

# 1

THE PHONE RANG. THE PHONE RANG AGAIN. THE PHONE RANG A THIRD TIME. THE answering machine kicked in halfway into the fourth ring.

Click. *“Hello caller. I’m going to be gone for the next couple weeks. I’ve set out to find the guy who coined the phrase, ‘It is better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all,’ and blow his brains all over the sidewalk. You can leave a message if you want, but odds are I’m either in jail or dead. Happy holidays. Live long and prosper. Jesus loves you. The pen is mightier than the sword. Vote yes on 3B. Always compare to the placebo. Seat belts save lives. Freedom.”* Beep.

A voice gave an exasperated sigh, then started, “Nice message, Thomas. Very eloquent. I would tell you that you’re an idiot but you already know that. I know you’re home. In fact, I know you’re lying on the couch with your blue comforter. There’s probably a jar of peanut butter, the jelly, a loaf of two-week-old bread, and about ten juice boxes sitting on the coffee table.”

I lolled my head to the left and peeked at the glass coffee table. *Skippy Extra Creamy. Welch’s Raspberry Preserves. Sara Lee Golden Honey Wheat.* (Circa about four days. I’d had the grocery store deliver.) And six boxes of *Treetop* apple juice.

I guess Lacy knew me pretty well.

She continued, “Do me a favor and get off your pathetic ass and pick up the phone.” She was silent for a second then started back in, “Fine. If you want to self-destruct, isolate yourself from the world, then that’s your problem. Have fun.”

I will. Thank you.

“Just remember there are those of us who still love you. Even when you’re acting like a huge baby.”

Ouch.

“Well, I just wanted to call and wish you a happy Thanksgiving. Sorry, I couldn’t be there for you. I hope you find your way to some pumpkin pie.”

A *Pumpkin Spice Latte* from Starbucks would suffice. I hope they delivered.

“I know I’ve said it a hundred times already, Thomas, but she doesn’t deserve you. You’re too good for her. It’s been almost six weeks. It’s time to get on with your life.”

Wrong. I didn’t deserve *her*. She was too good *for me*. It’d only been *41 days*. And it was time *to wallow*.

“Bye, I love you.”

I hit my head backwards on the pillow three times, then threw off the comforter. I snagged the remote from underneath the couch and blindly turned on the television. The parade filled the screen and I mentally gagged. This had the potential to be the most depressing day in the history of time.

I stared at the large TV. A big floating Snoopy filled the screen. An overly joyous woman commented on this, each affected syllable steaming the cold New York air as it left her mouth.

I pulled on my bear paw slippers and padded to the window.

If it was cold in New York then it was *freezing* in Maine. The sky was a dark gray and the earth looked frozen, the dew brittle, tundra like, the land preparing itself for the long onslaught of Old Man Winter. The first big snowstorm of the year was expected to start in the late afternoon, early evening. Then everything would be white for the next five months. At least until late April. Old Man Winter wasn’t very friendly in the Northeast. In fact, it could be said he was one mean old sumbitch.

I made my way to the sliding glass door and peered out on the bay. By bay, I refer to the Penobscot. The last body of water before the Pond, silent “E’s”, and bad teeth.

Anyhow, it was early, around eight, but even so, there were a couple brave souls in their sailboats getting one last ride in before the snow began to fall. The water was three shades darker than the sky and lapped idly against the rocky shore. Just off center was the Surry Woods lighthouse. The old tattered lighthouse’s light was still visible; a reflective coin on the drab horizon.

Sort of made you want to catch the redeye to the Bahamas.

On this note, I walked into the kitchen, cranked the heat to Bahamian, and

opened the freezer. There were five boxes of waffles; *Regular*, *Buttermilk*, *Cinnamon Toast*, *Blueberry*, and *Strawberry*. I know, I had a problem. Hi, my name is Thomas and I'm addicted to waffles. *Hey, Leggo my Eggo*.

I popped two waffles down in the toaster and started a cup of water heating in the microwave. I opened the front door and scampered the ten steps to the paper. It was already half drizzling, half snowing, and I had a feeling the storm was six hours ahead of schedule.

I sat down to the waffles and a cup of steaming apple cider and read the paper. You can tell a lot about a person by the way they read a newspaper. I was a comics, sports, weather, front page, Dow-Jones, Jumble, kind of guy. Alex had been a front-to-back kind of gal. Maybe that's why it hadn't worked out. But then again, she owned the newspaper. So, perhaps it went deeper than that.

I retired back to the couch and turned it to football. Detroit and Minnesota. One of them was winning. I was looking forward to John Madden's Turkey Leg awards, but it turns out he wasn't doing the game this year. Shucks.

I flipped the TV off.

I picked up a different remote and hit the stereo. Some stupid Shania Twain song was playing (You know the one, *The One I Want for Life*) and I couldn't move. I couldn't even think. I almost—I stress *almost*—started crying. And I'm fairly certain if there had been a gun in the house I would have shot myself through the heart. I turned the stereo off.

So, there I was about an hour into my thirty-third Thanksgiving and it had already proved to be the worst yet. Well, the first one after my parents' death was awful, but this one was giving it a run for its money.

I packed a bag, turned the heat off, hit all the lights, and recorded a new phone message.

I pulled the front door open and was hit by a wall of cold. It was officially snowing now and everything that wasn't made of concrete was white.

I took two steps then froze. I pressed my ear to the door. The phone rang three more times then the answering machine picked up.

Click. "*If this is Lacy, I'll call you in a couple days. If this isn't Lacy, stick the phone in your mouth and swallow it.*" Beep.

“Hi, Thomas. It’s me. Listen—”

It was Alex.

I panicked. I couldn’t find my keys. Then I couldn’t find the *right* key. By the time I got the door open Alex was long gone.

I made my way to the answering machine and stared at the blinking red light. Time for a real gut check. I took a deep breath, picked up the machine, and threw it against the wall. I’d clean it up when I got back. If I *ever* got back.

Two hours later, I was at 37,000 feet headed for Seattle.

## 2

THE CROSS-COUNTRY JOURNEY FROM BANGOR INTERNATIONAL TO CHICAGO O’Hare and onto SeaTac International took about seven and change. I gained three hours during the flight and when I landed the local time was just after two in the afternoon.

The weather was typical Seattle November; overcast, gloomy, with a light drizzle. No blizzard in these parts. Although the Northwest had far milder winters than the Northeast. Old Man Winter in the Northwest had Alzheimer’s. He got lost a lot. Mostly in Canada.

I hailed a taxi and he drove the twenty miles north to the town of Magnolia. A bit of Magnolia lore here—In 1956 Captain George Davidson of the US Coast Survey named the southern bluff overlooking the Puget Sound for the magnolia trees growing along it. Had he been a better botanist, he would have clearly recognized the red-barked trees as madrona. The madrona is a shiny, dark green leafed, evergreen species that thrives on west facing bluffs. The trees, which can reach heights of 90 feet, usually have a twisted, windblown shape.

Anyhow, the community liked the name *Magnolia* better than *Madrona* and decided to keep *Magnolia* to identify the affluent, well-ordered, waterfront properties.

My parents’ house—I still had a problem calling it *my house*—was built on

the westernmost bluff overlooking the Puget Sound. It was too steep to build anywhere near the house and there wasn't anything within a quarter mile both directions. The main concern of course being landslides. The wet soil building up over time, the vegetation slowly losing its tenacity in the soft earth. It was a miracle the house hadn't slipped into the Sound years ago. As many of its brethren had.

The house was built in 1972. It was a monolith then. A work of art. But then, so once was the Coliseum. My parents had slowly begun overhauling the house. Gutting it from the inside. There had been plans for a remodel, a new kitchen, new hardwood floors, modern day plumbing. But my parents never got around to it. Then it was too late.

The cabbie pulled up alongside the expansive wrought iron fence surrounding the large estate. He wished me a Happy Thanksgiving and I tipped him an extra twenty. When I'd said I'd packed a bag, I failed to mention I'd only packed a small carry on of the essentials; contact solution, shampoo, conditioner, mouthwash, and a couple other things that had been "red flagged" at airport security.

On a side note, I was just the least bit curious who the science wizard was who decided 3.5 oz. was the magic number. Because 3.5 oz. of acid, anthrax, or whatever these zealots make in their caves wasn't going to harm anyone.

Anyhow, basically, I had the clothes on my back, my favorite pair of jeans, a black t-shirt over a long sleeve thermal, a rarely used cell phone, and my wallet.

I pushed through the rusted gate and ambled up the long drive. The once neatly manicured yard was overgrown with weeds and other debris. Dark vegetation sprung from every crack and every fissure of the dilapidated drive.

As for the house, the wet pacific climate and harsh ocean air hadn't been kind in my absence. The five thousand-square foot Victorian was a combination of rust and sodium-lime deposits. Brown meets green. Almost as if some pesky kids had unloaded on the house with a barrage of aged avocados. Thick foliage had attacked the house from every angle, crawling up, around, and through the gray brick.

I walked up the cragged drive and to the front door. A solitary brass six hung just above the door frame. There was once a brass seven. As well as a brass zero. Vines spider-webbed across the front door like organic crime scene tape and I cut these away with my keys. The door had warped to the frame and I had to literally kick the door in. It gave on the second try and a wave of musty air washed over me.

I took a step inside the foyer and stopped. I hadn't touched anything in the wake of my parents' death. I'd just left. Fled. Denial isn't just a river in Egypt where people wash their clothes, get sick from drinking the water, get bit by snakes, get eaten by hippos, contract malaria, West Nile, and countless other deadly diseases.

There was a small table to my immediate left. A pink vase centered the small table; the remnants of a paper-thin stem silently listing over its porcelain edge. I ran my finger over the table, the years of dust coloring my finger in a thick black.

I left the front door open and entered a small walkway. I traced my fingers against the eggshell brown walls, which had been an eggshell white last I remembered.

I came to a set of two doors, one led to the basement, the other a small bathroom. I poked my head into the bathroom and flipped the light. The two seventy watt bulbs were clouded with dust and barely illuminated the small room. The floral wallpaper had begun to peel in many places, its glue well into its late thirties. There was a soft noise and I stared at the small sink. Water slowly began to bead around the head of the faucet before giving way to a single tear.

I shook my head. Those tears could have filled a swimming pool over the course of eight years.

I turned the faucet on. After five seconds, there was a loud rattle that shook through the foundation of the large house. The pipes screamed and the house shuddered. I held onto the door frame.

It would be slightly ironic if I'd left for eight years, come back for less than an hour, and the house slides into the Puget Sound. Or would that just be a terrible coincidence? Or just unfortunate?

The rattling slowly began to subside and after a good minute water spurt from the faucet. It was brown. I watched for over a minute as the water remained brown. I turned the water off.

I spent the next half hour reacquainting myself with the old house. Pick your cliché. *I took a ride down memory lane. Home is where you hang your hat. Absence, makes the heart grow fonder. You can't put toothpaste back in the tube. Even a blind squirrel finds an acorn every once in a while. Too many chiefs and not enough Indians.* Okay, so maybe those last few weren't exactly relevant, but you get my drift.

Around four, it dawned on me your average American was sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner. My stomach growled. Nope, it was the pipes.

I walked into the kitchen. There were a couple cardboard boxes strewn about the linoleum and a roll of packaging tape and a black Sharpie resting on the island centering the small kitchen. Of the few things Lacy and I had packed up on our departure were the pots and pans, the silver, glasses, plates, toaster, and other such appliances. That stuff had traveled to New York. Then Maine. So much for dishware.

I pulled open the refrigerator, picked up the milk, and read the expiration date off the side: 13APR00. It was green and it said, "Where ya been, Thomas?"

I'm lying of course, the fridge was empty.

I rummaged through the cabinets. There was a lot of canned stuff, lots of nonperishables, and lots of other things you see in those Thanksgiving donation barrels. I picked up a can of beets and pondered the irony of the situation.

I expunged my cell phone from my pocket and turned it on. There were only a handful of people—and by handful I mean less than five—who had my cell phone number. Lacy and I shared a plan and had that not been the case I would have ceased to have a phone years ago. I believe the last phone call I'd made was to the dean of the university telling him I wouldn't be joining him the following semester. That call had been sometime in early June.

Anyhow, the phone vibrated. I flipped it open. In four months I had all of five missed calls and three voice mails. I scrolled through the five calls. They

were all from Alex. Two calls were in October, two in early November, and the last call, just hours earlier. Being that I was once a detective—albeit a second-rate one—I deduced the messages were also from Alex. Still got it.

As for Alex, I wasn't sure if I wanted to hear what she had to say. As much as I loved her—and I still did—I could never take a girl back that dumped me. It's a pride thing. But maybe that isn't why she'd called. Maybe she wanted her *Fried Green Tomatoes* DVD back.

I picked up the black marker off the center island and wrote on my palm, "She dumped you for a fucking stockbroker." Underneath this I scribbled, "Toothpaste and contact solution."

I located one of the old phone books and after a couple unsuccessful attempts, I found a pizza joint still in service. I inquired if I were the only person to order a pizza on Thanksgiving and was informed, "There were a couple others."

At five the pizza came.

I grabbed a slice and ambled through a sliding glass door that led to a thin balcony. The balcony was sort of an afterthought, growing out of the side of the house like a malignant tumor. My father had constructed it after retirement and honestly I would have felt safer attached to the side of the house with two plungers. I took a step onto the beaten timber and it wobbled. Seriously, I've been in tree houses that were more structurally sound.

The sky was a deep gray from which a light drizzle steadily dripped. The sun was preparing for its descent in my right viewfinder, undressing layers of pinks and oranges behind the clouds' satin curtain. There was a distant island thinly traced into the horizon on the far left and I remember my father telling me it was Japan. I'm still not sure if it was or wasn't. Straight down was a thicket of tall, windswept madronas, then black rock, then rippling Sound.

It was all very melancholy if you ask me.

I rested my elbows on the railing, ate pizza, and watched the sun lower its landing gear. There was a port just a half mile south and I watched as a colossal freighter made its lackluster final stretch. It rode high on the black water, inching across the gray horizon. The ship had traveled thousands of miles and here

I was witnessing its last steps. Such is life.

So, I spent the next couple minutes thinking deep philosophical thoughts brought on by a stupid boat. The SS Aristotle. I thought about where the SS Prescott was in its voyage. And what freight it would carry. How it got here and where it was going. I thought about Alex. Was she cargo? Or was she one of these rogue waves I kept hearing about?

On that note, my cell phone vibrated in my pocket and I whipped it out. I stared at the screen. I fought the urge to flip the phone open. The phone pulsed four times then relaxed, then pulsed about two minutes later notifying me I had a new message.

*Two minutes?* Must be some message. But then again, Alex *loved* Kathy Bates.

I stared at the phone for a solid minute. Then I reared back and hucked the phone at the setting sun. For a brief moment I thought the phone would reach the rippling black water. But it lost velocity, splattering against the rocky shore, its ashes quickly swept away by the incoming tide.

*Bye Alex.*

I rubbed my right shoulder with my left hand and peered over the edge of the balcony. The balcony creaked and wobbled under the displaced weight but I hardly noticed. I leaned over the balcony and squinted. There was something in the water. Something floating. It would hit the black rocks then be sucked back into the channel with each ebb and flow. The white water receded into the black rocks and I was granted a quick glimpse of arms and long black hair.

It was a woman.

### 3

I WATCHED AS THE WOMAN'S BLACK HAIR SWIRLED AROUND HER THEN VANISHED UNDER the white water.

I should mention that in another life I'd been a homicide detective. So

I'd seen my fair share of dead bodies. In fact, I'd seen most people's fair share of dead bodies. For the last couple years of my career I'd been a consultant to the FBI's Violent Crime Unit. In a nutshell, I outsourced my skills, instincts, cleverness, and good looks to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Half the time I was working hand-in-hand with the FBI (Fruitdicks, Backstabbers, and Impersonators). The other half I was getting yelled at by them.

But then I went and got killed. But as you can see, I'm not dead. Thanks to some stubborn doctors, a couple electricity charged paddles, and sixteen pints of somebody else's blood.

I bought a quiet house in Maine—wheelchair accessible of course—and opted for early retirement. I kept myself peripherally related to the world of law enforcement teaching an intro-level criminology class at the local university. But I'd lost my passion for this as well. I'd lived my life by the age-old axiom, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." But all I wanted to do was sit on my couch. Without the Job, I wasn't really sure who I was. I was defined by the Job. I think this may have contributed to Alex leaving me for a day trader, but then again, I might just be Monday Morning Relationshiping here.

Anyhow, the last thing I wanted to see was exactly what was staring me in the face this very second. A dead woman washed up on a piece of remote coastline that just so happened to make up my backyard.

I walked to the side of the balcony and found a rope ladder that led to the ground. I made a mental note to make a NO GIRLS ALLOWED sign.

There were two different routes to the water. Route 1 was a straight shot down five hundred vertical feet. If you did it right, you could get to the water in about five minutes, but one missed step and you were shark bait. Route 2 had you walking about a half mile south to a relatively open area with a commanding view of the entire Sound. There was a small parking lot, eight or nine slots, and a concrete platform nestled at the edge of the bluff. Just within the railing there were a couple of those binocular posts bolted to the ground and during the afternoon there was usually a decent crowd of tourists patiently awaiting their turn to drop fifty cents for a chance to catch a glimpse of a whale tail or a bald eagle, or more likely, a large freighter, through the foggy lenses.

Anyhow, there were stairs leading to another platform about two hundred feet down with a similar set up. Enough people had made the trek from the lower platform to the rocks below that there was a trail of sorts, which from a misspent youth, I knew, would eventually lead to the crescent shaped cove directly beneath my house. This of course added another fifteen minutes and took out the risk of serious injury.

I braced myself against two trees and started down. If I could go back and do it all over again, I would have done a couple things differently. One, I wouldn't have turned off that football game. Two, I'd have thrown a sinker instead of a fastball. And three, I would have taken Route 2.

As I continued down the treacherous path to the water, I contemplated a couple different scenarios. People died on the water frequently. I saw it in the papers and on television as a kid and I heard the war stories about people dying in the coastal waters of Maine. In the two years I lived in Penobscot, there were nine separate occurrences when someone died in the water. Or at the hands of it.

Things were a bit different here in the Sound. There weren't quite as many recreational boaters; the main concern here being fishing boats, ferries, and scuba diving. Now the Puget wasn't exactly the Bering Sea, but it was connected to the Bering Sea and the water temperature was still in the mid 40s. This means if you did happen to fall off a boat—or get pushed for that matter—you had about seven minutes to get your ass out of the water.

So, logic told us the woman died by accident or in some other benign fashion. But, logic is overrated.

Granted I'd only seen the body for a split second, and I was gazing down from 400 vertical feet above, and the sun was setting in my eyes, and my contact prescription was three years old, and I'd once mistaken a 300 pound elk for a mailbox, but my instincts told me this was no accident. Of course as a detective you have to think like that. You are paid to think like that.

This conjecture was solely based on the fact the woman appeared to be naked. In the summer months on the Penobscot it was swim trunks, a polo, and docksiders for the men. Women were a bit more loosely clad; a skirt and

a blouse with the optional bikini underneath. Maybe even a thin sweater or jacket. But this was the Puget Sound in November. If it wasn't raining then it was cold. The average high for the month around 50. Typically, the attire for both men and women was a windbreaker, jeans, boots, gloves, with optional thermal underwear.

But then again, maybe this woman was a light dresser. Maybe she was menopausal and she'd just had a hot flash. Maybe she'd ripped her clothes off as she thrashed about in the cold water. (Which you're supposed to do.) Or maybe she'd been going at it with the *el Capitan* and slipped and fell off the edge. Who knows?

Anyhow, the trees gave way to the black rock and I slowly began lowering myself down the steep bluff. It was far from a sheer drop off, the grade about the same as the steps in a football stadium, except instead of steps there was jagged quartzite and instead of falling into the arms of a drunken fan, you fell into the teeth of angry shark. Just kidding.

As I mentioned before, the area directly behind my house was shaped like a crescent. It was a stretch of rock separated by two bluffs, and my mother referred to it as Prescott Cove. I should also point out that whereas other parts of the shore the water lapped nonchalantly against the banks, the water in Prescott Cove was white and angry. Which, might have been another reason it got its name.

There was a relatively flat section of rock about twenty vertical feet above the crashing surf and I stopped to get my bearings. It was high tide and the small powerful waves came in six or seven second intervals. The waves would sweep in high on the face of the opposing bluffs a milky white, two separate forces destined for a head on collision. And then they became one, sending a violent surge of white water high into the air.

Droplets of spray found me, as well as the stark revelation that this was a bad, bad, idea.

The sun was sucking in its final breaths before plunging its head beneath the cold water and I figured I had less than two minutes before I was engulfed in darkness.

After two more explosions, I still hadn't seen any sign of the woman. There was a strong possibility her body had been carried by the undertow and sucked from the cove, whereby it would become someone else's problem.

And good riddance they say.

I decided to give it one more wave before hightailing it up the rock while I could still see the hand in front of me.

Then I saw her. Her body twisting and rolling in the white water just off the rock bank. I nearly made a dash for it. I caught myself and five seconds later the cove erupted. The blast would have sent me reeling and more than likely sent me into the freezing water.

At this point it dawned on me it was going to be nearly impossible to extract the woman from the freezing water without getting soaked myself. I removed my wallet and wedged it between two rocks.

The water calmed, but the woman had disappeared. A moment later, her body popped up like a buoy, rolling against the rocks. This was my first good look at the body. Or what was left of it.

Her right arm was missing at the shoulder. Both legs had been stripped down to the bone. And huge chunks of flesh had been ripped from her torso. The remaining flesh was a chalky purple and the exposed bone stained a deep red. It was evident the body had been attacked by something. Mauled. I'd said sharks earlier but a more likely scenario was pilot whales. Killer whales. They were abundant in these waters and although it was rare, they did attack humans.

But the odds were this woman was dead hours, or even days, before the feast.

I jumped down the last couple feet and huddled behind a large boulder. The blast came, showering me in saltwater. I wiped my eyes and waited for the woman to resurface. She popped up and I took the four strides to the edge of the churning Sound. I could hear the wave making its approach, but I was at the point of no return. I lowered myself onto the rock and wrenched my arm under the woman's remaining arm.

The body rose with the incoming wave and I pulled the woman up and

out of the water. The blast came, spraying the two of us in a couple thousand gallons of seawater. Freezing would be an understatement. It was a biting cold. One that clawed at your very insides.

I coughed a couple dozens times before pushing myself off the rock. I then dragged what was left of the woman to a haven behind a large rock.

My chest was heaving and I turned and looked out on the dark water. The sun was gone, a faint reddish glow all that remained.

I turned my attention to the body. She was even worse off than at first glance. Maybe a third of her body remained, reduced to mere bones and torn flesh. Half her torso was eaten down to the ribs and her entrails spilled out through her lower abdomen. Her head and neck had for the most part been spared and I brushed the woman's dark hair from her face.

If I had my doubts this woman was killed by Shamu and friends, now I was positive she wasn't. I'd only heard of a handful of killer whale attacks and I'd never heard of a killer whale carrying a gun. Hell, I wasn't even sure if a whale could hold a gun. Or get a license to carry for that matter.

There, just above the woman's left eye, was the distinct fingerprint of a bullet. A small black hole.