The Lucky One
by chanelloves1D

Summary

When U.S. Marine Zayn Malik finds a photograph of a smiling young man half-buried in the dirt during his third tour of duty in Iraq, his first instinct is to toss it aside. Instead, he brings it back to the base for someone to claim, but when no one does, he finds himself always carrying the photo in his pocket. Soon Malik experiences a sudden streak of luck—winning poker games and even surviving deadly combat that kills two of his closest buddies. Only his best friend, Sean, seems to have an explanation for his good fortune: the photograph—his lucky charm.

Back home in Colorado, Malik can’t seem to get the photo—and the man in it—out of his mind. Believing that he somehow holds the key to his destiny, he sets out on a journey across the country to find him, never expecting the strong but vulnerable man he encounters—Niall, a divorced father with a young son—to be the boy he’s been waiting his whole life to meet. Caught off guard by the attraction he feels, Malik keeps the story of the photo, and his luck, a secret. As he and Niall embark upon a passionate and all-consuming love affair, the secret he is keeping will soon threaten to tear them apart—destroying not only their love, but also their lives.

Notes

This is Nicholas Sparks' book --- one of my favorites --- rewritten as Ziall Horlik fanfiction.

All credit goes to Nicholas Sparks and no copyright intended.

If you like this fic, please purchase the book by Nicholas Sparks. It really is a treasure.
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See the end of the work for more notes.
Deputy Liam Payne hadn't heard them approach, and up close, he didn't like the looks of them any more than he had the first time he'd seen them. The dog was part of it. He wasn't fond of German shepherds, and this one, though he was standing quietly, reminded him of Panther, the police dog that rode with Deputy Kenny Moore and was quick to bite suspects in the crotch at the slightest command. Most of the time he regarded Moore as an idiot, but he was still just about the closest thing to a friend that Payne had in the department, and he had to admit that Moore had a way of telling those crotch-biting stories that made Payne double over in laughter. And Moore would definitely have appreciated the little skinny-dipping party Payne had just broken up, when he'd spied a couple of coeds sunning down by the creek in all their morning glory. He hadn't been there for more than a few minutes and had snapped only a couple of pictures on the digital camera when he saw a third girl pop up from behind a hydrangea bush. After quickly ditching the camera in the bushes behind him, he'd stepped out from behind the tree, and a moment later, he and the coed were face-to-face.

"Well, what have we got here?" he drawled, trying to put her on the defensive.

He hadn't liked the fact that he'd been caught, nor was he pleased with his insipid opening line. Usually he was smoother than that. A lot smoother. Thankfully, the girl was too embarrassed to notice much of anything, and she almost tripped while trying to back up. She stammered something like an answer as she tried to cover herself with her hands. It was like watching someone play a game of Twister by herself.

He made no effort to avert his gaze. Instead he smiled, pretending not to notice her body, as if he bumped into naked women in the woods all the time. He could already tell she knew nothing about the camera.

"Now calm down. What's going on?" he asked.

He knew full well what was going on. It happened a few times every summer, but especially in August: Coeds from Chapel Hill or NC State, heading to the beach for a long, last-chance weekend at Emerald Isle before the fall term began, often made a detour onto an old logging road that twisted and bumped for a mile or so into the national forest before reaching the point where Swan Creek made a sharp turn toward the South River. There was a rock-pebble beach there that had come to be known for nude sunbathing—how that happened, he had no idea—and Payne often made it a point to swing by on the off chance he might get lucky. Two weeks ago, he'd seen six lovelies; today, however, there were three, and the two who'd been lying on their towels were already reaching for their shirts. Though one of them was a bit heavy, the other two—including the brunette standing in front of him—had the kind of figures that made frat boys go crazy. Deputies, too.

"We didn't know anyone was out here! We thought it would be okay!"

Her face held just enough innocence to make him think, 'Wouldn't Daddy be proud if he knew what his little girl was up to?' It amused him to imagine what she might say to that, but since he was in uniform, he knew he had to say something official. Besides, he knew he was pressing his luck; if word got out that the sheriffs office was actually patrolling the area, there'd be no more coeds in the future, and that was something he didn't want to contemplate.

"Let's go talk to your friends."

He followed her back toward the beach, watching as she tried unsuccessfully to cover her
backside, enjoying the little show. By the time they stepped from the trees into the clearing by the river, her friends had pulled on their shirts. The brunette jogged and jiggled toward the others and quickly reached for a towel knocking over a couple of cans of beer in the process. Payne motioned to a nearby tree.

"Didn't y'all see the sign?"

On cue, their eyes swung that way. People were sheep, waiting for the next order, he thought. The sign, small and partially hidden by the low-slung branches of an ancient live oak, had been posted by order of Judge Kendrick Payne, who also happened to be his uncle. The idea for the signs had been Liam's; he knew that the public prohibition would only enhance the attraction of the place.

"We didn't see it!" the brunette cried, swiveling back to him. "We didn't know! We just heard about this place a couple of days ago!" She continued to protest while struggling with the towel; the others were too terrified to do much of anything except try to wiggle back into their bikini bottoms. "It's the first time we've ever been here!"

It came out like a whine, making her sound like a spoiled sorority sister. Which all of them probably were. They had that look.

"Did you know that public nudity is a misdemeanor in this county?"

He saw their young faces grow even more pale, knowing they were imagining this little transgression on their record. Fun to watch, but he reminded himself not to let it go too far.

"What's your name?"


"Where are you from?"

"Chapel Hill. But I'm from Charlotte originally."

"I see some alcohol there. Are y'all twenty-one?" For the first time, the others answered as well. "Yes, sir."

"Okay, Amy. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to take you at your word that you didn't see the sign and that you're of legal age to drink, so I'm not going to make a big deal out of this. I'll pretend I wasn't even here. As long as you promise not to tell my boss that I let you three off the hook."

They weren't sure whether to believe him.

"Really?"

"Really," he said. "I was in college once, too." He hadn't been, but he knew it sounded good. "And you might want to put your clothes on. You never know—there might be people lurking around." He flashed a smile. "Make sure you clean up all the cans, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"I appreciate it." He turned to leave.
"That's it?"

Turning around, he flashed his smile again- "That's it. Y'all take care now."

Payne pushed through the underbrush, ducking beneath the occasional branch on the way back to his cruiser, thinking he'd handled that well. Very well indeed. Amy had actually smiled at him, and as he'd turned away, he'd toyed with the idea of doubling back and asking her for her phone number. No, he decided, it was probably better to simply leave good enough alone. More than likely they'd go back and tell their friends that even though they’d been caught by the sheriff, nothing had happened to them. Word would get around that the deputies around here were cod. Still, as he wove through the woods, he hoped the pictures came out. They would make a nice addition to his little collection.

All in all, it had been an excellent day. He was about to go back for the camera when he heard whirling.

He followed the sound toward the logging road and saw the it ranger with a dog, walking slowly up the road, looking like some kind of hippie from the sixties.

The stranger wasn't with the girls. Payne was sure of it. The guy was too old to be a college student for one thing; he had to be late twenties, at least. His quiffed hair reminded Payne of a rat’s nest, and on the stranger's back, Payne could see the outlines of a sleeping bag poking out from beneath a backpack. This was no day tripper on the way to the beach; this guy had the appearance of someone who’d been hiking, maybe even camping out. No telling how long he'd been here or what he'd seen.

Like Payne taking pictures?

No way. It wasn't possible. He'd been hidden from the main road, the underbrush was thick, and he would have heard someone tramping through the woods. Right? Still, it was an odd place to be hiking. They were in the middle of nowhere out here, and the last thing he wanted was a bunch of hippie losers ruining this spot for the coeds.

By then, the stranger had passed him. He was nearly to the cruiser and heading toward the Jeep that the girls had driven. Payne stepped onto the road and cleared his throat. The stranger and the dog turned at the sound.

From a distance, Payne continued to evaluate them. The stranger seemed unfazed by Payne's sudden appearance, as did the dog, and there was something in the stranger's gaze that unsettled him. Like he'd almost expected Payne to show up. Same thing with the German shepherd. The dog's expression was aloof and wary at the same time—intelligent, almost—which was the same way Panther often appeared before Moore set him loose. His stomach did a quick flip-flop. He had to force himself not to cover his privates.

For a long minute, they continued to stare at each other. Clay-ton had learned a long time ago that his uniform intimidated most people. Everyone, even innocent people, got nervous around the law, and he figured this guy was no exception. It was one of the reasons he loved being a deputy.

"You got a leash for your dog?" he said, making it sound more like a command than a question.

"In my backpack."

Payne could hear no accent at all. "Johnny Carson English," as his mother used to describe it. "Put it on."
"Don't worry. He won't move unless I tell him to."

"Put it on anyway."

The stranger lowered his backpack and fished around; Payne craned his neck, hoping for a glimpse of anything that could be construed as drugs or weapons. A moment later, the leash was attached to the dog's collar and the stranger faced him with an expression that seemed to say, Now what?

"What are you doing out here?" Payne asked.

"Hiking."

"That's quite a pack you've got for a hike."

The stranger said nothing.

"Or maybe you were sneaking around, trying to see the sights."

"Is that what people do when they're here?"

Payne didn't like his tone, or the implication. "I'd like to see some identification."

The stranger bent over his backpack again and fished out his passport. He held an open palm to the dog, making the dog stay, then took a step toward Payne and handed it over.

"No driver's license?"

"I don't have one."

Payne studied the name, his lips moving slightly. "Zayn Malik"

The stranger nodded. "Where you from?"

"Colorado"

"Long Trip"

The stranger said nothing.

"You going anywhere in particular?"

"I'm on my way to Arden."

"What's in Arden?"

"I couldn't say. I haven't been there yet."

Payne frowned at the answer. Too slick. Too...Challenging? Too something. Whatever. All at once he knew he didn't like this guy. "Wait here," he said before proceeding to empty a bottle of water into it. Like he didn't have a care in the world.

We'll find out, won't we? In the cruiser, Payne radioed in the name and spelling before being interrupted by the dispatcher. "It's Malik. It's Pakistani."

"Why should I care how it's pronounced?"
"I was just saying—"

"Whatever, Marge. Just check it out, will you?"

"Does he look Pakistani?"

How the hell would I know what a Pakistani looks like?"

I'm just curious. Don't get so huffy about it. I'm a little busy here."

Yeah, real busy, Payne thought. Eating doughnuts, most likely. Marge scarfed down at least a dozen Krispy Kremes a day. She must have weighed at least three hundred pounds.

Through the window he could see the stranger squatting beside the dog and whispering to it as it lapped up the water. He shook his head. Talking to animals. Freak. Like the dog could understand anything other than most basic of commands. His ex-wife used to do that, too. That woman treated dogs like people, which should have warned him to stay away from her in the first place.

"I can't find anything," he heard Marge say. She sounded like she was chewing something. "No outstanding warrants that I can see."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I do know how to do my job."

As though he'd been listening in on the conversation, the stranger retrieved the bowl and slipped it back into his backpack, then slung his backpack over his shoulder.

"Have there been any other unusual calls? People loitering around, things like that?"

"No. It's been quiet this morning. And where are you, by the way? Your dad's been trying to find you."

Payne's dad was the county sheriff.

"Tell him I'll be back in a little while."

"He seems mad."

"Just tell him I've been on patrol, okay?"

So he'll know I've been working, he didn't bother to add.

"Will do."

That's better.

"I gotta go."

He put the radio handset back in place and sat without moving, feeling the slightest trace of disappointment. It would have been fun to see how the guy handled lockup, what with that girly hair and all. The Landry brothers would have had a field day with him. They were regulars in lockup on Saturday nights: drunk and disorderly, disturbing the peace, fighting, almost always with each other. Except when they were in lockup. Then they'd pick on someone else.

He fiddled with the handle of his car door. And what was his dad mad about this time? Dude got on his nerves. Do this. Do that. You serve those papers yet? Why are you late? Where've you
been? Half the time he wanted to tell the old guy to mind his own damn business. Old guy still thought he ran things around here.

No matter. He supposed he'd find out sooner or later. Now it was time to get the hippie loser out of here, before the girls came out. Place was supposed to be private, right? Hippie freaks could ruin the place.

Payne got out of the car, closing the door behind him. The dog cocked its head to the side as Payne approached. He handed the passport back. "Sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Malik." This time, he mangled the pronunciation on purpose. "Just doing my job. Unless, of course, you've got some drugs or guns in your pack."

"I don't."

"You care to let me see for myself?"

"Not really. Fourth Amendment and all."

"I see your sleeping bag there. You been camping?"

"I was in Burke County last night."

Payne studied the guy, thinking about the answer.

"There aren't any campgrounds around here."

The guy said nothing.

It was Payne who looked away. "You might want to keep that dog on the leash."

"I didn't think there was a leash law in this county."

"There isn't. It's for your dog's safety. Lot of cars out by the main road."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Okay, then." Payne turned away before pausing once more. "If you don't mind my asking, how long have you been out here?"

"I just walked up. Why?"

Something in the way he answered made Payne wonder, and he hesitated before reminding himself again that there was no way the guy could know what he'd been up to. "No reason."

"Can I go?"

"Yeah. Okay."

Payne watched the stranger and his dog start up the logging road before veering onto a small trail that led into the woods. Once he vanished, Payne went back to his original vantage point to search for the camera. He poked his arm into the bushes, kicked at the pine straw, and retraced his steps a couple of times to make sure he was original vantage point to search for the camera. He poked his arm into the bushes, kicked at the pine straw, and retraced his steps a couple of times to make sure he was in the right place. Eventually, he dropped to his knees, panic beginning to settle in. The camera belonged to the sheriffs department. He'd only borrowed it for these special outings, and there'd be a lot of questions from his dad if it turned out to be lost. Worse, discovered with a card
full of nudie pictures. His dad was a stickler for protocol and responsibility.

By then, a few minutes had passed. In the distance, he heard the throaty roar of an engine fire up. He assumed the coeds were leaving; only briefly did he consider what they might be thinking when they noticed his cruiser was still there. He had other issues on his mind.

The camera was gone.

Not lost. Gone. And the damn thing sure as hell didn't walk off on its own. No way the girls had found it, either. Which meant Malik had been playing him all along. Malik. Playing. Him. Unbelievable. He knew the guy had been acting too slick, too "I Know What You Did Last Summer.

No way was he getting away with that. No grimy, hippie, dog-talking freak was ever going to show up Liam Payne. Not in this life, anyway.

He pushed through branches heading back to the road, figuring he'd catch up to Zayn Thigh-bolt and have a little look-see. And that was just for starters. More than that would follow; that much was certain. Guy plays him? That just wasn't done. Not in this town, anyway. He didn't give a damn about the dog, either. Dog gets upset? Bye, bye, doggie. Simple as that. German shepherds were weapons—there wasn't a court in the land where that wouldn't stand up.

First things first, though. Find Malik. Get the camera. Then figure out the next step.

It was only then, while approaching his cruiser, that he realized both his rear tires were flat.

"What did you say your name was?"

Malik leaned across the front seat of the Jeep a few minutes later, talking over the roar of the wind. "Zayn Malik." He thumbed over his shoulder. "And this is Zeus."

Zeus was in the back of the Jeep, tongue out, nose lifted to the wind as the Jeep sped toward the highway.

"Beautiful dog. I'm Amy. And this is Jennifer and Lori."

Malik glanced over his shoulder. "Hi."

"Hey."

They seemed distracted. Not surprising, Malik thought, considering what they'd been through. "I appreciate the ride."

"No big deal. And you said you're going to Hampton?"

"If it's not too far."

"It's right on the way."

After leaving the logging road and taking care of a couple of things, Malik had edged back to the road just as the girls were pulling out. He'd held out his thumb, thankful that Zeus was with him, and they'd pulled over almost immediately.

Sometimes things work out just like they're supposed to.
Though he pretended otherwise, he'd actually seen the three of them earlier that morning as they'd come in—he'd camped just over the ridge from the beach—but had given them the privacy they deserved as soon as they'd started to disrobe. To his mind, what they were doing fell into the "no harm, no foul" category; aside from him, they were completely alone out here, and he had no intention of hanging around to stare. Who cared if they took their clothes off or, for that matter, dressed up in chicken costumes? It wasn't any of his business, and he'd intended to keep it that way—until he saw the deputy driving up the road in a Hampton County Sheriffs Department car.

He got a good look at the deputy through the windshield, and there was something wrong about the guy's expression. Hard to say what it was, exactly, and he didn't pause to analyze it. He turned around, cutting through the forest, and arrived in time to see the deputy checking the disk in his camera before quietly shutting the door of his cruiser. He watched him slink off toward the ridge. Malik knew full well that the deputy could have been working officially, but he looked the way Zeus did when he was waiting for a piece of beef jerky. A little too excited about the whole thing.

Malik had Zeus stay where he was, kept enough distance so the deputy wouldn't hear him, and the rest of the plan had come together spontaneously after that. He knew that direct confrontation was out—the deputy would have claimed he was collecting evidence, and the strength of his word against a stranger's would have been unassailable. Anything physical was out of the question, mostly because it would have caused more problems than it was worth, though he would have loved to go toe-to-toe with the guy. Luckily—or unluckily, he supposed, depending on the perspective—the girl had appeared, the deputy had panicked, and Malik had seen where the camera had landed. Once the deputy and the girl headed back toward her friends, Malik retrieved the camera. He could have simply left at that point, but the guy needed to be taught a lesson. Not a big lesson, just a lesson that would keep the girls' honor intact, allow Malik to be on his way, and ruin the deputy's day. Which was why he'd doubled back to flatten the deputy's tires.

"Oh, that reminds me," Malik volunteered. "I found your camera in the woods."

"It's not mine. Lori or Jen—did either of you lose a camera?" Both of them shook their heads.

"Keep it anyway," Malik said, putting it on the seat, "and thanks for the ride. I've already got one."

"You sure? It's probably expensive."

"Positive."

"Thanks."

Malik noted the shadows playing on her features, that she was attractive in a big-city kind of way, with sharp features, olive skin, and brown eyes flecked with hazel. He could imagine staring at her for hours.

"Hey … you doing anything this weekend?" Amy asked him "We're all going out to the beach."

"I appreciate the offer, but I can't."

"I'll bet you're going to see your girlfriend, aren't you."

"What makes you say that?"

"You have that way about you."

He forced himself to turn away. "Something like that."
Malik

Chapter Notes

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It was strange to think of the unexpected twists a man's life could take. Up until a year ago, Malik would have jumped at the opportunity to spend the weekend with Amy and her friends. It was probably exactly what he needed, but when they dropped him off just outside the Hampton town limits with the August afternoon heat bearing down hard, he waved good-bye, feeling strangely relieved. Maintaining a facade of normalcy had been exhausting.

Since leaving Colorado five months earlier, he hadn't voluntarily spent more than a few hours with anyone, the lone exception being an elderly dairy farmer just south of Little Rock, who let him sleep in an unused upstairs bedroom after a dinner in which the farmer talked as little as he did. He appreciated the fact that the man didn't feel the need to press him about why he'd just appeared the way he had. No questions, no curiosity, no open ended hints. Just a casual acceptance that Malik didn't feel like talking. In gratitude, Malik spent a couple of days helping to repair the roof of the barn before finally returning to the road, backpack loaded, with Zeus trailing behind him.

With the exception of the ride from the girls, he'd walked the entire distance. After dropping the keys to his apartment at the manager's office in mid-March, he'd gone through eight pairs of shoes, pretty much survived on PowerBars and water during long, lonely stretches between towns, and once, in Tennessee, had eaten five tall stacks of pancakes after going nearly three days without food. Along with Zeus, he'd traveled through blizzards, hailstorms, rain, and heat so intense that it made the skin on his arms blister; he'd seen a tornado on the horizon near Tulsa, Oklahoma, and had nearly been struck by lightning twice. He'd taken numerous detours, trying to stay off the main toads, further lengthening the journey, sometimes on a whim. Usually, he walked until he was tired, and toward the end of the day, he'd start searching for a spot to camp, anywhere he thought he and Zeus wouldn't be disturbed. In the mornings, they hit the toad before dawn so no one would be the wiser. To this point, no one had bothered them.

He figured he'd been averaging more than twenty miles a day, though he'd never kept specific track of either the time or the distance. That wasn't what the journey was about. He could imagine some people thinking that he was walking to outpace the memories of the world he'd left behind, which had a poetic ring to it; others might want to believe he was walking simply for the sake of the journey itself. But neither was true. He liked to walk and he had someplace to go. Simple as that. He liked going when he wanted, at the pace he wanted, to the place he wanted to be. After four years of following orders in the Marine Corps, the freedom of it appealed to him.
His mother worried about him, but then that's what mothers did. Or his mother, anyway. He called every few days to let her know he was doing okay, and usually, after hanging up, he would think that he wasn't being fair to her. He'd already been gone for much of the past five years, and before each of his three tours in Iraq, he'd listened as she'd lectured into the phone, reminding him not to do anything stupid. He hadn't, but there had been more than a few close calls. Though he'd never told her about them, she read the papers. "And now this," his mother had lamented the night before he'd left. "This whole thing seems crazy to me."

Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't. He wasn't sure yet.

"What do you think, Zeus?"

The dog looked up at the sound of his name and padded to his side.

"Yeah, I know. You're hungry. What's new?"

Malik paused in the parking lot of a run-down motel on the edge of town. He reached for the bowl and the last of the dog food. As Zeus began to eat, Malik took in the view of the town.

Hampton wasn't the worst place he'd ever seen, not by a long shot, but it wasn't the best, either. The town was located on the banks of the South River, about thirty-five miles northwest of Wilmington and the coast, and at first glance, it seemed no different from the thousands of self-sufficient, blue-collar communities long on pride and history that dotted the South. There were a couple of traffic lights dangling on droopy wires that interrupted the traffic flow as it edged toward the bridge that spanned the river, and on either side of the main road were low-slung brick buildings, sandwiched together and stretching for half a mile, with business names stenciled on the front windows advertising places to eat and drink or purchase hardware. A few old magnolias were scattered here and there and made the sidewalks swell beneath their bulging roots. In the distance, he saw an old-fashioned barber pole, along with the requisite older men sitting on the bench out in front of it. He smiled. It was quaint, like a fantasy of the 1950s.

On closer inspection, though, he sensed that first impressions were deceiving. Despite the waterfront location—or maybe because of it, he surmised—he noted the decay near the rooflines, in the crumbling bricks near the foundations, in the faded brackish stains a couple of feet higher than the foundations, which indicated serious flooding in the past. None of the shops were boarded up yet, but observing the dearth of cars parked in front of the businesses, he wondered how long they could hold out. Small-town commercial districts were going the way of the dinosaurs, and if this place was like most of the other towns he'd passed through, he figured there was probably another, newer area for businesses, one most likely anchored by a Wal-Mart or a Piggly Wiggly, that would spell the end for this part of town.

Strange, though. Being here. He wasn't sure what he'd imagined Hampton to be, but it wasn't this.

No matter. As Zeus was finishing his food, he wondered how long it would take to find him. The man in the photograph. The man he'd come to meet.

But he would find him. That much was certain. He hoisted his backpack. "You ready?"

Zeus tilted his head.

"Let's get a room. I want to eat and shower. And you need a bath."

Malik took a couple of steps before realizing Zeus hadn't moved. He glanced over his shoulder.

"Don't give me that look. You definitely need a bath. You smell."
Zeus still didn't move.

"Fine. Do what you want. I'm going."

He headed toward the manager's office to check in, knowing that Zeus would follow. In the end, Zeus always followed.

Until he'd found the photograph, Malik's life had proceeded as he'd long intended. He'd always had a plan. He'd wanted to do well in school and had; he'd wanted to participate in a variety of sports and had grown up playing pretty much everything. He'd wanted to learn to play the piano and the violin, and he'd become proficient enough to write his own music. After college at the University of Colorado, he'd planned to join the Marine Corps, and the recruiter had been thrilled that he'd chosen to enlist instead of becoming an officer. Shocked, but thrilled. Most graduates had little desire to become a grunt, but that was exactly what he'd wanted.

The bombing of the World Trade Center had little to do with his decision. Instead, joining the military seemed the natural thing to do, since his dad had served with the marines for twenty-five years. His dad had gone in as a private and finished as one of those grizzled, steel-jawed sergeants who intimidated pretty much everyone except his wife and the platoons he commanded. He treated those young men like his sons; his sole intent, he used to tell them, was to bring them back home to their mothers alive and well and all grown up. His dad must have attended more than fifty weddings over the years of guys he'd led who couldn't imagine getting married without having his blessing. Good marine, too. He'd picked up a Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts in Vietnam and over the years had served in Grenada, Panama, Bosnia, and the First Gulf War. His dad was a marine who didn't mind transfers, and Malik had spent the majority of his youth moving from place to place, living on bases around the world. In some ways, Okinawa seemed more like home than Colorado, and though his Japanese was a bit rusty, he figured a week spent in Tokyo would rekindle the fluency he'd once known. Like his dad, he figured he'd end up retiring from the corps, but unlike his dad, he intended to live long enough afterward to enjoy it. His dad had died of a heart attack only two years after he'd slipped his dress blues onto the hanger for the last time, a massive infarction that came out of the blue. One minute he was shoveling snow from the driveway, and the next minute he was gone. That was thirteen years ago. Malik had been fifteen years old at the time.

That day and the funeral that followed were the most vivid memories of his life prior to joining the marines. Being raised as a military brat has a way of making things blur together, simply because of how often you have to move. Friends come and go, clothing is packed and unpacked, households are continually purged of unnecessary items, and as a result, not much sticks. It's hard at times, but it makes a kid strong in ways that most people can't understand. Teaches them that even though people are left behind, new ones will inevitably take their place; that every place has something good—and bad—to offer. It makes a kid grow up fast.

Even his college years were hazy, but that chapter of his life had its own routines. Studying during the week, enjoying the weekends, cramming for finals, crappy dorm food, and two boyfriends, one of whom lasted a little more than a year. Everyone who ever went to college had the same stories to tell, few of which had lasting impact. In the end, only his education remained. In truth, he felt like his life hadn't really started until he'd arrived on Parris island for basic training. As soon as he'd hopped off the bus, the drill sergeant started shouting in his ear. There's nothing like a drill sergeant to make a person believe that nothing in his life had really mattered to that point. You were theirs now, and that was that. Good at sports? Give me fifty push-ups, Mr. Point Guard. College educated? Assemble this rifle, Einstein. Father was in the marines? Clean the cropper like your old man once did. Same old clichés. Run, march, stand at attention, crawl through the mud, scale that wall: There was nothing in basic training he hadn't expected.
He had to admit that the drill mostly worked. It broke people down, beat them down even further, and eventually molded them into marines. Or that's what they said, anyway. He didn't break down. He went through the motions, kept his head low, did as he was ordered, and remained the same man he'd been before. He became a marine anyway.

He ended up with the First Battalion, Fifth Marines, based out of Camp Pendleton. San Diego was his kind of town, with great weather, gorgeous beaches, and even more beautiful men. But it was not to last. In January 2003, right after he turned twenty-three, he deployed to Kuwait as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Camp Doha, in an industrial part of Kuwait City, had been in use since the First Gulf War and was pretty much a town unto itself. There was a gym and a computer center, a PX, places to eat, and tents spread as far as the horizon. Busy place made much busier by the impending invasion, and things were chaotic from the start. His days were an unbroken sequence of hours-long meetings, backbreaking drills, and rehearsals of ever changing attack plans. He must have practiced donning his chemical war protection suit a hundred times. There were endless rumors, too. The worst part was trying to figure out which one might be true. Everyone knew of someone who knew someone who'd heard the real story. One day they were going in imminently; next day they'd hear that they were holding off. First, they were coming in from the north and south; then just from the south, and maybe not even that. They heard the enemy had chemical weapons and intended to use them; next day they heard they wouldn't use them because they believed that the United States would respond with nukes. There were whispers that the Iraqi Republican Guard intended to make a suicide stand just over the border; others swore they intended to make the stand near Baghdad. Still others said the suicide stand would happen near the oil fields. In short, no one knew anything, which only fueled the imaginations of the 150,000 troops who'd assembled in Kuwait.

For the most part, soldiers are kids. People forget that sometimes. Eighteen, nineteen, twenty—half of the servicemen weren't old enough even to buy a beer. They were confident and well trained and excited to go, but it was impossible to ignore the reality of what was coming. Some of them were going to die. Some talked openly about it, others wrote letters to their families and handed them to the chaplain. Tempers were short. Some had trouble sleeping; others slept almost all the time. Malik observed it all with a strange sense of detachment. Welcome to war, he could hear his father saying. It's always a SNAFU: situation normal, all f—ed up.

Malik wasn't completely immune to the escalating tension, and like everyone else, he'd needed an outlet. It was impossible not to have one. He started playing poker. His dad had taught him to play, and he knew the game… or thought he knew. He quickly found out that others knew more. In the first three weeks, he proceeded to lose pretty much every dime he'd saved since joining up, bluffing when he should have folded, folding when he should have stayed in the game. It wasn't much money to begin with, and it wasn't as if he had many places to spend it even if he'd kept it, but it put him in a foul mood for days. He hated to lose.

The only antidote was to go for long runs first thing in the morning, before the sun came up. It was usually frigid; though he'd been in the Middle East for a month, it continually amazed him how cold the desert could be. He ran hard beneath a sky crowded with stars, his breaths coming out in little puffs.

Toward the end of one of his runs, when he could see his tent in the distance, he began to slow. By then, the sun had begun to crest the horizon, spreading gold across the arid landscape. With his hands on his hips, he continued to catch his breath, and it was then, from the corner of his eye, that he spotted the dull gleam of a photograph, half-buried in the dirt. He stopped to pick it up and noticed that it had been cheaply but neatly laminated, probably to protect it from the elements. He brushed off the dust, clearing the image, and that was the first time he saw him.
The blonde with the smile and the sapphire-colored mischievous eyes, wearing jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with the words lucky lad across the front. Behind him was a banner showing the words Hampton fairgrounds. A German shepherd, gray in the muzzle, stood by his side. In the crowd behind him were two young men, clustered near the ticket stand and a bit out of focus, wearing T-shirts with logos. Three evergreen trees rose in the distance, pointy ones that could grow almost anywhere. On the back of the photo were the handwritten words, "Keep Safe! N."

Not that he'd noticed any of those things right away. His first instinct, in fact, had been to toss the picture aside. He almost had, but just as he was about to do so, it occurred to him that whoever had lost it might want it back. It obviously meant something to someone.

When he returned to camp, he tacked the photo to a message board near the entrance to the computer center, figuring that pretty much every inhabitant of the camp made his way there at one point or another. No doubt someone would claim it.

A week went by, then ten days. The photo was never retrieved. By that point, his platoon was drilling for hours every day, and the poker games had become serious. Some men had lost thousands of dollars; one lance corporal was said to have lost close to ten thousand. Malik, who hadn't played since his initial humiliating attempt, preferred to spend his free time brooding on the upcoming invasion and wondering how he'd react to being fired upon. When he wandered over to the computer center three days before the invasion, he saw the photo still tacked to the message board, and for a reason he still didn't quite understand, he took down the photo and put it in his pocket.

Ant, his best friend in the squad—they'd been together since basic training—talked him into joining the poker game that night, despite Malik's reservations. Still low on funds, Malik started conservatively and didn't think he'd be in the game for more than half an hour. He folded in the first three games, then drew a straight in the fourth game and a full house in the sixth. The cards kept falling his way—flushes, straights, full houses—and by the halfway point in the evening, he'd recouped his earlier losses. The original players had left by then, replaced by others. Malik stayed. In turn, they were replaced. Malik stayed. His winning streak persisted, and by dawn, he'd won more than he'd earned in his first six months in the marines.

It was only when he was leaving the game with Ant that he realized he'd had the photograph in his pocket the entire time. When they were back at their tent, he showed the photo to Ant and pointed out the words on the man's shirt. Ant, whose parents were illegal immigrants living near Bakersfield, California, was not only religious, but believed in portents of all kinds. Lightning storms, forked roads, and black cats were favorites, and before they'd shipped out, he'd told Malik about an uncle who supposedly possessed the evil eye: "When he looks at you a certain way, it's only a matter of time before you die." Ant's conviction made Malik feel like he was ten years old again, listening raptly as Ant told the story with a flashlight propped beneath his chin. He said nothing at the time. Everyone had their quirks. Guy wanted to believe in omens? Fine with him. More important was the fact that Ant was a good enough shot to have been recruited as a sniper and that Malik trusted him with his life.

Ant stared at the picture before handing it back. "You said you found this at dawn?"

"Yeah."

"Dawn is a powerful time of the day."

"So you've told me."

"It's a sign," he said. "He's your good-luck charm. See the shirt he is wearing?"
"He was tonight."

"Not just tonight. You found that picture for a reason. No one claimed it for a reason. You took it today for a reason. Only you were meant to have it."

Malik wanted to say something about the guy who'd lost it and how he'd feel about that, but he kept quiet. Instead, he lay back on the cot and clasped his hands behind his head.

Ant mirrored the movement. "I'm happy for you. Luck will be on your side from now on," he added.

"I hope so."

"But you can't ever lose the picture."

"No?"

"If you do, then the charm works in reverse."

"Which means what?"

"It means you'll be unlucky. And in war, unlucky is the last thing you want to be."

The motel room was as ugly on the inside as it had been from the outside: wood paneling, light fixtures attached to the ceiling with chains, shag carpet, television bolted to the stand. It seemed to have been decorated around 1975 and never updated, and it reminded Malik of the places his dad had made them stay in when they took their family vacations through the Southwest, when Malik was a kid. They'd stayed overnight in places just off the highway, and as long as they were relatively clean, his dad had deemed them fine. His mom less so, but what could she do? It wasn't as if there had been a Four Seasons across the street, and even if there had been, there was no way they could ever have afforded it.

Malik went through the same routine his dad had when entering a motel room: He pulled back the comforter to make sure the sheets were fresh, he checked the shower curtain for mold, he looked for hairs in the sink. Despite the expected rust stains, a leaky faucet, and cigarette bums, the place was cleaner than he'd imagined it might be. Inexpensive, too. Malik had paid cash for a week in advance, no questions asked, no extra charge for the dog. All in all, a bargain. Good thing. Malik had no credit cards, no debit cards, no ATM cards, no official mailing address, no cell phone. He carried pretty much everything he owned. He did have a bank account, one that would wire him money as needed. It was registered under a corporate name, not his own. He wasn't rich. He wasn't even middle-class. The corporation did no business. He just liked his privacy.

He led Zeus to the tub and washed him, using the shampoo in his backpack. Afterward, he showered and dressed in the last of his clean clothes. Sitting on the bed, he thumbed through the phone book, searching for something in particular, without luck. He made a note to do laundry when he had time, then decided to get a bite to eat at the small restaurant he'd seen just down the street.

When he got there, they wouldn't let Zeus inside, which wasn't surprising. Zeus lay down outside the front door and went to sleep. Malik had a cheeseburger and fries, washed it down with a chocolate milk shake, then ordered a cheeseburger to go for Zeus. Back outside, he watched as Zeus gobbled it down in less than twenty seconds and then looked up at Malik again.

"Glad you really savored that. Come on."

Malik bought a map of the town at a convenience store and sat on a bench near the town square—
one of those old-fashioned parks bordered on all four sides by business-lined streets. Featuring large shady trees, a play area for the kids, and lots of flowers, it didn't seem crowded: A few mothers were clustered together, while children zipped down the slide or glided back and forth on the swings. He examined the faces of the men, making sure he wasn't among them, then turned away and opened the map before they grew nervous at his presence. Mothers with young kids always got nervous when they saw single men lingering in the area, doing nothing purposeful. He didn't blame them. Too many perverts out there.

Studying the map, he oriented himself and tried to figure out his next move. He had no illusions that it was going to be easy. He didn't know much, after all. All he had was a photograph—no name or address. No employment history. No phone number. No date. Nothing but a face in the crowd.

But there were some clues. He'd studied the details of the photo, as he had so many times before, and started with what he knew. The photograph had been taken in Hampton. The man appeared to be in his early twenties when the photo was taken. He was attractive. He either owned a German shepherd or knew someone who did. His first name started with the letter N. Nate, Nelson, Noah, Noel Nash, Norman, Nico… they seemed the most likely, though in the South, he supposed there could be names like Nolan or Nicolo, too. He went to the fair with someone who was later posted to Iraq. He had given this person the photograph, and Malik had found the photograph in February 2003, which meant it had to have been taken before then. The man, then, was most likely now in his late twenties. There was a series of three evergreen trees in the distance. These things he knew. Facts.

Then, there were assumptions, beginning with Hampton. Hampton was a relatively common name. A quick Internet search turned up a lot of them. Counties and towns: South Carolina, Virginia, New Hampshire, Iowa, Nebraska, Georgia. Others, too. Lots of others. And, of course, a Hampton in Hampton County, North Carolina.

Though there'd been no obvious landmarks in the background—no picture of Monticello indicating Virginia, for instance, no welcome to Iowa! sign in the distance—there had been information. Not about the man, but gleaned from the young men in the background, standing in line for tickets. Two of them had been wearing shirts with logos. One—an image of Homer Simpson—didn't help. The other, with the word Davidson written across the front, meant nothing at first, even when Malik thought about it. He'd originally assumed the shirt was an abbreviated reference to Harley-Davidson, the motorcycle. Another Google search cleared that up. Davidson, he'd learned, was also the name of a reputable college located near Charlotte, North Carolina. Selective, challenging, with an emphasis on liberal arts. A review of their bookstore catalog showed a sample of the same shirt.

The shirt, he realized, was no guarantee that the photo had been taken in North Carolina. Maybe someone who'd gone to the college gave the guy the shirt; maybe he was an out-of-state student, maybe he just liked the colors, maybe he was an alum and had moved someplace new. But with nothing else to go on, Malik had made a quick phone call to the Hampton Chamber of Commerce before he'd left Colorado and verified that they had a county fair every summer. Another good sign. He had a destination, but it wasn't yet a fact. He just assumed this was the right place. Still, for a reason he couldn't explain, this place felt right.

There were other assumptions, too, but he'd get to those later. The first thing he had to do was find the fairgrounds. Hopefully, the county fair had been held in the same location for years; he hoped the person who could point him in the right direction could answer that question as well. Best place to find someone like that was at one of the businesses around here. Not a souvenir or antiques shop—Those were often owned by newcomers to town, people escaping from the North in search of a quieter life in warmer weather. Instead, he thought his best bet would be someplace
like a local hardware store. Or a bar. Or a real estate office. He figured he'd know the place when he saw it.

He wanted to see the exact place the photograph had been taken. Not to get a better feel for who the man was. The fair-grounds wouldn't help with that at all.

He wanted to know if there were three tall evergreen trees clustered together, pointy ones that could grow almost anywhere.
This is Nicholas Sparks' book --- one of my favorites --- rewritten as Ziall Horlik fanfiction.

All credit goes to Nicholas Sparks and no copyright intended.

If you like this fic, please purchase the book by Nicholas Sparks. It really is a treasure.

THIS IS NOT MINE - JUST TURNED IT INTO ZIALL BECAUSE WHEN I READ IT I THOUGHT ZIALL WOULD BE PERFECT FOR THE STORY.

NO COPYRIGHT INTENDED!

Ben calls Niall Dad, and calls Liam Pops. (Sorry, can't think of other!)

Niall set aside his can of Diet Coke, glad that Ben was having a good time at his friend Zach's birthday party. He was just wishing that he didn't have to go to his father's when Melody came by and sat in the chair beside him.

"Good idea, huh? The water guns are a big hit." Melody smiled, her bleached teeth a bit too white, her skin a shade too dark, as though she'd just come back from a trip to the tanning salon. Which she probably had. Melody had been vain about her appearance since high school, and lately it seemed to have become even more of an obsession.

"Let's just hope they don't turn those Super Soakers on us."

"They better not." Melody frowned. "I told Zach that if he did, I'd send everyone home." She leaned back, making herself more comfortable. "What have you been doing with yourself this summer? I haven't seen you around, and you haven't returned my calls."

“I know. I'm sorry about that. I've been a hermit this summer. It's just been hard trying to keep up with Nana and the kennel and all the training. I have no idea how Nana kept it up for so long."

"Nana's doing okay these days?"

Nana was Niall's grandmother. She'd raised Niall since the age of three, after Niall's parents died in a car accident. He nodded. "She's getting better, but the stroke took a lot out of her. Her left side is still really weak. She can manage some of the training, but running the kennel and training is beyond her. And you know how hard she pushes herself. I'm always worried she might be overdoing it."

"I noticed she was back in the choir this week."
Nana had been in the First Baptist Church choir for over thirty years, and Niall knew it was one of her passions. "Last week was her first week back, but I'm not sure how much singing she actually did. Afterward, she took a two-hour nap."

Melody nodded. "What's going to happen when school starts up?"

"I don't know."

"You are going to teach, aren't you?"

"I hope so."

"You hope? Don't you have teacher meetings next week?"

Niall didn't want to think about it, let alone discuss it, but he knew Melody meant well. "Yeah, but that doesn't mean I'll be there. I know it would leave the school in a bind, but it's not as if I can leave Nana alone all day. Not yet, anyway. And who would help her run the kennel? There's no way she could train the dogs all day."

"Can't you hire someone?" Melody suggested.

"I've been trying. Did I tell you what happened earlier in the summer? I hired a guy who showed up twice, then quit as soon as the weekend rolled around. Same thing with the next guy I hired. After that, no one's even bothered to come by. The 'Help Wanted' sign has become a permanent fixture in the window."

"David's always complaining about the lack of good employees."

"Tell him to offer minimum wage. Then he'd really complain. Even high school kids don't want to clean the cages anymore. They say it's gross."

"It is gross."

Niall laughed. "Yeah, it is," he admitted. "But I'm out of time. I doubt if anything will change before next week, and if it doesn't, there are worse things. I do enjoy training the dogs. Half the time they're easier than students."

"Like mine?"

"Yours was easy. Trust me."

Melody motioned toward Ben. "He's grown since the last time I saw him."

"Almost an inch, "he said, thinking it was nice of Melody to notice. Ben had always been small for his age, the kid always positioned on the left side, front row, of the class picture, half a head shorter than the child seated next to him. Zach, Melody's son, was just the opposite: right-hand side, in the back, always the tallest in class.

"I heard a rumor that Ben isn't playing soccer this fall," Melody commented. "He wants to learn to play the violin. He's going to take lessons with Mrs. Hastings."

"She's still teaching? She must be at least ninety."
"But she's got patience to teach a beginner. Or at least that's what she told me. And Ben likes her a lot. That's the main thing."

"Good for him," Melody said. "I'll bet he'll be great at it. But Zach's going to be bummed."

"They wouldn't be on the same team. Zach is going to play for the select team, right?"

"If he makes it."

"He will."

And he would. Zach was one of those naturally confident, competitive kids who matured early and ran rings around other, less talented players on the field. Like Ben. Even now, running around the yard with his Super Soaker, Ben couldn't keep up with him. Though good-hearted and sweet, Ben wasn't much of an athlete, a fact that endlessly infuriated his ex-husband. Last year, his ex had stood on the sidelines of soccer games with a scowl on his face, which was another reason Ben didn't want to play.

"Is David going to help coach again?"

David was Melody's husband and one of two pediatricians in town. "He hasn't decided yet. Since Hoskins left, he's been on call a lot more. He hates it, but what can he do? They've been trying to recruit another doctor, but it's been hard. Not everyone wants to work in a small town, especially with the nearest hospital in Wilmington forty-five minutes away. Makes for much longer days. Half the time he doesn't get home until almost eight. Sometimes it's even later than that."

Niall heard the worry in Melody's voice, and he figured his friend was thinking about the affair David had confessed to last winter. Niall knew enough not to comment on it. He'd decided when he'd first heard the whispers that they would talk about it only if Melody wanted to. And if not? That was fine, too. It was none of his business.

"How about you, though? Have you been seeing anyone?"

Niall grimaced. "No. Not since Justin."

"Whatever happened with that?"

"I have no idea."

Melody shook her head. "I can't say that I envy you. I never liked dating."

"Yeah, but at least you were good at it. I'm terrible."

"You're exaggerating."

"I'm not. But it's not that big of a deal. I'm not sure I even have the energy for it anymore. Wearing sexy underwear, shaving my legs, flirting, pretending to get along with his friends. The whole thing seems like a lot of effort."

Melody wrinkled her nose. "You don't shave your legs?"

"Of course I shave my legs," he said. Then, lowering his voice, "Most of the time, anyway." He sat up straighter. "But you get the point. Dating is hard. Especially for someone my age."

"Oh, please. You're not even thirty, and you're a knockout." Niall had heard that for as long as he
could remember, and he wasn't immune to the fact that men—even married men—often craned their necks when he walked past them. In his first three years teaching, he'd had only one parent-teacher conference with a father who came alone. In every other instance, it was the mother who attended the conference. He remembered wondering aloud about it to Nana a few years back, and Nana had said, "They don't want you alone with the hubbies because you're as pretty as a tickled pumpkin."

Nana always had a unique way of putting things.

"You forget where we live," Niall offered. "There aren't a lot of single men my age. And if they are single, there's a reason."

"That's not true."

"Maybe in a city. But around here? In this town? Trust me. I've lived here all my life, and even when I was in college, I commuted from home. On the rare occasions that I have been asked out, we'll go on two or three dates and then they stop calling. Don't ask me why." He waved a hand philosophically. "But it's no big deal. I've got Ben and Nana. It's not like I'm living alone, surrounded by dozens of cats."

"No. You've got dogs."

"Not my dogs. Other people's dogs. There's a difference."

"Oh yeah," Melody snorted. "Big difference."

Across the yard, Ben was trailing behind the group with his Super Soaker, doing his best to keep up, when he suddenly slipped and fell. His glasses tumbled off into the grass. Niall knew enough not to get up and see if he was okay: The last time he'd tried to help, he'd been visibly embarrassed. He felt around until he found his glasses and was up and running again.

"They grow up so fast, don't they?" said Melody, interrupting Niall's thoughts. "I know it's a cliché, but it's true. I remember my mom telling me they would and thinking she didn't know what she was talking about. I couldn't wait for Zach to get a little older. Of course, at the time, he had colic and I hadn't slept more than a couple of hours a night in over a month. But now, just like that, they'll be starting middle school already."

"Not yet. They've got another year."

"I know. But it still makes me nervous."

"Why?"

"You know… it's a hard age. Kids are in that stage where they're beginning to understand the world of adults, without having the maturity of adults to deal with everything going on around them. Add to that all the temptations, and the fact that they stop listening to you the way they once did, and the moods of adolescence, and I'll be the first to admit that I'm not looking forward to it. You're a teacher. You know."

"That's why I teach second grade."

"Good choice." Melody grew quiet. "Did you hear about Elliot Spencer?"

"I haven't heard much of anything. I've been a hermit, remember?"
"He was caught selling drugs."

"He's only a couple of years older than Ben!"

"And still in middle school."

"Now you're making me nervous."

Melody rolled her eyes. "Don't be. If my son were more like Ben, I wouldn't have reason to be nervous. Ben has an old soul. He's always polite, he's always kind, always the first to help the younger kids. He's empathetic. I, on the other hand, have Zach."

"Zach's a great kid, too."

"I know he is. But he's always been more difficult than Ben. And he's more of a follower than Ben."

"Have you seen them playing? From where I'm sitting, Ben's been doing all the following."

"You know what I mean."

Actually, he did. Even from a young age, Ben had been content to forge his own path. Which was nice, he had to admit, since it had been a pretty good path. Though he didn't have many friends, he had a lot of interests he pursued on his own. Good ones, too. He had little interest in video games or surfing the Web, and while he occasionally watched television, he'd usually turn it off on his own after thirty minutes or so. Instead, he read or played chess (a game that he seemed to understand on some intuitive level) on the electronic game board he'd received for Christmas. He loved to read and write, and though he enjoyed the dogs at the kennel, most of them were anxious because of the long hours they spent in a kennel and tended to ignore him. He spent many afternoons throwing tennis balls that few, if any, ever retrieved.

"It'll be fine."

"I hope so." Melody set aside her drink. "I suppose I should go get the cake, huh? Zach has practice at five."

"It'll be hot."

Melody stood. "I'm sure he'll want to bring the Super Soaker. Probably squirt the coach."

"Do you need some help?"

"No thanks. Just sit here and relax. I'll be right back."

Niall watched Melody walk away, realizing for the first time how thin she'd become. Ten, maybe fifteen pounds lighter than she'd been the last time Niall had seen her. Had to be stress, he thought. David's affair had crushed her, but unlike Niall when it had happened to him, Melody was determined to save her marriage. Then again, they'd had different sorts of marriages. David made a big mistake and it hurt Melody, but overall, they'd always struck Niall as a happy couple. Niall's marriage, on the other hand, had been a fiasco from the beginning. Just as Nana had predicted. Nana had the ability to size people up in an instant, and she had this way of shrugging when she didn't like someone. When Niall announced he was pregnant and that instead of go-tag to college, he and her ex planned to get married, Nana began shrugging so much that it resembled a nervous tic. Niall, of course, ignored it at the time, thinking, 'She hasn't given him a chance. She doesn't really know him. We can make this work.' Nosiree. Never happened. Nana was always polite, always cordial when he was around, but the shrugging didn't stop until Niall moved back home.
ten years ago. The marriage had lasted less than nine months; Ben was five weeks old. Nana had been right about him all along.

Melody vanished inside the house, only to reemerge a few minutes later, David right behind her. He was carrying paper plates and forks, obviously preoccupied. He could see the tufts of gray hair near his ears and deep lines in his forehead. The last time he'd seen him, the lines hadn't been as evident, and he figured it was another sign of the stress he was under.

Sometimes, Niall wondered what his life would be like if he were married. Not to her ex, of course. That thought made him shudder. Dealing with him every other weekend was more than enough, thank you very much. But to someone else. Someone… better. It seemed like it might be a good idea, at least in the abstract, anyway. After ten years, he was used to her life, and though it might be nice to have someone to share his evenings with after work or get a back rub from now and then, there was also something nice about spending all day Saturday in his pajamas if he wanted to. Which he sometimes did. Ben, too. They called them "lazy days." They were the best days ever. Sometimes they'd cap off a day of doing absolutely nothing by ordering pizza and watching a movie. Heavenly.

Besides, if relationships were hard, marriage was even harder. It wasn't just Melody and David who struggled; it seemed like most couples struggled. It went with the territory. What did Nana always say? Stick two different people with two different sets of expectations under one roof and it ain't always going to be shrimp and grits on Easter.

Exactly. Even if he wasn't completely sure where Nana came up with her metaphors.

Glancing at his watch, he knew that as soon as the party ended, he'd have to head back to check in on Nana. No doubt he'd find her in the kennel, either behind the desk or checking on the dogs. Nana was stubborn like that. Did it matter that her left leg could barely support her? ‘My kg ain't perfect, but it's not beeswax, either’. Or that she might fall and get hurt? ‘I'm not a bucket of fine china.’ Or that her left arm was basically useless? ‘As long as I can eat soup, I don't need it anyway.’

She was one of a kind, bless her heart. Always had been.

"Hey, Dad?"

Lost in thought, he hadn't seen Ben approaching. His freckled face was shiny with sweat. Water dripped from his clothes, and there were grass stains on his shirt he was certain would never come out.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Can I spend the night at Zach's tonight?"

"I thought he had soccer practice."

"After practice. There's going to be a bunch of people staying over, and his mom got him Guitar Hero for his birthday."

He knew the real reason he was asking.

"Not tonight. You can't. Your pop's coming to pick you up at five."

"Can you call him and ask?"

“I can try. But you know…”
Ben nodded, and as it usually did when this happened, his heart broke just a little. "Yeah, I know."

The sun glared through the windshield at baking temperature, and he found himself wishing he'd had the car's air conditioner fixed. With the window rolled down, his hair whipped in his face, making it sting. He reminded himself again to get a real haircut. He imagined saying to his hairdresser, 'Chop it on off, Terri. Make me look like a monk.' But he knew he'd end up asking for his regular trim when the time came. In some things, he was a coward.

"You guys looked like you were having fun."

"I was."

"That's all you can say?"

"I'm just tired, Dad."

He pointed toward the Dairy Queen in the distance. "You want to swing by and get some ice cream?"

"It's not good for me."

"Hey, I'm the father here. That's what I'm supposed to say. I was just thinking that if you're hot, you might want some."

"I'm not hungry. I just had cake."

"All right. Suit yourself. But don't blame me if you get home and realize you should have jumped at the opportunity."

"I won't." He turned toward the window.

"Hey, champ. You okay?"

When he spoke, his voice was almost inaudible over the wind. "Why do I have to go to Pop's? It's not like we're going to do anything fun. He sends me to bed at nine o'clock, like I'm still in second grade or something. I'm never even tired. And tomorrow, he'll have me do chores all day."

"I thought he was taking you to your grandfather's house for brunch after church."

"I still don't want to go."

'I don't want you to go, either', he thought. But what could she do?

"Why don't you bring a book?" he suggested. "You can read in your room tonight, and if you get bored tomorrow, you can read there, too."

"You always say that."

'Because I don't know what else to tell you', he thought "You want to go to the bookstore?"

"No," he said. But he could tell he didn't mean it.

"Well, come with me anyway. I want to get a book for myself."

"Okay."
"I'm sorry about this, you know."

"Yeah. I know."

Going to the bookstore did little to lift Ben's mood. Though he'd ended up picking out a couple of Hardy Boys mysteries, he'd recognized his slouch as they'd stood in line to pay for them. On the ride home, he opened one of the books and pretended to be reading. Niall was pretty sure he'd done it to keep him from peppering him with questions or trying, with forced cheerfulness, to make him feel better about his overnight at his dad's. At ten, Ben was already remarkably adept at predicting her behavior.

He hated the fact that he didn't like going to his dad's. He watched him walk inside their house, knowing that he was heading to his room to pack his things. Instead of following him, he took a seat on the porch steps and wished for the thousandth time he'd put up a swing. It was still hot, and from the whimpering coming from the kennel across the yard, it was clear that the dogs, too, were suffering from the heat. He strained for the sound of Nana inside. Had she been in the kitchen when Ben walked through, she definitely would have heard her. Nana was a walking cacophony. Not because of the stroke, but because it went part and parcel with her personality. Seventy-six going on seventeen, she laughed loud, banged pans with the spoon when she cooked, adored baseball, and turned the radio up to ear-shattering levels whenever NPR featured the Big Band era. "Music like that doesn't just grow like bananas, you know." Until the stroke, she'd worn rubber boots, overalls, and an oversize straw hat nearly every day, tramping through the yard as she taught dogs to heel or come or stay.

Years ago, along with her husband, Nana had taught them to do pretty much everything. Together, they'd bred and trained hunting dogs, service dogs for the blind, drug-sniffing dogs for the police, security dogs for home protection. Now that he was gone, she did those things only occasionally. Not because she didn't know what to do; she'd always handled most of the training anyway. But to train a dog for home protection took fourteen months, and given the fact that Nana could fall in love with a squirrel in less than three seconds, it always broke her heart to have to give up the dog when the training was completed. Without Grandpa around to say, "We've already sold him, so we don't have a choice," Nana had found it easier to simply fold that part of the business.

Instead, these days Nana ran a thriving obedience school. People would drop off their dogs for a couple of weeks—doggie boot camp, she called it—and Nana would teach them how to sit, lie down, stay, come, and heel. They were simple, uncomplicated commands that nearly every dog could master quickly. Usually, somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five dogs cycled through every two weeks, and each one needed roughly twenty minutes of training per day. Any more than that, and the dogs would lose interest. It wasn't so bad when there were fifteen, but boarding twenty-five made for long days, considering each dog also needed to be walked. And that didn't factor in all the feeding, kennel maintenance, phone calls, dealing with clients, and paperwork. For most of the summer, Niall had been working twelve or thirteen hours a day.

They were always busy. It wasn't difficult to train a dog—Niall had been helping Nana on and off since he was twelve—and there were dozens of books on the subject. In addition, the veterinary clinic offered lessons for dogs and their owners every Saturday morning for a fraction of the price. Niall knew that most people could spare twenty minutes a day for a couple of weeks to train their dog. But they didn't. Instead, people came from as far away as Florida and Tennessee to drop off their dogs to have someone else do it. Granted, Nana had a great reputation as a trainer, but she was really only teaching dogs to sit and come, heel and stay. It wasn't rocket science. Yet people were always extremely grateful. And always, always, amazed.

Niall checked his watch. Liam—her ex—would be here soon, Though he had issues with the man
— Lord knows he had serious issues—he had joint custody, simple as that, and he'd tried to make the best of it. He liked to tell himself that it was important for Ben to spend time with his dad. Boys needed to spend time with their dads, especially those coming up on their teenage years, and he had to admit that he wasn't a bad guy. Immature, yes, but not bad. He had a few beers now and then but wasn't an alcoholic; he didn't take drugs; he had never been abusive to either of them. He went to church every Sunday. He had a steady job and paid his child support on time. Or, rather, his family did. The money came from a trust, one of many that the family had established over the years. And for the most part, he kept his never-ending string of girlfriends/boyfriends away on those weekends he spent with his son. Key words: "for the most part." Lately, he'd been better about that, but he was fairly sure it had less to do with a renewed commitment to parenting than the likelihood that he was between girlfriends/boyfriends right now. He wouldn't really have minded so much, except for the fact that his girlfriends/boyfriends were usually closer in age to Ben than they were to him and, as a general rule, had the IQs of salad bowls. He wasn't being spiteful; even Ben realized it. A couple of months back, Ben had to help one of them make a second batch of Kraft macaroni and cheese after the first attempt burned. The whole "add milk, butter, mix, and stir" sequence was apparently beyond them.

That wasn't what bothered Ben the most, however. The girlfriends/boyfriends were okay—they tended to treat him more like a younger brother than a son. Nor was he truly upset about the chores. He might have to rake the yard or clean the kitchen and take out the trash, but it wasn't as if her ex treated Ben like an indentured servant. And chores were good for him; Ben had weekend chores when he was with her, too. No, the problem was Liam's childish, relentless disappointment in Ben. Liam wanted an athlete; instead he got a son who wanted to play the violin. He wanted someone to hunt with; he got a son who would rather read. He wanted a son who could play catch or shoot baskets; he was saddled with a clumsy son with poor vision.

He never said as much to Ben or to him, but he didn't have to. It was all too apparent in the scornful way he watched Ben play soccer, in the way he refused to give Ben credit when he won his last chess tournament, in the way he continually pushed Ben to be someone he wasn't. It drove Niall crazy and broke his heart at the same time, but for Ben, it was worse. For years, he'd tried to please his dad, but over time, it had just exhausted the poor kid. Take learning to play catch. No harm in that, right? Ben might learn to enjoy it, he might even want to play Little League. Made perfect sense when her ex had suggested it, and Ben was gung ho in the beginning. But after a while, Ben came to hate the thought of it. If he caught three in a row, his dad would want him to try to catch four. When he did that, it had to be five. When he got even better, his dad wanted him to catch all of them. And then catch while he was running forward. Catch while he was running backward. Catch while he was sliding. Catch while he was diving. Catch the one his dad threw as hard as he could. And if he dropped one? You'd think the world was coming to an end. His dad wasn't the kind of guy who'd say, Nice try, champ! or, Good effort.' No, he was the kind of guy who'd scream, C'mon! Quit screwing up!

Oh, he'd talked to him about it. Talked to him ad nauseam. It went in one ear and out the other, of course. Same old story. Despite—or perhaps because of—his immaturity, Liam was stubborn and opinionated about many things, and raising Ben was one of them. He wanted a certain kind of son, and by God, he was going to get him. Ben, predictably, began reacting in his own passive-aggressive way. He began to drop everything his dad threw, even simple lobs, while ignoring his father's growing frustration, until his father finally slammed his glove to the ground and stormed inside to sulk the rest of the afternoon. Ben pretended not to notice, taking a seat beneath a loblolly pine to read until he picked him up a few hours later.

He and her ex didn't battle just about Ben; they were fire and ice as well. As in, he was fire and he was ice. He was still attracted to him, which irritated him no end. Why on earth he could believe that he'd want anything to do with him was beyond him, but no matter what he said to him, it didn't seem to deter his overtures. Most of the time, he could barely remember the reasons he'd
been attracted to him years ago. He could recite the reasons for marriage—he'd been young and stupid, foremost among them, and pregnant to boot—but nowadays, whenever he stared him up and down, he cringed inside. He wasn't her type. Frankly, he'd never been her type. If his entire life had been recorded on video, the marriage would be one of those events he would gladly record over. Except for Ben, of course.

He wished his older brother, Greg, were here, and he felt the usual ache when he thought of him. Whenever he'd come by, Ben followed him around the way the dogs followed Nana. Together, they would wander off to catch butterflies or spend time in the tree house that Grandpa had built, which was accessible only by a rickety bridge that spanned one of the two creeks on the property. Unlike his ex, Greg accepted Ben, which in a lot of ways made him more of a father to Ben than her ex had ever been. Ben adored him, and he adored Greg for the quiet way he built confidence in his son. He remembered thanking him for it once, but he'd just shrugged. "I just like spending time with him," he'd said by way of explanation.

He knew he needed to check on Nana. Rising from his seat, he spotted the light on in the office, but he doubted that Nana was doing paperwork. More likely she was out in the pens behind the kennels, and he headed in that direction. Hopefully, Nana hadn't got it in her mind to try to take a group of dogs for a walk. There was no way she could keep her balance—or even hold them—if they tugged on the leashes, but it had always been one of her favorite things to do. She was of the opinion that most dogs didn't get enough exercise, and the property was great for remedying that. At nearly seventy acres, it boasted several open fields bordered by virgin hardwoods, crisscrossed by half a dozen trails and two small streams that flowed all the way to the South River. The property, bought for practically nothing fifty years ago, was worth quite a bit now. That's what the lawyer said, the one who'd come by to feel Nana out about the possibility of selling it.

She knew exactly who was behind all that. So did Nana, who pretended to be lobotomized while the lawyer spoke to her. She stared at him with wide, blank eyes, dropped grapes onto the floor one by one, and mumbled incomprehensibly. She and Niall giggled about it for hours afterward.

Glancing through the window of the kennel office, he saw no sign of Nana, but he could hear Nana's voice echoing from the pens.

"Stay… come. Good girl! Good come!"

Rounding the corner, Niall saw Nana praising a shih tzu as it trotted toward her. It reminded him of one of those wind-up toy dogs you could purchase from Wal-Mart.

"What are you doing, Nana? You're not supposed to be out here."

"Oh, hey, Niall." Unlike two months ago, now she hardly slurred her words anymore. Niall put his hands on his hips. "You shouldn't be out here alone."

"I brought a cell phone. I figured I'd just call if I got into a problem."

"You don't have a cell phone."

"I have yours. I snuck it out of your purse this morning."

"Then who would you have called?" She hadn't seemed to have considered that, and her brow furrowed as she glanced at the dog. "See what I have to put up with, Precious? I told you the boy was sharper than a digging caterpillar." She exhaled, letting out a sound like an owl.

Niall knew a change of subject was coming.
"Where's Ben?" she asked.

"Inside, getting ready. He's going to his dad's."

"I'll bet he's thrilled about that. You sure he's not hiding out in the tree house?"

"Go easy," Niall said. "He's still his dad."

"You think."

"I'm sure."

"Are you positive you didn't mess around with anyone else back then? Not even a single one-night stand with a waiter or trucker, or someone from school?" She sounded almost hopeful. She always sounded hopeful when she said it.

"I'm positive. And I've already told you that a million times."

She winked. "Yes, but Nana can always hope your memory improves."

"How long have you been out here, by the way?"

"What time is it?"

"Almost four o'clock."

"Then I've been out here three hours."

"In this heat?"

"I'm not broken, Niall. I had an incident."

"You had a stroke."

"But it wasn't a serious one."

"You can't move your arm."

"As long as I can eat soup, I don't need it anyway. Now let me go see my grandson. I want to say good-bye to him before he leaves. They started toward the kennel, Precious trailing behind them, panting quickly, her tail in the air. Cute dog.

"I think I want Chinese food tonight," Nana said. "Do you want Chinese?"

"I haven't thought about it."

"Well, think about it."

"Yeah, we can have Chinese. But I don't want anything too heavy. And not fried, either. It's too hot for that."

"You're no fun."

"But I'm healthy."

"Same thing. Hey, and since you're so healthy, would you mind putting Precious away? She's in number twelve. I heard a new joke I want to tell Ben."
"Where did you hear a joke?"

"The radio."

"Is it appropriate?"

"Of course it's appropriate. Who do you think I am?"

"I know exactly who you are. That's why I'm asking. What's the joke?"

"Two cannibals were eating a comedian, and one of them turns to the other and asks, 'Does this taste funny to you?'" Niall chuckled. "He'll like that."

"Good. The poor kid needs something to cheer him up."

"He's fine."

"Yeah, sure he is. I didn't just fall off the milk cart, you know."

As they reached the kennel, Nana kept walking toward the house, her limp more pronounced than earlier this morning. She was improving, but there was still a long way to go.
The Marine Corps is based on the number 3. It was one of the first things they taught you in basic training. Made things easy to understand. Three marines made a fire team, three fire teams made a squad, three squads made a platoon, three platoons made a company, three companies made a battalion, and three battalions made a regiment. On paper, anyway. By the time they invaded Iraq, their regiment had been combined with elements from other units, including the Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, Firing Battalions of the Eleventh Marines, the Second and Third Assault Amphibian Battalions, Company B from the First Combat Engineer Battalion, and the Combat Service Support Battalion 115. Massive. Prepared for anything. Nearly six thousand personnel in total.

As Malik walked beneath a sky beginning to change colors with the onset of dusk, he thought back to that night, technically his first combat in hostile territory. His regiment, the First, Fifth, became the first unit to cross into Iraq with the intention of seizing the Rumaylah oil fields. Everyone remembered that Saddam Hussein had set most of the wells in Kuwait on fire as he'd retreated in the First Gulf War, and no one wanted the same thing to happen again. Long story short, the First, Fifth, among others, got there in time. Only seven wells were burning by the time the area was secured. From there Malik's squad was ordered north to Baghdad to help to secure the capital city. The First, Fifth was the most decorated marine regiment in the corps and thus was chosen to lead the deepest assault' into enemy territory in the history of the corps. His first tour in Iraq lasted a little more than four months.

Five years after the fact, most of the specifics about that first tour had blurred. He had done his job and eventually was sent back to Pendleton. He didn't talk about it. He tried not to think about it. Except for this: Ricky Martinez and Bill Kincaid, the other two men in Malik's fire team, were part of a story he'd never forget.

Take any three people, stick them together, and they're going to have differences. No surprise there. And on the surface, they were different. Ricky grew up in a small apartment in Midland, Texas, and was a former baseball player and weight-lifting fanatic who'd played in the Minnesota Twins farm system before enlisting; Bill, who played the trumpet in his high school marching band, was from upstate New York and had been raised on a dairy farm with five sisters. Ricky liked blondes, Bill liked brunettes; Ricky chewed tobacco, and Bill smoked; Ricky liked rap music, Bill favored country-western. No big deal. They trained together, they ate together, they
slept together. They debated sports and politics. They shot the breeze like brothers and played practical jokes on each other. Bill would wake with one eyebrow shaved off; Ricky would wake the next night with both of them gone. Malik learned to wake at the slightest sound and somehow kept both eyebrows intact. They laughed about it for months. Drunk one night, they got matching tattoos, each proclaiming their fidelity to the corps.

After so much time together, they got to the point where they could anticipate what the others would do. Each of them in turn had saved Malik’s life, or at least kept him from serious harm. Bill grabbed the back of Malik’s flak jacket just as Malik was poised to move into the open; moments later, a sniper wounded two men nearby. The second time, a distracted Malik was almost struck by a speeding Humvee driven by a fellow marine; that time, it was Ricky who grabbed his arm to stop him. Even in war, people die in auto accidents. Look at Patton.

After securing the oil fields, they had arrived at the outskirts of Baghdad with the rest of their company. The city had not fallen yet. They were part of a convoy, three men among hundreds, tightening their grip on the city. Aside from the roar of Allied vehicle engines, all was quiet as they entered the outlying neighborhoods. When gunfire was heard from a graveled road off the main thoroughfare, Malik’s squad was ordered to check it out.

They evaluated the scene. Two- and three-story buildings sandwiched together on either side of the potholed road. A lone dog eating garbage. The smoking ruins of a car a hundred meters away. They waited. Saw nothing. Waited some more. Heard nothing. Finally, Malik, Ricky, and Bill were ordered to cross the street. They did so, moving quickly, reaching safety. From there, the squad proceeded up the street, into the unknown.

When the sound of gunfire rang out again that day, it wasn’t a single shot. It was the death rattle of dozens and then hundreds of bullets from automatic weapons trapping them in a circle of gunfire. Malik, Ricky, and Bill, along with the rest of the squad across the street, found themselves pinned in doorways with few places to hide.

The firefight didn’t last long, people said later. It was long enough. The blizzard of fire cascaded from windows above them. Malik and his squad instinctively raised their weapons and fired, then fired again. Across the street, two of their men were wounded, but reinforcements arrived quickly. A tank rolled in, fast-moving infantry in the rear. The air vibrated as the muzzle flashed and the upper stories of a building collapsed, dust and glass filling the air. Everywhere Malik heard the sounds of screaming, saw civilians fleeing the buildings into the streets. The fusillade continued; the stray dog was shot and sent tumbling. Civilians fell forward as they were shot in the back, bleeding and crying out. A third marine was injured in the lower leg. Malik, Ricky, and Bill were still unable to move, imprisoned by the steady fire chipping at the walls next to them, at their feet. Still, the three of them continued to fire. The air vibrated with a roar, and the upper floors of another building collapsed. The tank, rolling forward, was getting close now. All at once, enemy gunfire started coming from two directions, not just one. Bill glanced at him; he glanced at Ricky. They knew what they had to do. It was time to move; if they stayed, they would die. Malik rose first.

In that instant, all went suddenly white, then turned black.

In Hampton, more than five years later, Malik couldn’t recall the specifics, other than the feeling that he’d been tossed into a washing machine. He was sent tumbling into the street with the explosion, his ears ringing. His friend Ant quickly reached his side; so did a naval corpsman. The tank continued to fire, and little by little, the street was brought under control.

He learned all this after the fact, just as he learned that the explosion had been caused by an RPG, a rocket-propelled grenade. Later, an officer would tell Malik that it had most likely been meant for the tank; it missed the turret by inches. Instead, as if fated to find them, it flew toward Malik,
Malik was loaded into a Humvee and evacuated from the scene, unconscious. Miraculously, his wounds had been minor, and within three days he would be back with his squad. Ricky and Bill would not; each was later buried with full military honors. Ricky was a week away from his twenty-second birthday. Bill was twenty years old. They were neither the first casualties of the war nor the last. The war went on.

Malik forced himself not to think about them much. It seemed callous, but in war the mind shuts down about things like that. It hurt to think about their deaths, to reflect on their absence, so he didn't. Nor did most of the squad. Instead, he did his job. He focused on the fact that he was still alive. He focused on keeping others safe.

But today he felt the pinpricks of memory, and loss, and he didn't bury them. They were with him as he walked the quiet streets of town, making for the outskirts on the far side. Following the directions he'd received from the front desk at the motel, he headed east on Route 54, walking on the grassy shoulder, staying well off the road. He'd learned in his travels never to trust drivers. Zeus trailed behind, panting heavily. He stopped and gave Zeus some water, the last in the bottle.

Businesses lined either side of the highway. A mattress shop, a place that did auto body repairs, a nursery, a Quick'N-Go that sold gas and stale food in plastic wrappers, and two ramshackle farmhouses that seemed out of place, as if the modern world had sprouted up around them. Which was exactly what had happened, he assumed. He wondered how long the owners would hold out or why anyone would want to live in a home that fronted a highway and was sandwiched between businesses.

Cars roared past in both directions. Clouds began to roll in, gray and puffy. He smelled rain before the first drop hit him, and within a few steps it was pouring. It lasted fifteen minutes, drenching him, but the heavy clouds kept moving toward the coast until only a haze remained. Zeus shook the water from his coat. Birdsong resumed from the trees while mist rose from the moist earth.

Eventually, he reached the fairgrounds. It was deserted. Nothing fancy, he thought, examining the layout. Just the basics. Parking on a dirt-gravel lot on the left; a couple of ancient barns on the far right; a wide grassy field for carnival rides separating the two, all lined with a chain-link fence.

He didn't need to jump the fence, nor did he need to look at the picture. He'd seen it a thousand times. He moved forward, orienting himself, and eventually he spotted the ticket booth. Behind it was an arched opening where a banner could be strung. When he arrived at the arch, he turned toward the northern horizon, framing the ticket booth and centering the arch in his vision, just as it had appeared in the photograph. This was the angle, he thought; this was where the picture had been taken.

The structure of the marines was based on threes. Three men to a fire team, three fire teams to a squad, three squads to a platoon. He served three tours in Iraq. Checking his watch, he noted that he'd been in Hampton for three hours, and straight ahead, right where they should have been, were three evergreen trees clustered together.

Malik walked back to the highway, knowing he was closer to finding him. He wasn't there yet, but he soon would be.

He'd been here. He knew that now.

What he needed now was a name. On his walk across the country, he'd had a lot of time to think, and he'd decided there were three ways to go about it. First, he could try to find a local veterans association and ask if any locals had served in Iraq. That might lead him to someone who might
recognize him. Second, he could go to the local high school and see if it had copies of yearbooks from ten to fifteen years ago. He could look through the photographs one by one. Or third, he could show the photograph and ask around.

All had their drawbacks, none were guaranteed. As for the veterans association, he hadn't found one listed in the phone book. Strike one. Because it was still summer vacation, he doubted if the high school would be open; even if it was, it might be difficult to gain access to the library's yearbooks. Strike two—for now, anyway. Which meant that his best bet was to ask around and see if anyone recognized him.

Who to ask, though?

He knew from the almanac that nine thousand people lived in Hampton, North Carolina. Another thirteen thousand people lived in Hampton County. Way too many. The most efficient strategy was to limit his search to the likeliest pool of candidates. Again, he started with what he knew.

He appeared to be in his early twenties when the photograph had been taken, which meant he was in his late twenties now. Possibly early thirties. He was obviously attractive. Further, in a town this size, assuming an equal distribution among age brackets, that meant there were roughly 2,750 kids from newborns up to ten years of age, 2,750 from eleven to twenty, and 5,500 people in their twenties and thirties, his age bracket. Roughly. Of those, he assumed half were males and half were females. Females would tend to be more suspicious about his intentions, especially if they actually knew him. He was a stranger. Strangers were dangerous. He doubted they would reveal much.

Men might, depending on how he framed the question. In his experience, nearly all males noticed attractive people in their age bracket, especially if they were single men or women. How many men in his current age group were single? He guessed about thirty percent. Might be right, might be wrong, but he'd go with it. Say 900 or so. Of those, he figured eighty percent had been living here back then. Just a guess, but Hampton struck him as a town that people were more likely to emigrate from, as opposed to immigrate to. That brought the number down to 720. He could further cut that in half if he concentrated on single men aged twenty-five to thirty-five, instead of twenty to forty. That brought it down to 360. He figured a good chunk of those men either knew him or knew of him five years ago. Maybe they'd gone to high school with him or maybe not—he knew there was one in town—but they would know him if he was single. Of course, it was possible he wasn't single—men in small southern towns probably married young, after all—but he would work with this set of assumptions first. The words on the back of the photograph —"Keep Safe! N"—didn't strike him as romantic enough to have been given to a boyfriend or fiancé. No "Love you," no "I'll miss you." Just an initial. A friend.

Down from 22,000 to 360 in less than ten minutes. Not bad and definitely good enough to get started. Assuming, of course he lived here when the photograph had been taken. Assuming he hadn't been visiting.

He knew it was another big assumption. But he had to start someplace, and he knew he'd been here once. He would learn the truth one way or the other and move on from there.

Where did single men hang out? Single men who could be drawn into conversation? I met him a couple of years ago and he told me to call him if I got back into town, but I lost his name and number...

Bars. Pool halls.

In a town this size, he doubted whether there were more than three or four places where locals hung out Bars and pool halls had the advantage of alcohol, and it was Saturday night. They'd be
filled. He figured he'd have his answer, one way or the other, within the next twelve hours.

He glanced at Zeus. "Seems like you're going to be on your own tonight. I could bring you, but I'd have to leave you outside and I don't know how long I'll be."

Zeus continued walking, his head down, tongue out. Tired and hot. Zeus didn't care.

"I'll put the air conditioner on, okay?"
It was nine o'clock on Saturday night, and he was stuck at home babysitting. Great. Just great.

How else could a day like today end, though? First, one of the girls almost catches him taking pictures, then the department's camera gets stolen, and then Zayn Malik flattens his tires. Worse, he'd had to explain both the loss of the camera and the tires to his dad, Mr. County Sheriff. Predictably, his dad was spitting mad and somehow didn't buy the story he'd concocted. Instead he just kept peppering him with questions. By the end, Payne had wanted to pop the old man. Dad might be a bigwig to a lot of the folks around here, but the man had no business talking to him like he was an idiot. But Payne had kept to his story—he'd thought he'd seen someone, gone to investigate, and somehow run over a couple of nails. And the camera? Don't ask him. He had no idea if it had even been in the cruiser in the first place. Not great, he knew, but good enough.

"That looks more like a hole made by a buck-knife," said his dad, bending down, examining the tires.

"I told you it was nails."

"There's no construction out there."

"I don't know how it happened, either! I'm just telling you what happened."

"Where are they?"

"How the hell should I know? I pitched them in the woods."

The old man wasn't convinced, but Payne knew enough to stick to his story. Always stick to the story. It was when you started backtracking that people got in trouble. Interrogation 101.

Eventually the old man left, and Payne put on the spares and drove to the garage, where they patched the original tires. By then a couple of hours had passed, and he was late for an appointment with one Mr. Zayn Malik. Nobody, but nobody, messed with Liam Payne, especially not some hippie drifter who thought he could put one over on him.

He spent the rest of the afternoon driving the streets of Arden, asking whether anyone had seen
him. Dude like that was impossible to miss if only because of Cujo by his side. His search yielded zippo, which only infuriated him further, since he realized that it meant Malik had lied to his face and Payne hadn't picked up on it.

But he'd find the guy. Without a doubt he'd find the guy, if only because of the camera. Or, more accurately, the pictures. Especially the other pictures. Last thing he wanted was for Malik to stroll into the sheriff's department and drop that baby on the counter—or even worse, head straight to the newspaper. Of the two, the department would be the lesser of two evils, since his dad could keep a lid on it. While his dad would blow a gasket and most likely put him on some crap detail for the next few weeks, he'd keep it quiet. His dad wasn't good for much, but he was good for things like that.

But the newspaper… now that was a different story. Sure, Gramps would pull some strings and do his best to keep it quiet there, too, but there was no way that sort of information could be kept in check. It was just too juicy, and the news would spread like wildfire through this town, with or without an article. Clay-ton was already regarded as the black sheep of the family, and the last thing he needed was another reason for Gramps to come down on him. Gramps had a way of dwelling on the negative. Even now, years later, Gramps was still bent that he and Niall had divorced, not that it was even his business. And at family gatherings, he could usually be counted on to bring up the fact that Payne hadn't gone to college. With his grades, Payne could easily have handled it, but he simply couldn't imagine spending another four years in the classroom, so he'd joined his father at the sheriff's department. That was enough to placate Gramps. It seemed like he'd spent half his life placating Gramps.

But he had no choice in the matter. Even though he didn't particularly like Gramps—Gramps was a devout Southern Baptist who went to church every Sunday and thought that drinking and dancing were sins, which always struck Payne as ridiculous—he knew what Gramps expected of him, and let's just say that taking nudie pictures of coeds was not on the "to do" list. Nor were some of the other photos on the disk, especially of him and a few other ladies in compromising positions. That sort of thing would definitely lead to serious disappointment, and Gramps wasn't very patient with those who disappointed him, even if they were family. Paynes had lived in Hampton County since 1753; in many ways, they were Hampton County. Family members included judges, lawyers, doctors, and landowners; even the mayor had married into the family, but everyone knew Gramps was the one who sat at the head of the table. Gramps ruled the place like an old-fashioned Mafia don, and most people in town sang his praises and went on and on about what a quality man he was. Gramps liked to believe it was because he supported everything from the library to the theater to the local elementary school, but Payne knew the real reason was that Gramps owned pretty much every commercial building in the downtown area, as well as the lumberyard, both marinas, three automobile dealerships, three storage complexes, the only apartment complex in town, and vast tracts of farmland. All of it made for an immensely wealthy—and powerful—family, and since Payne got most of his money from the family trusts, the last thing he needed was some stranger in town making trouble for him.

Thank God he'd had Ben in the short time he'd been with Niall. Gramps had this weird thing about lineage, and since Ben had been named after Gramps—a pretty slick idea, if he did say so himself—Gramps adored him. Most of the time, Payne had the sense that Gramps liked Ben, his great-grandson, a lot more than he liked his grandson.

Oh, Payne knew Ben was a good kid. It wasn't just Gramps—everyone said so. And he did love the kid, even if he was a pain in the ass sometimes. From his perch on the front porch, he looked through the window and saw that Ben had finished with the kitchen and was back on the couch. He knew he should join him inside, but he wasn't ready just yet. He didn't want to fly off the handle or say something he'd regret. He'd been working at being better about things like that; a couple of months back, Gramps had had a little talk with him about how important it was to be a
steady influence. Peckerhead. What he should have done was talk to Ben about doing what his
dad asked when he asked, Payne thought. Would have done a lot more good. The kid had already
pissed him off once tonight, but instead of exploding, he'd remembered Gramps and pressed his
lips together before stalking outside.

Seemed like he was always getting pissed off at Ben these days. But it wasn't his fault; he honestly
tried to get along with the kid! And they'd started out okay. Talked about school, had some
burgers, tuned in to SportsCenter on ESPN. All good. But then, honor of horrors, he'd asked Ben
to clean the kitchen. Like that was too much to ask, right? Payne hadn't had the chance to get to it
for the last few days, and he knew the kid would do a good job. So Ben promised he'd clean it,
but instead of doing it, he'd just sat there. And sat. And the clock ticked by. And then he'd sat
some more. So Payne had asked again—he was sure he'd said it nicely—and though he couldn't
be certain, he was pretty sure that Ben had rolled his eyes as he'd finally trudged off. That was all
it took. He hated when Ben rolled his eyes at him, and Ben knew he hated it. It was like the kid
knew exactly which buttons to push, and he spent all his spare time trying to figure out new
buttons to hit the next time he saw him. Hence, Payne had found himself on the porch.

Behaviors like that were his dad's doing; of that, Payne had no doubt. He was one hell of a good-
looking man, but he didn't know the first thing about turning a young boy into a man. He had
nothing against the kid getting good grades, but he couldn't play soccer this year because he
wanted to play the violin? What kind of crap was that? Violin? Might as well start dressing the
boy in pink and teaching him to ride sidesaddle. Payne did his best to keep that sort of pansy stuff
in check, but the fact was, he had the kid only a day and a half every other weekend. Not his fault
the kid swung a bat like a girl. Kid was too busy playing chess. And just so everyone was clear,
there was no way on God's green earth that he'd be caught dead at a violin recital.

Violin recital. Good Lord. What was this world coming to?

His thoughts circled back to Malik again, and though he wanted to believe the guy had simply left
the county, he knew better. The guy was walking, and there was no way he could reach the far
side of the county by nightfall. And what else? Something had been gnawing at him most of the
day, and it wasn't until he'd come to cool off on the porch that he'd figured it out. If Malik had
been telling the truth about living in Colorado—and granted, he might not have been, but let's say
he was—it meant he'd been traveling from west to east. And the next town east? Not Arden.
That's for sure. That was southwest from where they'd met. Instead, heading east would have
brought the guy to good old Hampton. Right here, his hometown. Which meant, of course, the
guy might be less than fifteen minutes from where he was sitting now.

But where was Payne? Out searching for the guy? No, he was babysitting.'

He squinted through the window again at his son. He was reading on the couch, which was the
only thing the kid ever seemed to want to do. Oh yeah, except for the violin. He shook his head,
wondering if the kid had gotten any of his genes at all. Not likely. He was a daddy's boy through
and through. Niall's son.

Niall…

Yeah, the marriage didn't work. But there was still something between them. There always would
be. He may have been preachy and opinionated, but he'd always watch out for him, not only
because of Ben, but because he was surely the best-looking man he'd ever slept with. Great-
looking back then and somehow even better-looking now. Even better-looking than the coeds he'd
seen today. Weird. Like he had reached an age that suited him perfectly and somehow stopped
aging after that. He knew it wouldn't last. Gravity would take its toll, but still, he couldn't stop
thinking about having a quick roll in the sack with him. One for old times' sake, and to help him
… unwind.
He supposed he could call Danielle. Or Sophia, for that matter. One was twenty and worked in the pet store; the other was a year older and cleaned toilets at the Stratford Inn. They both had nice little figures and were always dynamite when it came time for a little bit of... unwinding. He knew Ben wouldn't care if he brought one of them over, but even so, he'd probably have to talk to them first. They'd been pretty angry at him the last time he'd seen either of them. He'd have to apologize and turn on the charm, and he wasn't sure he was up to listening to them smack their chewing gum and chatter away about what they'd seen on MTV or read in the National Enquirer. Sometimes they were too much work.

So that was out. Searching for Malik tonight was out. Looking for Malik tomorrow was out, too, since Gramps wanted everyone over for brunch after church. Still, Malik was walking, and with the dog and the backpack, it meant catching a ride was unlikely. How far could he get by tomorrow afternoon? Twenty miles? Thirty at the most? No more than that, which meant he was still in the vicinity. He'd make some calls to a couple of other departments in the surrounding counties, ask them to keep an eye out. There weren't that many roads leading out of the county, and he figured that if he spent a few hours making phone calls to some of the businesses along those routes, someone would spot the guy. When that happened, he'd be on his way. Malik never should have messed with Liam Payne.

Lost in thought, Payne barely heard the front door squeak open.

"Hey, Pop?"

"Yeah?"

"Someone's on the phone."

"Who is it?"

"Tony."

"Of course it is."

He rose from his seat, wondering what Tony wanted. Talk about a loser. Scrawny and pimpled, he was one of those hangers-on who sat near the deputies, trying to worm his way into pretending he was one of them. He was probably wondering where Payne was and what he was doing later because he didn't want to be left out.

Lame.

He finished his beer on the way in and tossed it in the can, listening to it rattle. He grabbed the receiver from the counter.

"Yeah?"

In the background, he could hear the distorted chords of a country-western song playing on a jukebox and the dull roar of loud conversation. He wondered where the loser was calling from.

"Hey, I'm at Decker's Pool Hall, and there's this strange dude here that I think you should know about."

His antenna went up. "Does he have a dog with him? Backpack? Kind of scruffy, like he's been out in the woods for a while?"

"No."
"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. He's shooting pool in the back. But listen. I wanted to tell you he's got a picture of your ex-husband."

Caught off guard, Payne tried to sound nonchalant. "So?" he said.

"I just thought you'd want to know."

"Why would I give a holy crap about that?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you don't. Holler."

He hung up the phone, thinking the guy must have potato salad where his brains should be, and ran an appraising gaze over the kitchen. Clean as could be. Kid did a great job, as usual. He almost shouted that out from where he stood, but instead, as he caught sight of Ben, he couldn't help but notice again how small his son was. Granted, a big chunk of that might be genetics, early or late growth spurts, and all that, but another part came from general health. It was common sense. Eat right, exercise, get plenty of rest. The basics; things everyone's mother told their kids. And parents were right. If you didn't eat enough, you couldn't grow. If you didn't exercise enough, your muscles stagnated. And when do you think a person grew? Night. When the body regenerated. When people dreamed.

He often wondered whether Ben got enough sleep at his dad's. Payne knew Ben ate—he'd finished his burger and fries—and he knew the kid was active, so maybe lack of sleep was keeping him small. Kid didn't want to end up short, did he? Of course not. And besides, Payne wanted a bit of alone time. Wanted to fantasize about what he was going to do to Malik the next time he saw him.

He cleared his throat. "Hey, Ben. It's getting kind of late, don't you think?"
Malik

Chapter Notes

This is Nicholas Sparks' book --- one of my favorites --- rewritten as Ziall Horlik fanfiction.

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If you like this fic, please purchase the book by Nicholas Sparks. It really is a treasure.

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On his way home from the pool hall, Malik remembered his second tour in Iraq.

It went like this: Fallujah, spring 2004. The First, Fifth, among other units, was ordered in to pacify the escalating violence since the fall of Baghdad the year before. Civilians knew what to expect and began to flee the city, choking the highways. Maybe a third of the city evacuated within a day. Air strikes were called in, then the marines. They moved block by block, house by house, room by room, in some of the most intense fighting since the opening days of the invasion. In three days, they controlled a quarter of the city, but the growing number of civilian deaths prompted a cease-fire. A decision was made to abandon the operation, and most of the forces withdrew, including Malik's company.

But not all of his company withdrew.

On the second day of operations, at the southern, industrial end of town, Malik and his platoon were ordered to investigate a building rumored to hold a cache of weapons. The particular building hadn't been pinpointed however; it could be any one of a dozen dilapidated structures clustered near an abandoned gas station, forming a rough semicircle. Malik and his platoon moved in, toward the buildings, giving the gas station a wide berth. Half went right, half went left. All was quiet, and then it wasn't. The gas station suddenly exploded. Flames leapt toward the sky, the explosion knocking half of the men to the ground, shattering eardrums. Malik was dazed; his peripheral vision had gone black, and everything else was blurry. All at once, a hail of fire poured from the windows and rooftops above them and from behind the burned-out remains of automobiles in the streets.

Malik found himself on the ground beside Ant. Two of the others in his platoon, Matt and Kevin—Mad Dog and K-Man, respectively—were with them, and the training of the corps kicked in. The brotherhood kicked in. Despite the onslaught, despite his fear, despite an almost certain death, Ant reached for his rifle and rose to one knee, zeroing in on the enemy. He fired, then fired again, his movements calm and focused, steady. Mad Dog reached for his rifle and did the same. One by one they rose; one by one fire teams were formed. Fire. Cover. Move. Except they couldn't move. There was no place to go. One marine toppled, then another. Then a third and a fourth.

By the time reinforcements arrived, it was almost too late. Mad Dog had been shot in the femoral
artery; despite having a tourniquet, he'd bled to death within minutes. Kevin was shot in the head and died instantly. Ten others were wounded. Only a few emerged unscathed: Malik and Ant were among them.

In the pool hall, one of the young men he'd spoken with reminded him of Mad Dog. They could have been brothers—same height and weight, same hair, same manner of speaking—and there had been an instant there where he'd wondered whether they were brothers before telling himself that it simply wasn't possible.

He'd known the chance he was taking with his plan. In small towns, strangers are always suspect, and toward the end of the evening, he'd seen the skinny guy with bad skin make a call from the pay phone near the bathroom, eyeing Malik nervously as he did so. He'd been jumpy before the call as well, and Malik assumed the call had been either to the man in the photograph or to someone close to him. Those suspicions were confirmed when Malik had left. Predictably, the man had followed him to the door to see which way he was walking, which was why Malik had headed in the opposite direction before doubling back.

When he'd arrived at the run-down pool hall, he'd bypassed the bar and made straight for the pool tables. He quickly identified the guys in the appropriate age group, most of whom seemed to be single. He asked to join in and put up with the requisite grumbling. Made nice, bought a few rounds of beers while losing a few games at pool, and sure enough, they began to loosen up. Casually, he asked about the social life in town. He missed the necessary shots. He congratulated them when they made a shot.

Eventually, they started asking about him. Where was he from? What was he doing here? He hemmed and hawed, mumbling something about a guy, and changed the subject. He fed their curiosity. He bought more beers, and when they asked again, he reluctantly shared his story: that he'd gone to the fair with a friend a few years back and met a guy. They'd hit it off. He went on and on about how great he was and how he'd told him to look him up if he ever came to town again. And he wanted to, but damned if he could remember his name.

‘You don’t remember his name?’ they asked. ‘No’, he answered. ‘I’ve never been good with names. I got hit in the head with a baseball when I was a kid, and my memory doesn’t work so good.’ He shrugged, knowing they would laugh, and they did. ‘I got a photo, though,’ he added, making it sound like an afterthought.

Do you have it with you? ‘Yeah. I think I do.’

He rummaged through his pockets and pulled out the photo. The men gathered around. A moment later, one of them began shaking his head. ‘You’re out of luck’, he said. ‘He's off-limits. He's married! No, but let's just say he doesn't date. His ex wouldn't like it, and trust me, you don't want to mess with him.’

Malik swallowed. ‘Who is he?’

‘Niall Horan’, they said. ‘He's a teacher at Hampton Elementary and lives with his grandma in the house at Sunshine Kennels’.

Niall Horan. Or, more accurately, Malik thought, Niall James Horan.

N.

It was while they were talking that Malik realized one of the people he'd shown the picture to had slipped away. ‘I guess I'm out of luck’, then, Malik said, taking back the photo.
He stayed for another half hour to cover his tracks. He made more small talk. He watched the stranger with the bad skin make the phone call and saw the disappointment in his reaction. Like a kid who got in trouble for tattling. Good. Still, Malik had the feeling he'd see the stranger again. He bought more beers and lost more games, glancing occasionally at the door to see if anyone arrived. No one did. In time, he held up his hands and said he was out of money. He was going to hit the road. It had cost him a little more than a hundred dollars. They assured him he was welcome to join them anytime.

He barely heard them. Instead, all he could think was that he now had a name to go with the face, and that the next step was to meet him.
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Sunday.

After church, it was supposed to be a day of rest, when he could recover and recharge for the coming week. The day he was supposed to spend with his family, cooking stew in the kitchen and taking relaxing walks along the river. Maybe even cuddle up with a good book while he sipped a glass of wine, or soak in a warm bubble bath.

What he didn't want to do was spend the day scooping dog poop off the grassy area where the dogs trained, or clean the kennels, or train twelve dogs one right after the next, or sit in a sweltering office waiting for people to come pick up the family pets that were relaxing in cool, air-conditioned kennels. Which, of course, was exactly what he'd been doing since she'd gotten back from church earlier that morning.

Two dogs had already been picked up, but four more were scheduled for pickup sometime today. Nana had been kind enough to lay out the files for him before she retreated to the house to watch the game. The Atlanta Braves were playing the Mets, and not only did Nana love the Atlanta Braves with a feverish passion that struck Niall as ridiculous, but she loved any and all memorabilia associated with the team. Which explained, of course, the Atlanta Braves coffee cups stacked near the snack counter, the Atlanta Braves pennants on the walls, the Atlanta Braves desktop calendar, and the Atlanta Braves lamp near the window.

Even with the door open, the air in the office was stifling. It was one of those hot, humid summer days great for swimming in the river but unfit for anything else. His shirt was soaked with perspiration, and because he was wearing shorts, his legs kept sticking to the vinyl chair he sat in. Every time he moved his legs, he was rewarded with a sort of sticky sound, like peeling tape from a cardboard box, which was just plain gross.

While Nana considered it imperative to keep the dogs cool, he'd never bothered to add cooling ducts that led to the office. "If you're hot, just prop the door to the kennels open," she'd always said, ignoring the fact that while she didn't mind the endless barking, most normal people did. And
today there were a couple of little yappers in there: a pair of Jack Russell terriers that hadn't stopped barking since Niall had arrived. Niall assumed they'd barked nearly all night, since most of the other dogs seemed grumpy as well. Every minute or so, other dogs joined in an angry chorus, the sounds rising in pitch and intensity, as if every dog's sole desire was to voice its displeasure more loudly than the next. Which meant there wasn't a chance on earth that he was going to open the door to cool off the office.

He toyed with the idea of going up to the house to fetch another glass of ice water, but he had the funny feeling that as soon as he left the office, the owners who'd dropped off their cocker spaniel for obedience training would show up. They'd called half an hour ago, telling him that they were on their way—"We'll be there in ten minutes!"—and they were the kind of people who would be upset if their cocker spaniel had to sit in a kennel for a minute longer than it had to, especially after spending two weeks away from home.

But were they here yet? Of course not.

It would have been so much easier if Ben were around. He'd seen him in church that morning with his father, and he'd looked as glum as he'd expected. As always, it hadn't been a lot of fun for him. He'd called before going to bed last night and told her that Liam had spent a good chunk of the evening sitting alone on the porch outside while Ben cleaned the kitchen. What, he wondered, was that about? Why couldn't he just enjoy the fact that his son was there? Or simply sit and talk with him? Ben was just about the easiest kid to get along with, and he wasn't saying that because he was biased. Well, okay, he admitted, maybe he was a little biased, but as a teacher, he'd spent time with lots of different kids and he knew what he was talking about. Ben was smart. Ben had a zany sense of humor. Ben was naturally kind. Ben was polite. Ben was great, and it made him crazy to realize that Liam was too dumb to see it.

He really wished he were inside the house doing… some' thing. Anything. Even doing laundry was more exciting than sitting out here. Out here, he had way too much time to think. Not only about Ben, but about Nana, too. And about whether he would teach this year. And even the sad state of his love life, which never failed to depress him. It would be wonderful, he thought, to meet someone special, someone to laugh with, some-one who would love Ben as much as he did. Or even to meet a man with whom he could go to dinner and a movie. A normal man, like someone who remembered to put his napkin in his lap in a restaurant and opened a door for him now and then. That wasn't so unreasonable, was it? He hadn't been lying to Melody when he'd said his choices in town were slim, and he'd be the first to admit that he was picky, but aside from the short time with Justin, he'd spent every other weekend at home this past year. Forty-nine out of fifty-two weekends. he wasn't that picky, that's for sure. The simple fact was that Justin had been the only one who'd asked him out, and for a reason he still didn't understand, he'd suddenly stopped calling. Which pretty much summed up the story of his dating life the last few years.

But no big deal, right? He'd survived without a relationship this long, and he'd soldier on. Besides, most of the time it didn't bother him. If it hadn't been such a miserably hot day, he doubted it would bother him now. Which meant he definitely had to cool off. Otherwise he'd probably start thinking about the past, and he definitely didn't want to go there. Fingering his empty glass, he decided to get that ice water. And while he was at it, a small towel to sit on.

As he rose from his seat, he peeked down the empty gravel drive, then he scribbled a note saying he'd be back in ten minutes and tacked it to the front door of the office. Outside, the sun pressed down hard, driving him toward the shade offered by the ancient magnolia and guiding him to the gravel path that led toward the house he'd grown up in. Built around 1920, it resembled a broad, low-country farmhouse, banded by a large porch and sporting carved molding in the eaves. The backyard, hidden from the kennel and office by towering hedges, was shaded by giant oaks and graced with a series of decks that made eating outside a pleasure. The place must have been
magnificent long ago, but like so many rural homes around Hampton, time and the elements had conspired against it. These days the porch sagged, the floors squeaked, and when the wind was strong enough, papers would blow off the counters even when the windows were closed. Inside, it was pretty much the same story: great bones, but the place needed modern updates, especially in the kitchen and bathrooms. Nana knew it and mentioned doing something about it every now and then, but they were projects that always got put on the back burner. Besides, Niall had to admit that the place still had unique appeal. Not only the backyard—which was truly an oasis—but inside as well. For years, Nana had frequented antiques shops, and she favored anything French from the nineteenth century. She also spent good chunks of her weekends at garage sales, rummaging through old paintings. She had a knack for paintings in general and had developed some good friendships with a number of gallery owners throughout the South. The paintings hung on nearly every wall in the house. On a lark, Niall had once Googled a couple of the artists' names and learned that other works by those artists hung in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Huntington Library in San Marino, California When he mentioned what he'd learned, Nana had winked and said, "It's like sipping champagne, ain't it?" Nana's nutty turns of phrase often disguised her razor sharp instincts.

After reaching the front porch and opening the door, Niall was hit by a blast of cool air so refreshing that he stood in the doorway, savoring the feeling. "Close the door," Nana called over her shoulder. "You're letting the air out." She turned in her chair, giving Niall the onceover. "You look hot."

"I am hot."

"I take it that the office feels like a furnace today."

"Ya think?"

"I think you should have opened the door to the kennel like I told you. But that's just me. Well, come on in and cool off for a while." Niall motioned to the set. "How're the Braves doing?"

"Like a bunch of carrots."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Can carrots play baseball?"

"I guess not."

"Then you have your answer."

Niall smiled as he walked to the kitchen. Nana always got a little edgy when the Braves were losing.

From inside the freezer he drew out an ice tray and cracked out a few cubes. After dropping them into a glass, he filled it and took a long, satisfying drink. Realizing he was hungry as well, he chose a banana from the fruit bowl and went back to the living room. He propped himself on the armrest of the couch, feeling the sweat evaporate in the cold draft, half watching Nana and half watching the game. Part of him wanted to ask how many touchdowns had been scored, but he knew Nana wouldn't appreciate the humor. Not if the Braves were playing like a bunch of carrots, anyway. Glancing at the clock, he exhaled, knowing he had to get back to the office.

"It was nice visiting with you, Nana."

"You too, sweetie. Try not to get too hot."
"I'll do my best."

Niall retraced his steps to the kennel office, noting with disappointment the absence of cars in the parking lot, which meant the owners still hadn't showed up. There was, however, a man walking up the drive, a German shepherd by his side. Dust spirals were rising in the dirt behind him, and the dog's head drooped, his tongue hanging out.

He wondered why they were outside on a day like this. Even animals preferred to stay indoors. Thinking back, he realized it was the first time he could ever remember someone walking his dog to the kennel. Not only that, but whoever it was hadn't called for an appointment. People dropping off their pets always called for an appointment.

Figuring they'd reach the office at about the same time, he waved a greeting and was surprised when the man paused to stare at him. The dog did the same, his ears rising, and his first thought was that he looked a lot like Oliver, the German shepherd Nana had brought to the house when Niall was thirteen. He had the same black-and-tan markings, the same tilt of his head, the same intimidating stance in the presence of strangers. Not that he'd ever been afraid of Oliver. He'd been more Greg's dog during the day, but Oliver had always slept beside his bed at night, finding comfort in his presence.

Brought up short by memories of Greg and Oliver, he didn't realize at first that the man still hadn't moved. Nor had he said anything. Odd. Maybe he'd expected Nana. Because his face was in shadow, he couldn't tell one way or the other, but no matter. Once he reached the door, he took down the note and propped the door open, figuring he'd come to the office when he was ready. He walked around the counter and saw the vinyl chair, realizing he'd forgotten the towel. Figured.

Thinking he'd get the paperwork ready for the stranger to drop off his dog, he grabbed a sheet from the file cabinet and attached it to the clipboard. He rummaged through the desk for a pen and set both on the counter just as the stranger and his dog walked in. He smiled, and when their eyes met, it was one of the few times in his life that he felt at a complete loss for words.

It had less to do with the fact that he was staring than with the way he was staring. As crazy as it sounded, he was looking at him as though he recognized him. But he'd never seen him before; he was sure of that. He would have remembered him, if only because he reminded him of Greg in the way he seemed to dominate the room. Like Greg, he was probably close to six feet and lean, with wiry arms and broad shoulders. There was a rugged edge to his appearance, underscored by his sun bleached jeans and T-shirt.

But that's where the similarities ended. While Greg's eyes were blue, the stranger's were brown; where Greg had always kept his hair on the long-ish side, the stranger's hair was shorter. He noted that despite having walked here, he seemed to be sweating less than he was.

He felt suddenly self-conscious and turned away just as the stranger took a step toward the counter. From the corner of his eye, he watched him raise his palm slightly in the dog's direction. He'd seen Nana do that a thousand times, and the dog, attuned to every subtle move, stayed in place. The dog was already well trained, which probably meant he was here for boarding.

"Your dog is beautiful," he said, sliding the clipboard toward him. The sound of his own voice broke the awkward silence. "I had a German shepherd once. What's his name?"

"This is Zeus. And thank you."

"Hello, Zeus."

Zeus's head tilted to the side.
"I'm just going to need you to sign in," he said. "And if you have a copy of the vet's records, that would be great. Or the contact information."

"Excuse me?"

"The vet's records. You're here to board Zeus, right?"

"No," he said. He motioned over his shoulder. "Actually, I saw the sign in the window. I'm looking for work, and I was wondering if you still had anything available."

"Oh." He hadn't expected that and tried to reorient himself.

He shrugged. "I know I probably should have called first, but I was out this way anyway. I figured I'd just swing by in person to see if you had an application. If you want me to come back tomorrow, I will."

"No, it's not that. I'm just surprised. People usually don't come by on Sundays to apply for a job."

Actually, they didn't come by on other days, either, but he left that part out. "I've got an application on file here somewhere," he said, turning toward the cabinet behind him. "Just give me a second to grab it." She pulled out the bottom drawer and began rummaging through the files.

"What's your name?"

"Zayn Malik."

"Is that Asian – somewhere in the middle east?"

"On my father's side."

"I haven't seen you around here before."

"I'm new in town."

"Gotcha." He fished out the application. "Okay, here it is."

He set it in front of him on the counter along with a pen. As he printed his name, he noted a certain roughness to his skin, making him think that he spent a lot of time in the sun. At the second line of the form, he paused and looked up, their eyes meeting for the second time. He felt her neck flush slightly and tried to hide it by adjusting his shirt.

"I'm not sure what I should put for an address. Like I said, I just got to town and I'm staying at the Holiday Motor Court. I could also use my mom's mailing address in Colorado. Which would you prefer?"

"Colorado?"

"Yeah, I know. Kind of far from here."

"What brought you to Hampton?"

You, he thought. I came to find you. "It seems like a nice town, and I figured I'd give it a try."

"No family here?"

"None."

"Oh," he said. Handsome or not, his story didn't sit right, and he heard mental alarm bells starting to go off. There was something else, too, something gnawing at the back of his mind, and it took
him a few seconds to realize what it was. When he did, he took a small step back from the counter, creating a bit more space between them. "If you just got to town, how did you know the kennel was hiring? I didn't run an ad in the paper this week."

"I saw the sign."

"When?" He squinted at him. "I saw you walking up, and there was no way you could have seen the sign until you got to the front of the office."

"I saw it earlier today. We were walking along the road, and Zeus heard dogs barking. He took off this way, and when I went to find him, I noticed the sign. No one was around, so I figured I'd come back later to see if that had changed."

The story was plausible, but he sensed that he was either lying or leaving something out. And if he had been here before, what did that mean? That he'd been scoping out the place?

He seemed to notice his unease and set the pen aside. From inside his pocket he pulled out his passport and flipped it open. When he slid it toward him, he glanced at the photo, then up at him. His name, he saw, was legitimate, though it didn't silence the alarm bells. No one passed through Hampton and decided to stay here on a whim.


"I see," he said, suddenly wanting to end this conversation. "Just go ahead and put your mailing address on it. And your work experience. After that, all I need is a number where I can reach you and I'll be in touch."

His gaze was steady on him. "But you're not going to call."

He was sharp, he thought. And direct. Which meant he would be, too. "No."

He nodded. "Okay. I probably wouldn't call me based on what you've heard so far, either. But before you jump to conclusions, can I add something else?"

"Go ahead."

His tone made it plain that he didn't believe anything he said would matter.

"Yes, I'm temporarily staying at the motel, but I do intend to find a place to live around here. I will also find a job here." His gaze did not waver. "Now about me. I graduated from the University of Colorado in 2002 with a degree in anthropology. After that, I joined the marines, and I received an honorable discharge two years ago. I've never been arrested or charged with any crime, I've never taken drugs, and I've never been fired for incompetence. I'm willing to take a drug test, and if you think it necessary, you can have a background check run to confirm everything I said. Or if it's easiest, you can call my former commanding officer, and he'll verify everything I've said. And even though the law doesn't require me to answer a question of this type, I'm not on medication of any kind. In other words, I'm not schizophrenic or bipolar or manic. I'm just a guy who needs a job. And I did see the sign earlier."

He hadn't known what he'd expected him to say, but he'd certainly caught him off guard.

"I see," he said again, focusing on the fact that he'd been in the military.

"Is it still a waste of time for me to fill out the application?"

"I haven't decided yet." He felt intuitively that he was telling the truth this time, but he was equally
certain there was more to the story than he was revealing. He gnawed the inside of his cheek. He needed to hire someone. Which was more important—knowing what he was hiding or finding a new employee?

He stood before him erect and calm, and his posture spoke of easy confidence. Military bearing, he observed with a frown.

"Why do you want to work here?" The words sounded suspicious even to him. "With a degree, you could probably get a better job somewhere else in town."

He motioned toward Zeus. "I like dogs."

"It doesn't pay much."

"I don't need much."

"The days can be long." "I figured they would be."

"Have you ever worked in a kennel before?"

"No."

"I see."

He smiled. "You say that a lot."

"Yes, I do," he said. Note to self: Stop saying it. "And you're sure you don't know anyone in town?"

"No."

"You just arrived in Hampton and decided to stay."

"Yes."

"Where's your car?"

"I don't have one."

"How did you get here?"

"I walked."

He blinked, uncomprehending. "Are you telling me that you walked all the way from Colorado?"

"Yes."

"You don't think that's odd?"

"I suppose it depends on the reason."

"What's your reason?"

"I like to walk."

"I see." He couldn't think of anything else to say. He reached for the pen, stalling. "I take it you're not married," he said.
"No."

"Kids?"

"None. It's just me and Zeus. But my mom still lives in Colorado"

He pushed a sweaty lock of hair back from his forehead, equal parts flustered and bemused. "I still don't get it. You walk across the country, you get to Hampton, you say you like the place, and now you want to work here?"

"Yes."

"There's nothing else you want to add?"

"No."

He opened his mouth to say something, then changed his mind. "Excuse me for a minute. I have to talk to someone."

Niall could handle a lot of things, but this was beyond him. As much as he tried, he couldn't quite grasp everything he'd told him. On some level, it made sense, but on the whole, it just seemed... off. If the guy was telling the truth, he was strange; if he was lying, he picked strange lies. Either way, it was weird. Which was why, of course, he wanted to talk to Nana. If anyone could figure him out, Nana could.

Unfortunately, as he approached the house, he realized the game wasn't over yet. He could hear the announcers debating whether it was right for the Mets to bring in a relief pitcher or something along those lines. When he opened the door, he was surprised to find Nana's seat empty.

"Nana?"

Nana poked her head out from the kitchen. "In here. I was just getting ready to pour myself a glass of lemonade. Would you like some? I can do it one-handed."

"Actually, I need to talk to you. Do you have a minute? I know the game is still on ..."

She waved the thought away. "Oh, I'm done with that. Go ahead and turn it off. The Braves can't win, and the last thing I want to do is listen to their excuses. I hate excuses. There's no reason they should have lost, and they know it. What's going on?"

Niall walked into the kitchen and leaned against the counter as Nana poured the lemonade from the pitcher. "Are you hungry?" Nana inquired. "I can make you a quick sandwich."

"I just had a banana."

"That's not enough. You're as skinny as a golf club."

From your mouth to God's ears, Niall thought. "Maybe later. Someone came in to apply for the job. He's here now."

"You mean the cute one with the German shepherd? I figured that's what he was doing. How is he? Tell me that it's always been his dream to clean cages."

"You saw him?"

"Of course."
"How did you know he was applying for the job?"

"Why else would you want to talk to me?"

Niall shook his head. Nana was always a step ahead of him. "Anyway, I think you should talk to him. I don't quite know what to make of him."

"You can't lie to me. What's the problem?"

Quickly, Niall gave her a rundown of the interview. When he was finished, Nana sat in silence.

"He walked from Colorado?"

"That's what he says."

"And you believe him?"

"That part?" He hesitated. "Yeah, I think he's telling the truth about that."

"That's a long walk."

"I know."

"How many miles is that?"

"I don't know. A lot."

"That's kind of strange, don't you think?"

"Yes," he said. "And there's something else, too."

"What?"

"He was a marine."

Nana sighed. "Why don't you wait here. I'll go talk to him."

For the next ten minutes, Niall watched them from behind the living room window curtains. Nana hadn't stayed in the office to conduct the interview; instead, she'd led them to the wooden bench in the shade of the magnolia tree. Zeus was dozing at their feet, his ear flicking every now and then, shooing away the occasional fly. Niall couldn't make out what either of them was saying, but occasionally he saw Nana frown, which seemed to suggest the interview wasn't going well. In the end, Zayn Malik and Zeus walked back up the gravel drive toward the main road, while Nana watched them with a concerned expression on her face.

Niall thought Nana would make her way back to the house, but instead she began walking toward the office. It was then that Niall noticed a blue Volvo station wagon rolling up the drive.

The cocker spaniel. He'd completely forgotten about the pickup, but it seemed obvious that Nana was going to handle it. Niall used the time to cool himself with a cold washcloth and drink another glass of ice water.

From the kitchen, he heard the front door squeak open as Nana came back inside.

"How'd it go?"

"It went fine."
"What did you think?"

"It was… interesting. He's intelligent and polite, but you're right. He's definitely hiding something."

"So where does that leave us? Should I put another ad in the fan paper?"

"Let's see how he works out first."

Niall wasn't sure he had heard Nana right. "Are you saying you're going to hire him?"

"No, I'm saying I did hire him. He starts Wednesday at eight."

"Why'd you do that?"

"I trust him." She gave a sad smile, as if she knew exactly what Niall was thinking. "Even if he was a marine."

Chapter End Notes

And they finally meet...

Let me know what you think :)

End Notes

Let me know what you think! :)

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