

# One

## Five Years Later

It was a night in late August on an island in Maine. Over the course of an hour, one by one, five teenagers converged in a meadow at the edge of the ocean. All five of them were dressed in black wetsuits. The scene suggested a Ku Klux Klan meeting as it would appear in a photographic negative.

First came a young girl, tall and fair, maybe around thirteen and then a boy, also tall and fair and a few years older. They arrived at almost the same time, both of them carrying scuba diving gear. They sat down close to each other on the grass and whispered for a while before another girl arrived, about the same age as the first. The boy and the girl moved apart slightly. A few minutes later two more teenage boys arrived together. They all had scuba diving equipment.

“Hey, Sport,” said one of the boys to the girl who had arrived first, “What’d you tell your parents about where you were going?”

“You kidding? They think I’m asleep. I should have told my father. He would have thought this was a real gutsy thing to do. Character building.”

“Yeah, but what about your mother?”

“Talk about guts, she’d probably gut me with a knife. She doesn’t even know I still have my scuba gear. I bought it back from the thrift shop.” Guiltily, she glanced back behind her to a house whose lights showed dimly through the trees.

“What about you Tal, do they know you’re out?” asked the same boy.

The boy called Tal just shook his head.

“Am I the only one who told my parents that I was going into town with you guys to pick up some pizza?” asked the first boy, his voice rising with laughter.

The girl called Sport replied.

“Whitney, you idiot, it wouldn’t have made a lot of sense for Dede or me to say that. Our parents would sooner allow us to take ecstasy than drive around with you at night.”

Whitney and the girls laughed. Talbot put his finger to his lips.

“Shut up you guys.”

The third boy said nothing but stood holding his air tank in his arms as if he were afraid that it might disappear on him.

“Ok,” said Talbot, “Let’s go. Keep quiet and don’t let your gear bang around.”

The five of them started across the meadow to the top of a bluff overlooking a cove. They were now just a little way below the back of Sport’s house. At the bottom of the steep bluff was a dock. The three boys put their air tanks on their backs now, and two of them, Talbot and Whitney, were carrying air tanks for the girls. Each of the five wore a buoyancy vest and carried weights, fins and a flashlight, although the lights were turned off in deference to the secrecy of the occasion and a full moon overhead.

It was difficult getting down the steep hill and occasionally one or the other of them would grab at a rope that had been strung through the sparse spruce trees on the incline.

They walked out on a long wooden dock, a hundred feet in length, resting on huge granite pilings. The walkway was thirty feet above the water at low tide. Then they started down a steep steel ramp leading to the floating docks, moving very slowly so as not to bang the equipment against the ramp’s metal railings. When they got down to the floating docks at the bottom of the ramp, they put the equipment down.

“Ok,” said Talbot, “check through your gear, make sure everything’s there. Whitney, help Nevah.”

“Yes Sir!” said Whitney, goose-stepping for a few strides. “You know, Talbot, you’re a born leader. You’re gonna be president some day.”

“That’ll be lucky for you, Whit,” Talbot replied, “Maybe I’ll give you a pardon to get out of jail if you’re nice.”

“What am I going to be, Whitney?” asked the taller girl.

“You Sport, that’s a stupid question, isn’t it? You’re gonna’ be the first lady, but you knew that.”

Laughing, she gave him a shove from behind.

“So what about Nevah and me?” asked Dede, pointing to the third boy who had said nothing since they had met in the meadow.

“Oh, well Dede, you’re going to be a great artist. You’ll live in Paris and have ten children to absorb your mothering instincts. And Nevah, oh, I don’t know, he’ll marry

Sarah and be an engineer or something like that.” His voice trailed off as he examined his equipment, no longer interested in the conceit.

Sport put her arm companionably around Nevah’s shoulders. “I’d absolutely love to have you as my brother-in-law Nevah. I’ll tell Sarah as soon as she arrives next week.”

Nevah didn’t answer. In fact, he didn’t seem to have heard.

“Really Whit, what are you going to be, before you go to jail, that is?” the girl called Dede persisted.

“Me? You mean when I grow up?”

“Yeah, if that should ever happen.”

“Oh, well, I’ll be an enormously successful, happily married man, just like my father wasn’t.”

“Okay, Nevah,” said Talbot, “There’s nothing to it.”

All business now, he helped adjust the buoyancy vest around the silent boy’s body. “To inflate, you push this button. To deflate, this one.”

Nevah examined the indicated buttons and tried to veil his nervousness. Then he looked up and surveyed the peaceful scene as if searching for help. Neither the dinghies and outboards tied up to the dock, nor the smooth sea or dark sky offered any solace.

“If water gets into your mask,” continued Talbot, “Put your head back like this, press the upper rim of your mask and snort.”

As instructed, Nevah sat down on the edge of the dock and put on his flippers as Talbot buckled the tank on his back, attached the hose to the buoyancy compensator and placed the regulator in his mouth. Then he flashed his light on the gauge. “See this? It shows how much air you have. My dad had the tanks filled yesterday. Two thousand, two hundred and fifty P.S.I. It gets below five hundred, come on up.”

Nevah took a few experimental breaths.

“Easy. Not so fast.”

Nevah slowed down.

“When we go in, hold your nose and snort. It clears your ears.”

Talbot demonstrated.

“And remember. Never hold your breath, ok?”

“Hey, Tal,” Whitney said, “wanna’ give him a physics lesson? Explain how water pressure increases about half a pound per square inch for every foot of depth? Maybe you can draw a diagram. Explain how at thirty-three feet below sea level it’s twenty-nine point – ”

“Shut up, Whitney. It’s his first time.”

“ – four p.s.i. Hey, how about Archimedes’ principle? Explain that since he displaces an average of three cubic feet of water – ”

“Hey, Whit, knock it off,” Sport snapped. “Don’t forget, we’ve all had two summers of lessons.”

“Nevah hasn’t, Nevah will,” Whitney joked.

“Old, tired joke Whit. Can it,” Sport said in a bored tone.

“You’re losin’ your sense of humor, Sport,” Whitney replied. “Anyone ever tell you how good you look in basic skin tight black?”

Sport ignored him.

“You, Nevah, on the other hand?” Whitney paused theatrically. “Not so great.”

The boy named Nevah smiled distractedly, trying to seem amused and relaxed, although he was neither. He sat, snorkel and mask in place, tank strapped on, regulator in his mouth, on the edge of the dock and looked down at the black water of the inlet. Further out, he could see the silhouettes of the larger boats dipping and rising on their moorings. Although he was as big as the other two boys, he seemed years younger as he sat there, obviously trying to memorize the instructions.

“Who’s his buddy?” asked Dede.

“I am,” said Talbot. “You three stick together. Okay, let’s go.”

Nevah continued to stare into the water as if contemplating a plunge into a region beyond return.

“Hey, Nevah, you don’t have to do it if you don’t wanna.” Concerned, Talbot shot his flashlight beam on the other’s face.

Nevah shied away from the light. “I’m okay.”

“Next we go into the decompression tables,” Whitney intoned sonorously. “Listen up, Nevah. Should you decide to go down a hundred and ninety feet, which would be a neat trick in this cove, you can only remain at the bottom – ”

Talbot gave him a shove. “Keep your shirt on.”

“You mean tank.” Dede corrected him.

“ – for five minutes,” Whitney continued, backing away from Talbot’s reach, “that is, if you don’t want to go through decompression. But on the other hand, if you should settle for sixty minutes at sixty feet – ”

“What an ass you are,” Sport told him.

“Let’s go,” Talbot said. “Don’t forget. Press the sides of your nose and snort when you go down.”

“Why’re you filling my B.C.?” Nevah asked.

“We’re going to hang out on the surface for a minute. Ready?”

“Moving right along,” Whitney continued, “let’s discuss Boyle’s law. According to Boyle, as opposed to Hoyle, the volume of gas varies inversely – ” His words were lost in a burst of bubbles as Sport pushed him into the water. In a moment he bobbed to the surface, choking but still laughing.

Nevah took a deep breath, glanced at the sky and dropped into the water. Immediately, he came up gasping, his mask half off and his regulator flapping on his shoulder.

“What a turkey you are, Talbot,” Whitney scoffed. “The one thing you needed to tell him, to hold on to his mask, you forgot.”

Talbot slid into the water beside Nevah. “Sorry.” He adjusted Nevah’s mask and regulator as if Nevah were a small child.

Sport felt embarrassed for Nevah. Although she had only just turned fourteen and Nevah was nearly three years older, she was sensitive to his insecurity and felt oddly protective of him. Even at this age, she recognized that she and the other three had the easy confidence of having grown up under affluent circumstances with supportive parents and plenty of nearly obsequious hired help around their houses. Nevah was the only child of Edith and Johnny Wright. The Wrights lived year round on the island and were, in fact, the caretakers for the other four children’s summer homes. Nevah had a lot of pride and was plucky. He had spent all of his summers with the other four children swimming, sailing, kayaking, hiking and driving fast in small motorboats. The four families who owned houses on the Point had made it a point to include Nevah in all of their children’s activities and to pay for any activities that the Wrights could not afford. Because Nevah was smart, athletic, and game, he had been able to keep up with the other four, notwithstanding the many more lessons their parents could afford to provide at other times of the year. But he never complained or even mentioned their advantages. It was possible that he truly did not care about, or much notice, the differences in their economic status.

Sport and Dede opened the valves of their tanks, checked their air, put on their B.C.s and weight belts, adjusted tanks, and helped each other to strap on their tanks. Then, holding the tank straps with one hand and masks with the other, they stepped off the dock at the same time.

As they bobbed on the surface, Talbot gave them last minute instructions.

“Nevah, you stick with me. You other three stay together. Don’t leave this side of the cove. And check your air.” He glanced up the hill and saw no sign of their noise having awakened anyone in the house at the top of the hill. The moonlight had paved a sparkling path across the cove, and aside from cicadas and a few frogs, it was quiet. The water looked as if it had been steam rolled flat. A perfect night for a dive.

As they released the air from their B.C.s, Talbot flashed his light on Nevah’s face. The mask distorted it, broadening his nose and distending his lips. Talbot formed a questioning “O” with his thumb and forefinger and Nevah did the same to show he was all right.

Beyond the low tide line, ghostly vegetation oscillated with the action of the sea. Mussels and periwinkles, starfish, crabs and barnacles decorated the rocks below the surface. A mackerel slithered past, its tail palpitating in the miniature forest. There were none of the bright colors of the Caribbean but the cove had its own charms at this late summer time of night.

Tugging on Nevah's arm, Talbot pointed to a scuttling lobster and Nevah nodded as he flutter-kicked behind his guide. He was careful not to lose sight of his buddy as the pilings of the dock disappeared behind them. Repeatedly, he checked his air gauge and saw he was down to two thousand p.s.i. He made an effort to slow his breathing.

They caught up with the other three in time to see Whitney fooling around with the gauge on Sport's tank. She turned swiftly and aimed a kick at his crotch, which missed. Talbot's did not. Whitney doubled over in mock pain and the two girls appeared to be laughing.

The horseplay began to loosen Nevah's tension. He caught sight of a Pollock and made a grab for it, but since Talbot's lecture hadn't reached the part about objects appearing a third larger and a quarter closer under water, the Pollock was in no danger. Next his attention was diverted by another lobster, which disappeared under a ledge, and anxious to exhibit his casualness, he went in after it. The ledge was narrower than it had appeared, and after a moment Nevah became aware of something. He couldn't turn around. His teeth aching from gripping the regulator so tightly, he abandoned the chase and twisted frantically to loosen himself. Whirling and struggling in the tight space, he opened his mouth to scream and lost the regulator. His chest felt as if gripped by a monstrous claw.

Nevah's mind exploded in panic. He forgot everything except the desperate need to breathe. Among the things he forgot was the instruction to abandon the tank and the weights in an emergency.

Talbot, digging around in the seaweed and sand, captured four crabs which he dropped into the net bag he carried on his wrist along with the flashlight. Then he looked around for Nevah to show him his catch. And couldn't see him. After gyrating in circles, he followed another hard and fast rule he had neglected to impart to Nevah. When you lose sight of your buddy, head for the surface.

The black water, the silhouetted trees and starlit sky were all as serene as when they had descended. The ocean shimmered and undulated like silvery cloth in the moonlight.

Flinging the crabs away, he was about to descend again when another head bobbed up and he shouted with relief. "Nevah!"

But it was Sport. "I saw your light. Are we going back?"

“I can’t find Nevah. I forgot to tell him to come right up if we lost sight of each other.”

“He’s okay. Did you see what that idiot Whitney did?”

“Sport, wait up here in case he surfaces. Don’t let him go back down.”

“I’m sure he’s – ”

But Talbot was gone. Catching sight of a light, he flutter kicked towards it, but it turned out to be Dede. He removed his regulator and mouthed the word “Nevah.”

Dede shook her head and kicked in the direction of another light which turned out to be Whitney’s. Whitney shook his head and mouthed “Sport?” Talbot pointed upwards.

The three began rotating, flashing their lights. Then Talbot shot to the surface again. “Have you seen him?” he shouted at Sport.

“You haven’t found him?” Her voice, beginning to sound shrill with fright, shattered the quiet night.

Without answering, Talbot released his air and sank out of sight. The four remained within sight of one another as they gyrated frantically. Their eyes distended with apprehension and their movement became more and more erratic as precious moments passed. They forgot to check their air until Talbot took a breath and received nothing. Gesturing with his light at his gauge, he kicked upwards and the other three followed. All of them clung to the dock, gasping.

“What are you doing?” Sport shrieked. “Where is he? You didn’t find him?”

“Maybe he’s playing a trick on us,” Whitney said faintly.

“You think he could’ve climbed up on the shore somewhere?” Talbot asked.

“Jesus Christ,” Sport said in a whisper.

Sport checked her air. Then, adjusting her mask and regulator, she sank back below the surface of the water. At the same time Talbot unhooked Dede’s tank, B.C. and weights. “Dede! Run! Get my Dad. No, get the ambulance. Shit, anybody!”

Barefooted, Dede raced up the ramp, along the dock, up the steep slope, and was lost among the trees. The two boys stripped off all of their equipment except for masks and flashlights and dove back into the water. Air bubbles floated towards the surface.

Suddenly Whitney went berserk. Snaking his light back and forth, he pointed to the ledge where Nevah had disappeared. The back strap of a rubber fin enclosing the round heel of a human foot stuck out from the crevice. Frantically, Whitney and Talbot began tugging with no regard for any physical injuries they might be causing. Sport held the light to help them. The foot didn’t budge. Not at all.

Their lungs agonized, both boys shot to the surface, inhaled frenetically and jackknifed down again. Sport was still down by the ledge, holding the light on the

foot, her eyes wide in shock. Shoving Sport aside, Talbot snaked under the trapped figure, and using his light to guide him, undid the buckles of the tank. Immediately the inert figure shifted loose and, between them, Talbot and Whitney brought Nevah to the surface.

Scrambling up first, Whitney hauled as Talbot and Sport pushed from below. When Nevah was on the dock, Talbot lowered his head over the side to shake the water out of him. No sign of life.

Whitney dropped to his knees and, fingers laced, elbows rigid, he pressed hard on Nevah's sternum. "One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand, four one thousand, five one thousand – "

At the fifth one thousand, Talbot pinched Nevah's nostrils shut, covered his mouth with his own, and gave him a lungful of air. Sobbing, Sport watched.

"One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand, four one thousand, five, *breathe*, goddamn you." Whitney's hoarse voice blended with the night sounds of the frogs and cicadas. There was no pulse on Nevah's neck, no lifting of his chest, no flutter of his eyelids.

"Change!" The two boys switched positions, Talbot compressing, Whitney trying to give Nevah the kiss of life. Talbot pried open Nevah's eyes. Sport screamed without knowing she had. The pupils were large and fixed.

From far off on top of the hill came the wail of a siren, the screeching of tires, car doors slamming, voices shouting, and finally, shoes thumping on the ramp.

The teenagers on the dock didn't look up. "One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand, four one thousand, five one thousand, *breathe*, damn you."