

ONE

Alton

Beach Drive has always had the smoothest pavement in the city because that's where the money lives. I remember how the steering wheel trembled in my hands that afternoon as I drove along the edge of North Shore Park, and I made a mental note to check the tire pressure in the morning. But then it occurred to me that in three or four hours I would be dead, and the Porsche would become someone else's problem.

I nudged the gas pedal and the Boxster's engine responded, as if it had been anticipating the weight of my foot all along. I slipped past slower-moving Jaguar S-Types and Lexus SUVs piloted by retired hedge fund managers and solitary platinum-blond soccer moms. The late afternoon sun hung in the sky, two or three hand widths above the horizon, winking through the gaps between the condo towers as I drove past. I couldn't beat the light at Twelfth Avenue, so I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel while I

waited for green and tried to pretend I didn't notice the cars I'd just passed had already crept up to join me at the intersection.

Fuck it. Slow and steady might win the race, but it's certainly no way to live.

That day was cold for March. My hands felt raw on the steering wheel. It was probably somewhere in the forties that day, colder than usual for a March afternoon, and I hadn't thought to bring my gloves that morning. I probably could have blunted the chill a little by putting the top up, but I never did that unless it was raining. Driving a convertible with the top up seems pointless to me.

The cold worried me. The weather could scuttle everything I'd been planning for the last few weeks. There wasn't any room left on the calendar to push this back. All my arrangements were in place. All the external forces beyond my control were coming together in a vortex that would upend everything soon, possibly a matter of days. Maybe less. If I didn't go that day, I might not get another chance. How could I be sure that those gray-suited, humorless sons of bitches wouldn't show up at nine o'clock the next morning? Hell, they could be at the office *right then*, at that very moment, overturning filing cabinets and confiscating computers and bullying my staff. Could I be

sure they weren't?

No. I couldn't. So it had to be that day, chill or no chill. Then the light turned green, and as usual I was first off the line.

It took a little less than fifteen minutes to make the drive from my office to the Eighth Avenue Marina. I rolled through the gap in the long chain-link fence and heard my front bumper bounce and scrape along the tricky little dip in the pavement, the one I always forgot about, right next to the tiny wooden guard shack, streaked in peeling blue and white paint. There was no guard that day. I don't know why I even bothered to look. In all the years I had kept my boat at Eighth Avenue, I'd never seen anyone in that shack.

There were only three or four other cars in the lot that day, typical for a weekday. That marina's been just barely hanging on for years now. The only reason I used it was the location. It was only a few minutes away from both the office and my house, so whenever I felt the urge to be on the water, I could drop whatever I was doing and be half a mile offshore in less than thirty minutes. I was surprised the place was still open at all, because every couple of years the Beach Drive Residents Association tries to convince the city council to shut it down. So far, the marina's won every time, but I've always thought

the residents have a pretty good case. That marina is about as out of place as it could possibly be.

The Porsche glided through the lot almost on its own, past the small cluster of cars until the closest one was about ten spaces away. I parked across two spaces, at about a thirty-degree angle. I started parking that way after I had to spend twelve hundred dollars to get a tiny scuff mark buffed out of the side panel a couple years back. Body shops see you roll up in a Porsche and they will squeeze you for whatever they think you're good for. In my experience, people usually want to kidney-punch anyone who parks like I do, but there's plenty of parking anywhere you go in Florida, so it's not like I was ever really putting anyone out. I went around to the trunk, which was empty except for a couple of bottles of Scotch that I picked up at the ABC on the way over. I'd never heard of the brand before—I wasn't even sure I could pronounce it, to be honest—but it was expensive, and I knew nobody would believe I'd waste my last hour or two on earth with the cheap stuff. Those are the details that sell the story.

I squinted and looked northward, toward the marina's squat, mango-colored office building. Its jalousie windows probably dated back to the 1950s and were coated with a thin film of dried sea salt

residue and precipitate from marine diesel engine exhaust. With the glare of the setting sun reflecting from them, I couldn't tell if anyone was watching me from inside. I waited for a minute or two and then grabbed one of the bottles. The cork-bottomed cap twisted off easily and I sat down on the pavement, leaning against the rear bumper with my legs splayed out in front of me.

I looked out past the empty slips, toward the open water, where it was nothing but whitecaps. From what I could tell, the largest swells were maybe two feet, which meant it would probably be worse offshore. That was both a good thing and a bad thing. Bad because it meant I'd have to work harder—maybe a *lot* harder—to make it back; good because it was another detail that would help sell the story. I closed my eyes and massaged the bridge of my nose for about thirty seconds. When I opened my eyes again I was looking at my wedding ring.

I took a swig from the bottle and instantly regretted it. The Scotch tasted like perfume and caramel and dirt, and it scorched my esophagus on the way down. I wondered why I hadn't just bought vodka instead, but then I remembered that I didn't actually have to drink any of it. It was just a prop.

Other than the handful of parked cars in the lot, there wasn't a hint of another person at that marina; still, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching me. I did my best to look relaxed as I stood up and scanned the parking lot. A few scattered weeds poked through cracks in the pavement and bowed with each gust of wind. Nothing else moved.

I took a deep breath and tried to look casual as I strolled over to the nearest empty slip, where I dumped the bottle into the oil-slicked water below. Then I went back to the car, opened the other bottle and let some of it glug out onto the pavement. I splashed the rest of the bottle's contents onto the passenger seat and into the foot well, and then tossed the bottles in after it. I hated to do it. But it was all part of the rich tapestry of bullshit I was trying to weave together.

The quicker I left, the less chance someone would see me. I knew that. But I lingered, just for a moment or two, brushing my fingers on the door panel, back and forth. I'd wanted a Porsche since I was nine, and the day I bought it—a Thursday, light rain in the morning that cleared up by lunchtime, a flawless afternoon for a top-down cruise up the beach—was one of the three or four happiest days of my life. I know how that sounds, but it's the truth. Yes, it was

unreliable, and yes, it was an impractical way to get around, and yes, it had been the focal point of jokes, amateur psychoanalysis and—occasionally—simmering resentment from Nicole. But none of that mattered, or at least, it mattered less than the fact that the car made me feel like the man I'd always thought I was supposed to feel like, a man who was somehow above the world he floated through, always on his way to more important places. And now I was about to let it go.

Again, I know how that sounds, to talk about a car like that. It's just a car. I know that. But all I can say is that either you understand what I'm talking about or you don't, and if you don't, I feel sorry for you.

I stood there for a couple minutes, the key fob clenched in my fist, squeezing it hard enough to turn my fingers white, as if I was trying to turn it into a diamond. Then I slid the keys into my pocket and pushed the trunk lid down until I heard a quiet click, and I turned away from my baby for the last time and headed off toward my slip, number 34.

The dock leading out to my slip was tricky in spots. Once I tripped over a warped piece of decking. The planks were all split and weathered, sometimes with gaps an inch wide between them. They all

should have been replaced years ago. I almost fell in the water, and even though I hadn't really been hurt, I threatened to sue the marina anyway. One of the advantages of people knowing you're a lawyer is that a threat like that packs a little more weight. The marina's facilities manager, this befuddled little man with a brushy mustache covering his entire mouth, nodded his head and promised to pour more money into facilities maintenance, but only if I agreed not to file suit. Which was fine with me, because suing them would have been more trouble than it was worth, and I don't do personal injury work anyway. I leave that to the correspondence-school lawyers. Anyway, they started by yanking out the offending plank and replacing it with a fresh one, nice and flat and sturdy. As it turned out, that's also where they stopped: in the two years since, nothing else had been fixed, not so much as a loose nail. They never even bothered to paint the new plank.

My boat was a twenty-six-foot Island Runner, yellow hulled and glorious, and that afternoon it bobbed in time with the slow three-quarter beat of the harbor chop. I hopped aboard, timing the waves so that I didn't even have to break my stride when my feet hit the deck. I couldn't quite shake the feeling that I'd forgotten something, but the

backpack, kayak and paddle were still lying along the starboard side of the console, right where I had left them the night before, so I just fired up the engines. They chuckled at me for a few seconds before settling into a nice throaty purr. I cast off the lines and dropped the props into the water and then I was off, blasting into the open sea, the raw, elemental power of the machine surging up through my hands, the chill wind blasting into my cheeks. I smiled, knowing it was the smile of a free man, or of a damned one.

I'd been going full-bore for about half an hour before I figured I was far enough out, maybe five miles or so. At that distance nobody on shore would be able to get a good look at what I was doing, but it wasn't so far that I'd be unable to make it back without exhausting myself in the process. I cut the engines and sat down on the bench, looking west, into the setting sun. There was still too much light. Then I realized that I had no idea what time sunset actually was that day. I'd completely forgotten to look it up. From the color of the sky, I figured it was at least another twenty minutes off.

To pass the time, I tried to busy my mind, to fill my thoughts with the procedures and timetables and logistics of . . . well, whatever all of *this* was. Was it insurance fraud? From a legal standpoint,

certainly, but that wasn't the point. The fraud was just incidental. I wasn't doing this for the money. This was what I had to do *as a man*, as a real man who loved his wife and daughter more than he loved himself, or anything else for that matter. The money was just . . . well, all right, I will concede that it would all be impossible without the money. I needed it if I was to have any chance at all of sparing them from the indignity and humiliation that—

—and then just like *that*, I was exactly where I didn't want to be. Thinking of Nicole and Clara, whom, assuming everything went the way it was supposed to, I would never see again.

I rested my forehead in my hand and rubbed my temples. My family was all that had ever mattered to me. More than career, more than material things. This is something you will have to understand if the rest of this story is going to make any sense to you. I missed them so much already, with this deep and insistent ache in the pit of my chest that I knew would only get worse. I had meant to snap one last picture of Clara this morning before she left for school—maybe at breakfast, that would have probably been the time—but I had forgotten. Well, not so much *forgotten* as run out of time. Just as well, really. My phone could never show up on land, could never be dialed,

could never be switched on again. Disappearing meant *disappearing*, and something as simple and inconsequential as that phone could give everything away, the plan, the money, all of it. So instead I flipped through the photos I'd memorized long ago—Clara in the car seat, clutching her prized stuffed walrus and grinning in that innocent and slightly maniacal way only a small child can pull off; Clara sprawled on the orange-and-white polka-dot carpet of the children's section at the library, surrounded by stacks of picture books; Clara with her face buried in a piece of birthday cake (she refused to use a fork because it was her birthday and she didn't want to, simple as that) while Nicole hovered in the background with this mortified expression on her face, trying to pretend it didn't bother her—until I couldn't, just couldn't anymore. I snapped to my feet and heaved that phone into the wind with everything I had. It climbed, flipping end over end, and I was pretty impressed with the arc I'd gotten until a fresh gust of wind took hold of it, and then the phone dropped from the sky like a wounded pheasant.

By then the sun was almost gone. My escape kayak was wide and stubby, only about twelve feet or so and not built to stand up to the rigors of ocean use. The week before I had managed to fit an

eighteen-footer in the boat, but I hadn't been able to get it to lie flat along the deck, where it would have been out of sight of anyone who happened to walk past slip 34. (As an aside, it's surprisingly difficult to return a kayak to a certain big-box sporting goods store that I won't name here, even if it's never touched the water. So consider yourself warned.) If I'd had the ocean kayak, I probably could have gone another couple miles without any problem. But I didn't, so five miles it was.

The waiting, the thinking, the goddamn pictures—it was all ratcheting up the tension, all of it increasing the pressure in my mind, giving power to my doubts. Blood coursed through my head with a rhythmic thrumming; I could actually hear my own pulse. Wasn't that a sign of an impending stroke? I thought I'd heard something like that once. In any case, I didn't think it could be a sign of anything *good*. Then, finally, the sun retired below the horizon, and it was time. I stuffed my jacket into the waterproof backpack, an all-black, heavily padded nylon thing I'd picked up at REI. Then I peeled off my shirt—a soft cotton olive-colored Oxford, a Father's Day gift from Clara—khakis and shoes and crammed them inside, on top of the jacket. From the backpack's front pouch I removed a pair of water socks and

neoprene gloves—both black—to match the sleek wetsuit I had been wearing under my clothes since I left the office, and I put them on.

I crouched to fasten the paddle to the kayak and then pitched it all over the side, steadying it with the boat hook to keep it close aboard. I tightened the straps on my backpack so it didn't slide, tugged down the sleeves of my wetsuit and took a few quick, deep breaths. I was ready, or at least as ready as I was ever going to get.