

Chapter One

A Late-Night Swim

“Sevigny,” she cried. “Sevigny!” Her strained voice conveyed the warble of an accent Roger could not identify. That one word, again and again, *Sevigny, Sevigny, Sevigny*, her voice desperate, strange, and beautiful. In hearing the three syllables repeated, Roger almost wondered if this were the only word she knew. Yes, he might have wondered that if he’d stopped to wonder anything at all. But he didn’t. He just reacted, bursting outside and into the fog, trudging through a tidal pool, diving into the first breaker, and then swimming. And swimming.

While the rest of Pine Point Beach slept, Roger Simons had heard her cry through his open window, allowed it to infiltrate his dreams, and heeded its call. It was one or two o’clock in the morning, and he was in the midst of doing the most heroic thing he’d ever done. He didn’t stop to wonder at the fact that he was doing something brave; nor did he pause to observe that the cold, dry sand he pressed with hurried footprints spilled out for so many unseen miles in either direction, or that the sea before him churned beneath a moonless sky. He merely heard her voice and awoke, and before his head had left the pillow, or so it seemed, he was in the water.

“Sevigny,” she cried. Roger cringed at how much farther he still had to swim. A moment later, he realized her voice had been stifled by a swell, lifting and dropping her, pulling her under. When he next heard her call, he knew he’d veered off course. He put his head down and swam.

“Sevigny . . .” She was drifting away. He drove his arms through the water more ferociously and surged into darkness. He twisted to redirect himself. “Sevigny!” He tasted the salt of the sea. He thought he could see her splashing—yes, he could. “Sevigny . . .” And all at once he was upon her.

“Sevigny,” she gasped as her cold hands clung to him, as they both struggled for air. “Sevigny,” with a sob, during the long, slow swim to shore.

Roger swam half on his back and half on his side, holding her against his chest with his left arm while his right arm worked with his legs to propel them through the water. The beach seemed immeasurably farther away than he had ever imagined it could be. As for the woman, she wrapped both arms around him and strained to keep her mouth above the water, just below his chin. After a time, she began to help in the cumbersome work with legs that fell into rhythm with his. Twice, she nearly slipped away, her head sliding lower and lower into the circle of his bent elbow and curved wrist. Both times they stopped, floated briefly, without panic, without words, and repositioned themselves. The third time, she anticipated the breach and kicked more forcefully, and wriggled her waist and shoulders until she’d pulled herself higher onto him, so they could continue without losing momentum.

When the breakers began to crash on them, Roger knew they had made it. After just a few more kicks, he lowered his feet into a stutter against the ocean floor and tried to set her free, before realizing she had no intention of relinquishing her grip. He slid a hand down the smooth curve of her back, over her hips, then halfway down her legs to find a fulcrum from which to lift. With his feet touching the sand and his hands touching her body, Roger noticed for the first time that she was naked, or very nearly so. He felt her breasts pressing against his body as he carried her, and wondered what strange creature he’d plucked from the ocean. When they reached thigh-deep water, his tired arms were suddenly struck by the weight of her lithe body. His legs too began to buckle, and he no longer noticed her near-nakedness.

High above, the moon was breaking through the clouds. The fog was dispersing. Before him, the wet sand glistened, waiting to be reclaimed by the tide. A bit farther ahead, the gentle slope of the beach rose toward its plateau. For several steps Roger squinted to locate the outline of his cottage in the shadows beyond the dunes, but from the water’s edge, he could see only rooftops. Despite the reviving moon and his familiarity with the terrain, he couldn’t get his bearings.

He staggered up the slope and gently dropped her when he felt the loose sand beneath his feet. He fell beside her and they both gasped as the

adrenaline drained from their bodies. Then, when they had recovered slightly, he lifted her shivering body and began to make heavy footprints in the sand once more. By the time they had reached the dune grass, he'd given up on finding the path. They'd drifted farther than he would have guessed, and were at least a dozen lots down the beach from his, probably in front of the Plantes' or the Labbes'. It was only mid-June, and most of his neighbors hadn't yet arrived for the summer. Given the circumstances, he didn't think they'd mind if he stumbled through a backyard or two.

He paused only briefly as the first licks of wispy grass caressed his legs. He wondered if he might put her down to walk beside him. But, in that moment, as the moon finally overpowered the clouds and lit up the Plantes' patio, Roger turned first to look at the glistening depths from which they'd just emerged. He scanned the horizon, or as much of it as he could see. His mind was beginning to work again. He was starting to wonder how this underwear-clad woman had arrived in the waves in such a state, on such a night, when there were no boats or other signs of life upon the water. He gazed into the heaves and sighs of the ocean and held her close. Finally, he lowered his eyes to her face and studied it in the half-light. Behind the sand, strands of tangled brown hair, and beads of seawater, he found her eyes, and saw that they were fixed somewhere far away.

"Sevigny," she said one final time, but in a whisper so faint that Roger couldn't be sure later whether he'd heard it or merely seen it on her lips, as they'd parted and closed three mournful times.

Chapter Two

A Sleepless Night

Billy Carter tried not to listen. He'd awoken to a man's voice talking about the lackluster motel reservations, telling his mother that tourism would be down, saying the Pier might still draw a crowd on a Friday night, but that his friend at the Chamber had said to figure on a 20 percent drop overall. The T-shirt sellers and clam-shack owners were already griping about a lost season, even though summer was still a week away.

"Doesn't matter," Billy's mother said. "Last year all we got was Canucks anyway. Canucks who didn't tip worth two shits."

"Canucks . . . that sounds naughty," the man replied, in a voice that made Billy's stomach drop.

"Oh, I've known some naughty Canucks all right," Billy's mother said. She laughed a laugh Billy had hated all his life. "But they still didn't tip worth a shit."

"Shucks, Brandy," the man said. "You've met some Canucks who sure suck."

There was silence. Then, Billy heard his mother say, "Come 'ere," and the man moaned "Uh-huh," in a throaty, guttural way. A moment later, Billy heard the *thwack-thwack-thwack* of the sleeper sofa's metal skeleton unfolding in the living room. He heard his mother say, "Not yet, baby." He heard her quick footsteps, then the *whoosh* of his bedroom door closing. Then he heard their bodies fall onto the mattress, their rustling, and other noises.

Outside, the air was damp but warm for June. Down the hill, closer to the water, Billy knew it would be cooler. After he had lowered himself out his window and slipped through the rusty fence that enclosed their yard, he tried to focus on the sidewalk, on the cars parked along it, on

the houses. He knew better than to let his mind return to the living room and his mother and whichever man she'd brought home tonight.

He made his way down the long, gradual slope of Atlantic Avenue, toward West Grand. A scattering of porch lights lit his way, illuminating a stretch of sidewalk that Billy was capable of traversing even in the dark. Still, it was nice to see some lights. They meant that not everyone had moved away. At fifteen, Billy was becoming rapidly aware of the larger forces in the world that were decimating his neighborhood. Not long ago, the Hill District had been a bustling part of town. Now, there were only a few families left.

While the grown-ups complained about the layoffs at the B&M Baked Beans plant in Portland and the shuttered storefronts at the Maine Mall, Billy lamented that his two childhood friends had both moved from town midway through their freshman year, leaving him a man without a tribe at school. Even Mrs. Webber, who used to give him Table Talk pies and chat about the Red Sox, had disappeared one day without saying good-bye. One by one, nearly everyone had left, taking with them the markers that had differentiated their small yards and weather-beaten homes from the rest—the towels draped over porch railings, or sprinklers spraying water onto the sidewalk. Yellow eviction notices and orange-and-black FOR RENT signs had replaced those signs of life.

At the bottom of the hill, Billy walked past the much larger homes on West Grand, still awaiting the return of their summer inhabitants from wherever it was they went during the “other” ten months. Several of the houses remained boarded up from the winter, but before long they would all be open. Even if the motels downtown had trouble filling their rooms, Billy knew these regal estates would soon be occupied. They always were. As he crossed West Grand, he felt as though he were stepping into a different town. Behind him were the small rental houses on either side of Atlantic, with their dented aluminum siding and porches that seemed perpetually in need of repair. That was the world to which he belonged. Before him lay the sprawling mansions with their “front” yards facing the ocean, their floor-to-ceiling beachside windows, their pillars, and brick patios. This was the Old Orchard Beach portrayed on the postcards and in the magazines, the one famous for its white sand, bustling Pier, and hopping nightlife.

Billy walked down a driveway that led between two of the mansions. When the pavement turned to sand and gravel, he kicked off his sneakers. Continuing along the path, he felt the tips of the long, thin blades of dune grass nibbling at his legs, then the soft sand of the beach between his toes. He walked toward the crashing waves and then shivered for the first time when he reached the flat, wet sand. He hopped over a rivulet draining toward the sea. The stream told him by its very narrowness that the tide would be turning soon, or perhaps already had.

Within five minutes, Billy had passed the Brunswick Hotel. Within ten, he'd slipped between the tall, dark stilts of the Pier. Within fifteen, he'd passed Surf Six and the other nightclubs north of the Square. When he reached the first of the six towering condos that rose every few hundred feet up to the Scarborough line, he veered to his left, onto the dry sand, and sat down. He pulled his legs up against his chest and wrapped his arms around his knees. He stared into darkness. "It's not fair," he said quietly.

As Billy sat in the sand and tasted the salty tears trickling down his cheeks, he gave voice to an outrage that had been festering within him all his life. He parted his lips because if there were a God, Billy wanted Him to hear and be ashamed. "It's not fair," he said, in more than a whisper. "I hate her. And I hate this town." With each word, his voice grew a bit louder. "I hate it." He slowly rose to his feet and turned to glare at the dark spot where he knew his town to sit on the swell of land that rose behind him. "It's nothing to me," he said. "I don't need it."

Billy looked heavenward and glowered at the halo of yellow obscuring the moon. Then, as he stood there, the clouds began to disperse. The orb broke through, clean and white, and as it lit up the beach, Billy addressed his grievance to it, unsure of whether, in its newfound luminance, it meant to mock or acknowledge him. "I hate it!" he yelled. "All of it! And no one can make me stay!"

To Billy's surprise and horror, a voice answered. It was a quiet voice that spoke slowly, which seemed to hint as much at the person's reluctance to speak as his inability to bear silent witness to Billy's testimony any longer. "Do you really mean that?" the voice asked.

For a fleeting instant Billy thought it was the voice of God speaking to him, but as he processed the words, he realized they had come from

Strangers on the Beach

behind him, not above, so he spun away from the moon and with a quickening pulse turned to face the dunes. Just ten feet away there stood a man, obscured from the waist down by dune grass. His shirt, like his black hair, clung to his angular body. Billy realized he was soaking wet. He gazed at Billy with a strange mixture of disdain and curiosity.

Billy fell back a step, then another, before regaining his balance and standing to face the stranger.

“I’ll help you,” the man said slowly. “But first, you’ll need to help me.”

Chapter Three

Bountiful Sea

Sally Fiddler arose at dawn each day to emerge from the tall condo building abutting the Scarborough line, where Old Orchard Beach converged with Pine Point Beach. She traced the water's edge nearly every day of her life, except for the very worst days of winter when the weather prevented her from traversing the three miles south and three miles home that constituted her march. Even then, Sally suspended her efforts only because others had pressured her to exercise more caution. On a blustery morning in 1998, police officer Ernie Sabo had ventured into the teeth of a savage nor'easter to lead her to safety after she'd become disoriented in the blowing snow. After that, she'd promised Ernie to stay inside whenever the snow was so severe that she couldn't see the pink house from her bedroom window.

There were no worries about snow today; it was nearly summer, the busy season for Sally, who, although she received little praise for her efforts, saw her toil as a way of repaying the town for its kindness. Her father had drowned when she was thirteen, and two summers later her mother had run off with a tourist, never to return. Ever since, Sally had lived at Seaside Heights as one of its only year-round residents. She drew a small stipend from the condo association in exchange for sweeping the stairwells free of sand and turning the lobby lights on in the morning and off at night. She also received a small allowance from the town. Despite the divide between Old Orchard's working poor and deep-pocketed seasonal residents, the locals always took care of their own. And when it came time to hash out the municipal budget each spring, the town council never waffled when it got to the line dedicated to the mentally challenged girl, who was, in fact, no longer a girl, but suspended in a sort of perpetual childhood even as she reached the middle years of

womanhood. Sally, the good people of the town understood, was aware, but not *too* aware, of the world around her. Some said she couldn't speak. Others swore they'd heard her utter perfectly formed words in moments when the mood had struck her. In any case, she was different and vulnerable, but the town accepted her just the same.

Sally began her duties with greater zeal than usual on this morning. The warm sun suggested summer had arrived, and for Sally, who enjoyed this season most of all, that was a wonderful thing. With her wagon in tow, she hurried through the dry sand, then across the damp sand that had been molded by the tide. When she reached the smooth sand along the water's edge, she turned toward the Pier and began her trek. It was five o'clock and the tide was still coming in, which meant Sally had to gradually veer closer to the dry sand with every step she took toward Surf Six, the Pier, the Brunswick, the Sun Dial, and the little river where she'd turn around.

After fifty paces Sally paused to excavate a sand dollar partially covered with sand. She flipped it over with her metal ski pole and, seeing that it was intact, raised the pole and dropped its point onto the shell. It wouldn't be long before the shellers returned. They were the scourge of a delightful time of year when watches, rings, coins, bills, balls, Frisbees, keys, and all sorts of other things were left on the beach for Sally. The shellers tried to make small talk. They slowed her down. They took things that didn't belong to them.

She crushed a few more shells before pausing to inspect a piece of driftwood that had been caught in a tidal pool near the pink house. She decided it wasn't worthy of a place in her wagon; maybe it would be after a few more months of tumbling. Next, she encountered a mesh clamming bag that she scooped up, along with a wayward buoy.

But these were common things. What Sally encountered next was uncommon. She had just passed the Royal Anchor Inn when she saw it. The waves of the incoming tide had just given way to the calm of high tide, and she saw something lying half-covered in the sand. She flipped the item over with her stick, then stooped, rinsed the sand from it, and stood up. It was a black hood that reminded her of when Mrs. Munson came and dressed her up and took her to look at pumpkins in the Square. Yes, it would be a perfect mask, if only it had two more holes. She would have to

cut eyeholes into it, or maybe Mrs. Munson would. Maybe she would mend the bottom, where it was ripped, and cover the squiggly lines that looked like words. Sally laid it carefully at the bottom of her wagon.

As if this discovery hadn't made for a special-enough morning, after Sally passed the first condo and then the long yellow expanse of the Copley Motel, something else caught her eye. She squinted into the wet sand that shimmered beneath the climbing sun and was practically trotting by the time she reached the outermost edge of a fifty-foot stretch where various objects were tumbling in the gentle waves. It looked like someone had dumped a wardrobe, pantry, and dresser into the sea.

Sally began scooping up whatever she could and ferrying items of interest to higher ground. She would have time to sort through the bounty later. First, she needed to safeguard as much of it as possible against the tide. Here was a woman's shoe. There, a bobbing water bottle. A lantern. A pair of pants. Another shoe. An orange vest. A sopping book. A plastic container. Pants. Shirts. A black dress.

Sally's wagon was already brimming by the time she lifted a small leather case from the sea and located the zipper that wrapped around three of its sides. She unzipped it and was surprised to find dry pages inside. It was a book, full of words written in pretty looping letters that meant nothing to Sally. She flipped through several pages and was about to throw it back, when she came upon a picture. It was a sunset on a beach, with palm trees. It had been drawn in pencil but Sally could fill in the color at home. Flipping ahead she found more pictures. She zipped up the book, carried it to her wagon, and wedged it tightly against one of the sides, pushing it down so that it would be safe at the bottom with the Halloween mask.

But Sally still had one more thing to find, the most special thing of all—a small wooden box that she noticed bobbing twenty feet from shore. She waded out and waited for a wave. Then, in the lull before the next surge, she trapped it against her legs. She stood in knee-deep water and traced with pruned fingers the two letters on its top. Then she fumbled with the clasp before finally figuring out how it worked. She flipped up the lid and gazed into the box with amazement. She stared for thirty seconds at the sparkling prize inside. Then she closed the lid, fixed the clasp, and hurried to shore.

Strangers on the Beach

She had not yet completed her route; in fact, she had not even reached the Pier. But she turned her wagon and headed for home, clutching the little box tightly in her hand. She did not see the dark figure watching her from the dunes.