well into middle

school. Yet no matter how frightened the stories had made him, he would inevitably ask, "What happened next?"

To Travis, those days seemed like the innocent vestiges of another era. He was forty-three now, and as he parked his car in the parking lot of Carteret General Hospital, where his wife had worked for the past ten years, he thought again about the words he'd always said to his father.

After stepping out of the car, he reached for the flowers he'd brought. The last time he and his wife had spoken, they'd had an argument, and more than anything he wanted to take back his words and make amends. He was under no illusions that the flowers would make things better between them, but he wasn't sure what else to do. It went without saying that he felt guilty about what had happened, but married friends had assured him that guilt was the cornerstone of any good marriage. It meant that a conscience was at work, values were held in high esteem, and reasons to feel guilty were best avoided whenever possible. His friends sometimes admitted their failures in this particular area, and Travis figured that the same could be said about any couple he'd ever met. He supposed his friends had said it to make him feel better, to reassure him that no one was perfect, that he shouldn't be so hard on himself. "Everyone makes mistakes," they'd said, and though he'd nodded as if he believed them, he knew they would never understand what he was going through. They couldn't. After all, their wives were still sleeping beside them every night; none of them had ever been separated for three months, none of them wondered whether their marriage would ever return to what it once had been.

As he crossed the parking lot, he thought about both of his daughters, his job, his wife. At the moment, none of them gave him much comfort. He felt as though he were failing in practically every area of his life. Lately, happiness seemed as distant and unattainable to him as space travel. He hadn't always felt this way. There had been a long period of time during which he remembered

being very happy. But things change. People change. Change was one of the inevitable laws of nature, exacting its toll on people's lives. Mistakes are made, regrets form, and all that was left were repercussions that made something as simple as rising from the bed seem almost laborious.

Shaking his head, he approached the door of the hospital, picturing himself as the child he had been, listening to his father's stories. His own life had been the best story ever, he mused, the kind of story that should have ended on a happy note. As he reached for the door, he felt the familiar rush of memory and regret.

Only later, after he let the memories overtake him once again, would he allow himself to wonder what would happen next.

PART ONE

One

May 1996

Tell me again why I agreed to help you with this." Matt, red-faced and grunting, continued to push the spa toward the recently cut square at the far edge of the deck. His feet slipped, and he could feel sweat pouring from his forehead into the corners of his eyes, making them sting. It was hot, way too hot for early May. Too damn hot for this, that's for sure. Even Travis's dog, Moby, was hiding in the shade and panting, his tongue hanging out.

Travis Parker, who was pushing the massive box alongside him, managed to shrug. "Because you thought it would be fun," he said. He lowered his shoulder and shoved; the spa—which must have weighed four hundred pounds—moved another couple of inches. At this rate, the spa should be in place, oh . . . sometime next week.

"This is ridiculous," Matt said, heaving his weight into the box, thinking that what they really needed was a team of mules. His back was killing him. For a moment, he visualized his ears blowing off the sides of his head from the strain, shooting in both directions like the bottle rockets he and Travis used to launch as kids.

"You've already said that."

"And it isn't fun," Matt grunted.

"You said that, too."

"And it isn't going to be easy to install."

"Sure it is," Travis said. He stood and pointed to the lettering on the box. "See? It says right here, 'Easy to Install.'" From his spot beneath the shady tree, Moby—a purebred boxer—barked as if in agreement, and Travis smiled, looking way too pleased with himself.

Matt scowled, trying to catch his breath. He hated that look. Well, not always. Most of the time he enjoyed his friend's boundless enthusiasm. But not today. Definitely not today.

Matt reached for the bandanna in his rear pocket. It was soaked with sweat, which had of course done wonders for the seat of his pants. He wiped his face and wrung the bandanna with a quick twist. Sweat dribbled from it like a leaky faucet onto the top of his shoe. He stared at it almost hypnotically, before feeling it soak through the light mesh fabric, giving his toes a nice, slimy feel. Oh, that was just dandy, wasn't it?

"As I recall, you said Joe and Laird would be here to help us with your 'little project' and that Megan and Allison would cook some burgers and we'd have beer, and that—oh yeah, installing this thing should only take a couple of hours at the most."

"They're coming," Travis said.

"You said that four hours ago."

"They must be running a little late."

"Maybe you never called them at all."

"Of course I called them. And they're bringing the kids, too. I promise."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Uh-huh," Matt answered. He stuffed the bandanna back in his pocket. "And by the way—assuming they don't arrive soon, just how on earth do you think the two of us will be able to lower this thing into place?"

Travis dismissed the problem with a wave as he turned toward

the box again. "We'll figure it out. Just think how well we've done so far. We're almost halfway there."

Matt scowled again. It was Saturday—Saturday! His day of recreation and relaxation, his chance to escape from the grindstone, the break he *earned* after five days at the bank, the kind of day he *needed*. He was a loan officer, for God's sake! He was supposed to push paper, not hot tubs! He could have been watching the Braves play the Dodgers! He could have been golfing! He could have gone to the beach! He could have slept in with Liz before heading to her parents' house like they did almost every Saturday, instead of waking at the crack of dawn and performing manual labor for eight straight hours beneath a scalding southern sun. . . .

He paused. Who was he kidding? Had he not been here, he would have definitely spent the day with Liz's parents, which was, in all honesty, the main reason he'd agreed to Travis's request in the first place. But that wasn't the point. The point was, he didn't need this. He really didn't.

"I don't need this," he said. "I really don't."

Travis didn't seem to hear him. His hands were already on the box, and he was getting into position. "You ready?"

Matt lowered his shoulder, feeling bitter. His legs were shaking. Shaking! He already knew he'd be in serious, double-dose-of-Advil pain in the morning. Unlike Travis, he didn't make it into the gym four days a week or play racquetball or go running or go scuba diving in Aruba or surfing in Bali or skiing in Vail or anything else the guy did. "This isn't fun, you know?"

Travis winked. "You said that already, remember?"

"Wow!" Joe commented, lifting an eyebrow as he walked the perimeter of the hot tub. By then, the sun was beginning its descent, streams of gold reflecting off the bay. In the distance, a heron broke from the trees and gracefully skimmed the surface, dispersing the light. Joe and Megan, along with Laird and Allison, had arrived a

few minutes before with kids in tow, and Travis was showing them around. "This looks great! You two did all of this today?"

Travis nodded, holding his beer. "It wasn't so bad," he said. "I think Matt even enjoyed it."

Joe glanced at Matt, who lay flattened in a lawn chair off to the side of the deck, a cold rag over his head. Even his belly—Matt had always been on the pudgy side—seemed to sag.

"I can see that."

"Was it heavy?"

"Like an Egyptian sarcophagus!" Matt croaked. "One of those gold ones that only cranes can move!"

Joe laughed. "Can the kids get in?"

"Not yet. I just filled it, and the water will take a little while to heat up. The sun will help, though."

"The sun will heat it within minutes!" Matt moaned. "Within seconds!"

Joe grinned. Laird and the three of them had gone to school together since kindergarten.

"Tough day, Matt?"

Matt removed the rag and scowled at Joe. "You have no idea. And thanks for showing up on time."

"Travis said to be here at five. If I had known you needed help, I would have come earlier."

Matt slowly shifted his gaze to Travis. He really hated his friend sometimes.

"How's Tina doing?" Travis said, changing the subject. "Is Megan getting any sleep?"

Megan was chatting with Allison at the table on the far end of the deck, and Joe glanced briefly in her direction. "Some. Tina's cough is gone and she's been able to sleep through the night again, but sometimes I just think that Megan isn't wired to sleep. At least, not since she became a mom. She gets up even if Tina hasn't made a peep. It's like the quiet wakes her up."

"She's a good mom," Travis said. "She always has been."

Joe turned to Matt. "Where's Liz?" he asked.

"She should be here any minute," Matt answered, his voice floating up as if from the dead. "She spent the day with her parents."

"Lovely," Joe commented.

"Be nice. They're good people."

"I seem to recall you saying that if you had to sit through one more of your father-in-law's stories about his prostate cancer or listen to your mother-in-law fret about Henry getting fired again—even though it wasn't his fault—you were going to stick your head in the oven."

Matt struggled to sit up. "I never said that!"

"Yes, you did." Joe winked as Matt's wife, Liz, rounded the corner of the house with Ben toddling just in front of her. "But don't worry. I won't say a word."

Matt's eyes darted nervously from Liz to Joe and back again, checking to see if she'd heard.

"Hey, y'all!" Liz called out with a friendly wave, leading little Ben by the hand. She made a beeline for Megan and Allison. Ben broke away and toddled toward the other kids in the yard.

Joe saw Matt sigh in relief. He grinned and lowered his voice. "So . . . Matt's in-laws. Is that how you conned him into coming here?"

"I might have mentioned it," Travis smirked.

Joe laughed.

"What are you guys saying?" Matt called out suspiciously.

"Nothing," they said in unison.

Later, with the sun down and the food eaten, Moby curled up at Travis's feet. As he listened to the sound of the kids splashing away in the spa, Travis felt a wave of satisfaction wash over him. This was his favorite kind of evening, whiled away to the sound of shared laughter and familiar banter. One minute Allison was talking to Joe; the next minute she was chatting with Liz and then Laird or Matt; and so on for everyone seated around the outdoor

table. No pretenses, no attempts to impress, no one trying to show anyone up. His life, he sometimes thought, resembled a beer commercial, and for the most part, he was content simply to ride the current of good feeling.

Every now and then, one of the wives would get up to check on the kids. Laird, Joe, and Matt, on the other hand, reserved their child-rearing duties at times like these to periodically raising their voices in hopes of calming down the kids or preventing them from teasing or accidentally hurting one another. Sure, one of the kids would throw a tantrum now and then, but most problems were solved with a quick kiss on a scraped knee or a hug that was as tender to watch from a distance as it must have been for the kid to receive.

Travis looked around the table, pleased that his childhood friends not only had become good husbands and fathers, but were still a part of his life. It didn't always turn out that way. At thirty-two, he knew that life was sometimes a gamble, and he'd survived more than his share of accidents and falls, some of which should have inflicted far more serious bodily injury than they had. But it wasn't just that. Life was unpredictable. Others he'd known growing up had already died in car accidents, been married and divorced, found themselves addicted to drugs or booze, or simply moved away from this tiny town, their faces already blurring in his memory. What were the odds that the four of them—who'd known one another since kindergarten—would find themselves in their early thirties still spending weekends together? Pretty small, he thought. But somehow, after hanging together through all the adolescent acne and girl troubles and pressure from their parents, then heading off to four different colleges with differing career goals, they had each, one by one, moved back here to Beaufort. They were more like family than friends, right down to coded expressions and shared experiences that no outsiders could ever fully understand.

And miraculously, the wives got along, too. They'd come from different backgrounds and different parts of the state, but mar-

riage, motherhood, and the endless gossip of small-town America were more than enough to keep them chatting regularly on the phone and bonding like long-lost sisters. Laird had been the first to marry—he and Allison had tied the knot the summer after they graduated from Wake Forest; Joe and Megan walked the aisle a year later, after falling in love during their senior year at North Carolina. Matt, who'd gone to Duke, met Liz here in Beaufort, and they were married a year after that. Travis had been the best man in all three weddings.

Some things had changed in the past few years, of course, largely because of the new additions to the families. Laird wasn't always available to go mountain biking, Joe couldn't join Travis on the spur of the moment to go skiing in Colorado as he used to, and Matt had all but given up trying to keep up with him on most things. But that was okay. They were all still available enough, and among the three of them—and with enough planning—he was still able to make the most of his weekends.

Lost in thought, Travis hadn't realized that the conversation had lapsed.

"Did I miss something?"

"I asked if you'd talked to Monica lately," Megan said, her tone letting Travis know he was in trouble. All six of them, he thought, took a bit too much interest in his love life. The trouble with married people was that they seemed to believe that everyone they knew should get married. Every woman Travis dated was thus subjected to subtle, though unyielding, evaluation, especially by Megan. She was usually the ringleader at moments like these, always trying to figure out what made Travis tick when it came to women. And Travis, of course, loved nothing more than to push her buttons in return.

"Not recently," he said.

"Why not? She's nice."

She's also more than a little neurotic, Travis thought. But that was beside the point.

"She broke up with me, remember?"

"So? It doesn't mean she doesn't want you to call."

"I thought that's exactly what it meant."

Megan, along with Allison and Liz, stared at him as if he were just plain dense. The guys, as usual, seemed to be enjoying this. It was a regular feature of their evenings.

"But you were fighting, right?"

"So?"

"Did you ever think she might have simply broken up with you because she was angry?"

"I was angry, too."

"Why?"

"She wanted me to see a therapist."

"And let me guess—you said you didn't need to see one."

"The day I need to see a therapist is the day you see me hike up my skirt and crochet some mittens."

Joe and Laird laughed, but Megan's eyebrows shot up. Megan, they all knew, watched Oprah nearly every day.

"You don't think men need therapy?"

"I know I don't."

"But generally speaking?"

"Since I'm not a general, I really couldn't say."

Megan leaned back in her chair. "I think Monica might be on to something. If you ask me, I think you have commitment issues."

"Then I'll make sure not to ask you."

Megan leaned forward. "What's the longest you've ever dated someone? Two months? Four months?"

Travis pondered the question. "I dated Olivia for almost a year."

"I don't think she's talking about high school," Laird cracked. Occasionally, his friends enjoyed throwing him under the bus, so to speak.

"Thanks, Laird," Travis said.

"What are friends for?"

"You're changing the subject," Megan reminded him.

Travis drummed his fingers on his leg. "I guess I'd have to say . . . I can't remember."

"In other words, not long enough to remember?"

"What can I say? I've yet to meet any woman who could measure up to any of you."

Despite the growing darkness, he could tell she was pleased by his words. He'd learned long ago that flattery was his best defense at moments like these, especially since it was usually sincere. Megan, Liz, and Allison were terrific. All heart and loyalty and generous common sense.

"Well, just so you know, I like her," she said.

"Yeah, but you like everyone I date."

"No, I don't. I didn't like Leslie."

None of the wives had liked Leslie. Matt, Laird, and Joe, on the other hand, hadn't minded her company at all, especially when she wore her bikini. She was definitely a beauty, and while she wasn't the type he'd ever marry, they'd had a lot of fun while it lasted.

"I'm just saying that I think you should give her a call," she persisted.

"I'll think about it," he said, knowing he wouldn't. He rose from the table, angling for an escape. "Anyone need another beer?"

Joe and Laird lifted their bottles in unison; the others shook their heads. Travis started for the cooler before hesitating near the sliding glass door of his house. He darted inside and changed the CD, listening to the strains of new music filtering out over the yard as he brought the beers back to the table. By then, Megan, Allison, and Liz were already chatting about Gwen, the woman who did their hair. Gwen always had good stories, many of which concerned the illicit predilections of the town's citizens.

Travis nursed his beer silently, looking out over the water.

"What are you thinking about?" Laird asked.

"It's not important."

"What is it?"