

## PROLOGUE

Seven year old Zeke Freilich huddled behind tangled and thorny raspberry bushes at the edge of the lawn. Alternating yearning and hatred swept across his mournful face like scudding clouds.

“You’ll be sorry, Lisa. You’ll be sorry.”

From the direction of Molly Walden’s restored farm house came a hubbub of birthday merriment. Strains of *The Wheels on the Bus* mingled with shrill childish shouts and a female adult’s futile attempt to impose order. Above the children’s gleeful shouts and the sound of outdoor furniture being overturned, came the clear and exultant screeching of the birthday girl, Lisa Walden.

Zeke turned away in hopeless despair, and still crouched behind the raspberry bushes, headed down behind the Walden’s house towards the ocean. A field away to the east, he could just see his mother weeding a profusion of lupines, columbines and delphiniums on her back patio. Zeke was in no mood to appreciate the verdure. The sun scorched the back of his neck as he crouched down to pick some raspberries. Morels peeped out from the thick underbrush, but he had been frequently warned off anything resembling a mushroom.

He slid down a nearly invisible path, overgrown with bushes, to the Walden’s beach. Casing the wide swath of pebbly beach, he looked for some form of amusement. And found it.

A flash of shiny grey pelt.

Crunching mussel shells and skirting a litter of oil cans, milk cartons and plastic food containers, he came upon a creature even more miserable than himself. This one had not only been uninvited to a birthday party, but was literally out of its depth. Flippers rising and falling ineffectually, the baby seal struggled to traverse the four feet that separated it from its lifeblood, the ocean.

“Poor little shit,” Zeke murmured tenderly, “How’d you get washed up? Where’s your mom?” Squatting beside the castaway, he squinted out to sea. No sign of the maternal guardian. He poked a tentative finger at the little creature and it flapped in panic. He walked up and down the

beach until he located a flat, two foot board and placed it next to the seal.

“C’mon. Climb aboard.”

Again the baby seal became energized, but not in the direction of the board. Instead, it beat the ground with its small flippers and ended up a foot further from the water.

Desperate situations called for desperate measures. Gritting his teeth, Zeke placed both hands beneath the squealing, struggling infant. And gently lifted. For a moment he tottered and nearly dropped his slippery burden but then, regaining his balance, he made a dash for the ocean. Ignoring his new Nike sneakers, he waded into the icy surf and gently deposited the creature on the crest of an outgoing wave. Immediately, the seal slipped out to sea without any indication of gratitude.

“Hope you find your mom,” Zeke called out after it.

When he could no longer distinguish between the shifting hues of sea and the mammal, he looked for another diversion. A miniscule air hole caught his attention. He dug vigorously with the help of an empty mussel shell. In less than a minute, the shell struck a hard surface, and discarding the shell, he began digging with his bare hands. And came up with a stone. After several more failed attempts to locate a clam, he gave up and rinsed his hands in the ocean.

He walked along the beach and then up the field behind his own house, a small cape, restored with at least equal care to the Walden’s. His mother had migrated to the vegetable garden and was on her knees weeding lettuce, and tiny new squash and tomato plants. She brushed back the hair from her forehead.

“Where were you, hon?”

“I saved a baby seal.”

Margaret Freilich sat back on her haunches and smiled at her son.

“Really?”

“I did.”

“Well, tell me about it, honey. That’s very exciting.”

Under any other circumstances, Zeke would have provided a vivid and detailed explanation. But he was in no mood for that today. He shrugged.

“I put it back in the water.”

“Tell me the whole story Zeke.”

Instead, all he said was, “Today is Lisa’s party.”

Margaret stopped smiling, took a deep breath and rubbed her nose, leaving a muddy streak. Examining her beautiful little son with his straight black hair and somber face, she slapped at a flying insect.

“Zeke, love, you oughtn’t to have knocked her down. And called her names.”

“She didn’t let me have a turn on the dinghy.”

“It was *her* dinghy.”

“We made a deal. I let her on *my* scooter.”

“Listen, babe, I’m just about finished here. I’m going to take a quick shower and then we’ll go to the Helm for a burger and float.”

“I hate burgers and floats.”

“Since when? Okay, your call. What’ll it be?”

“Lisa’s mean. She said Dad left you because he liked somebody else a lot better.”

For a moment Margaret was still. She remained on her knees, staring at the neat, straight rows of young plants.

“Okay, no burgers. How about we go musseling at low tide?”

“I guess we’ll go to the Helm,” Zeke graciously conceded, “I’ll have a cheese burger with fries and a pistachio cone with rainbow jimmies.”

“And a Coke.” He added tentatively after realizing that Margaret hadn’t yet objected to his menu choices. Margaret stood up and placed her tools on the bench by the door.

“Give me, um, twenty minutes to shower and change.”

When his mother disappeared into the house, Zeke bent down to pick a baby lettuce leaf, nibbled at it, and spat it out. Then, forgetting all about the trip to the Helm, he wandered back down to the beach behind his house. Two kayaks and a dinghy were tied up to the Walden’s neighboring dock. None was glamorous or expensive by Ledge Island standards, but all aroused a stab of envy. His mother had gotten rid of all boats after her divorce. Glancing around, not to admire the sun polished sky or the silver glazed ocean, but instead to check if he were being

observed, he clambered over the rocky beach back towards the Walden's dock.

The Walden's small aluminum dock was deserted, but even here, he was tortured by the sound of merriment from Lisa's birthday party. The kayak paddles were lying on the dock. After another guilty glance in the direction of the Walden house, he undid the line, grabbed a paddle and slid into the kayak. Gently, he maneuvered west to the next beach over.

Never take a boat out alone, his mother had frequently warned him. Always wear a life jacket. But since he was keeping close to shore, he answered her silently: I'm being very safe. As he paddled along, he could see a distant lobster boat and an orange-slickered figure winching a trap out of the water. He tied up at his father's far larger and grander dock, climbed out of the boat and carefully secured the line to a cleat.

He clamored up the ramp. The dock rested on huge granite blocks that looked as if they had been haphazardly stacked by a giant child. Beyond the dock, at the top of the hill, was his father's rambling, classic Maine pile of a house. It was grey shingled, wrapped with porches, and in every way, conformed to the ideal of a Maine summer "cottage".

But Zeke had no interest in the house. Zeke infrequently saw his father in the winter while in the summer, every visit to his father's house meant an arduous effort to meet his father's high paternal expectations in tennis, golf, and sailing lessons. It was contrary to the natural order of things, but there it was: Zeke's father exhausted Zeke.

Instead of going up the hill to the house, Zeke walked into a small grey barn at the edge of the shore. The barn was littered with the detritus of Bill Freilich's many hobbies: a wooden rowing skiff, a jet ski, fishing poles, golf clubs, tennis rackets, two croquet sets, a badminton set, a volleyball net, a Harley Davidson. And at the very back, along the wall, a gun rack. There were gun cases stacked on the shelves, and more shotguns and rifles wrapped in flannel set in a gun rack. In a cupboard above the rack were five boxes that Zeke knew contained more guns. Smaller ones. Dragging a box of bocce balls over to the cupboard to serve as a stool, Zeke reached into the cupboard, read the labels and pocketed a small toy-like derringer.

Then Zeke returned to his kayak and paddled back in the direction of the Walden dock. He tied the Walden's kayak up at the dock and put the paddle down precisely where he had found it. He stood listening to the children playing. He started up the hill, hiding behind the raspberry bushes, pretending that he was an Indian scouting out a pioneer wagon train; this was before children had been taught to refer to Indians as Native Americans.

The guests, colorful gnomes outfitted in unisex tee shirts and shorts, were scattered all over the lawn like marbles. Zeke was seared with bitterness as he listened to Lisa's mother outlining the rules of the treasure hunt. He loved treasure hunts. He excelled at them. One time he'd won by being the only kid who knew what a "crustacean" was.

What a jerk he was. Why had he pushed Lisa? Actually, it hadn't been much of a push. Was it his fault that she was so clumsy that she'd fallen over backwards?

"Hey, look! It's Zeke."

One of the treasure hunters had spotted him. He wanted to escape, but it was the classic feet-caught-in-the-quicksand syndrome. He couldn't move. Momentarily distracted from the festivities, the children converged on Zeke. They all knew about the Zeke-Lisa dispute.

"Zeke love," Molly Walden exclaimed. She was filled with guilt, embarrassment and irritation with her small daughter. "What are you doing behind those bushes? Come on out and join the treasure hunt."

"No, he can't," a righteously aggrieved Lisa wailed. A yellow-haired bundle of indignation, she looked as if she'd been on a forced march for a week. Her shirt and shorts were streaked with food and grass stains and her face scratched by raspberry thorns (which had caused far more pain than Zeke's push). Her hair, neatly tied into two braids before the party, was now tangled like spaghetti all over her head.

"He pushed me down. He can't come to my party!"

"Lisa," Molly snapped, "Behave!"

"I won't. I hate that kid."

Molly nearly laughed. The two had always been best friends. "Stop that this instant."

The guests, their acquisitive instincts momentarily deferring to their inquisitive ones, watched with interest. At first their faces exhibited no particular partiality for either of the disputants, but the woeful expression on Zeke's face was beginning to tip the scales. They were, for the most part, a well brought up, kindly bunch. Five year old Cody Walden, the birthday girl's younger sister, brought their incipient sympathy to a head.

"Don't be so mean, Lisa," Cody said virtuously, "He's your best friend."

"Yeah, Lisa," other voices piped up, "Don't be mean."

"You all shut up!" Lisa shrieked, nearly hysterical by now and heartily repenting her decision. But like water tumbling downstream, she couldn't reverse direction.

"It's my party and he can't come to it."

If the jury had been wavering before, the tear sliding down Zeke's cheek decided the issue. The guests began berating the birthday girl.

"You all shut up," she kept shrieking, "He didn't hit *you*! He hit *me*."

"Lisa, come into the house this minute," her mother ordered.

"Zeke, you can stay if you want," five year old Cody told Zeke, glancing towards her mother to see if her mother had noticed this bit of graciousness. Good manners were valuable currency in Cody's house.

Stamping a small, sandal-shod foot, Lisa yelled, "No, he can't. Only creeps come to parties if they aren't invited."

By now, several empathetic guests were becoming tearful. How could a party for a seven year old come to this, Molly groaned inwardly. All because of a damned dinghy. A push. A spoiled little brat.

At the center of the maelstrom, Zeke Freilich stood and pulled out the sample he had lifted from his father's collection, pointed it at Lisa and said, "Bang, bang, you're dead."

And pulled the trigger.