

Tangier's Song

by John Snyder

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Prologue

In the vast blue waters of the Chesapeake Bay lies a small strip of land just six miles south of the Maryland border accessible only by an hour and a half journey by ferry.

This quaint Virginia Island is a place where wealth is measured in relative terms, and time, for the most part, stands still. The island was built on the backs of men and women who loved the water. The living is hard; the pay is meager, but there is a richness with which the inhabitants live their lives among the magnificent splendor of the Chesapeake. And, it is there they find their treasure, the coveted bounty from beneath the water ... oysters, clams, rock fish, and of course, blue crabs to die for; the essence of culinary masterpieces created by the world's foremost chefs.

Tangier Island is a place where the sun rises and sets on the water, a blessed and peaceful place where you're inclined to look at your watch less, in favor of the beauty that surrounds you ... a place where a man's word is his bond, and where families and friends have unequalled value. A sun-kissed waterman's paradise, Tangier is precious to all who truly come to know her.

Steeped in generations of rich maritime tradition, life on Tangier, to the outsider at least, appears mundane. However, to those who lived it, the routine of hard work on the open water bestows a sense of independence, comfort and tranquility.

Over the years, not much of significance has occurred on Tangier Island. It *was* occupied by British troops during the War of 1812, and it is from there the British launched their attack on Baltimore. There was the cholera plague of 1866, tuberculosis and measles outbreaks in the 1870s and the smallpox epidemic of the 1880s. But, most legendary was the Billy Sturgis

incident of July 11, 1998; an event which is relived, to the embarrassment of Billy and Polly Sturgis, whenever there is a gathering of ten or more islanders. The day went down in Tangier Island folklore, for on that humid Saturday afternoon in July, Billy Sturgis got drunk and climbed the water tower ... naked. There, to the amusement of most of the island's inhabitants, Billy professed his love for his wife, and he refused to come down until Polly Sturgis was summoned and embarrassed into apologizing for tossing him out of their house and pitching all of his clothes on the front yard during one of their notorious domestic ruckuses.

The island is a throwback to simpler times. Houses line the narrow streets on the high patches of land, and when you pass on in life, you are buried above ground because the water table is so low. The daily mail and supplies are delivered by boat. There are no banks, no ATMs, no jail, no movie theaters, and one church; Methodist. There is an old joke the islanders liked to tout, "We don't need a jail because we are all Methodists." And, you better bring cash when visiting because credit cards are not welcome.

No alcohol is sold on the island. That's not to say everyone is a teetotaler. Tangiermen are well known for enjoying their libations. The many crab shanties used for shedding soft-shell crabs also serve as makeshift bars and have been the backdrop for many good times.

Billed as the soft-shell crab capital of the world, William W. Warner wrote in his book "*Beautiful Swimmers*" that Tangiermen catch more crabs than anyone under the sun. His observation is true.

Chapter One

Rachael McFarland sat nervously tapping her pencil on a legal pad littered with thoughtless doodling of random stars and interlocking squares as she stared despondently at the wall of her cubical. Emphatically redirecting her attention to the paper before her, she began to write – then

stopped. Her breathing became shallow as she attempted to concoct some prudent thoughts about what she would say to her boss when she met with him. She scribbled down a note, pressing the pencil lead hard against the paper, *MORE HARD NEWS STORIES*, circling it several times, pausing long enough to chew on the pencil's eraser, and then continued writing before stopping again. Slamming the pencil down on the pad, she thrust her head into her hands exhaling in resignation, unsuccessfully battling tears of frustration which now dripped onto the legal pad causing the blue lines to bleed into the bright yellow paper.

Opening the drawer to her desk, she pulled a tissue from the box and dabbed at the mascara that streaked down her cheeks. Quickly glancing into the mirror next her desk, she did her best to reconstruct her makeup and then blew her nose into the tissue before tossing it in the trash can. Sitting upright, her fingers anxiously twisted at the ends of her blonde hair as she agonizingly tried to compose herself before her impending confrontation.

"What do I have to lose?" She mumbled under her breath as she stood abruptly, sending her chair gliding backwards, cascading off the wall behind her desk. Bolstered by resolve, Rachael marched out of her office into the bustling hallways at the Channel 2 News building in Baltimore, wending her way through the mass of people rushing round her, much like an ant maneuvering the tunnels of an ant farm.

"Excuse me," she murmured angrily as someone bumped into her along the way to her boss' office. On a mission, her heart pounded hard against her sternum. So involved in her inner thoughts of what she was going to say, she walked right past his office and further down the hall without realizing it. She looked up and there he was, Dan Robey, walking toward her from the opposite direction. Suddenly, reservations cast heavy shadows over her boldness. Dan was the general manager at Channel 2, a suspender-wearing throwback to the old days, moderately

overweight, a protruding belly, and always pulling up his slacks because his suspenders couldn't handle the pressure. Suffering from a severe case of male-pattern baldness, he had the complexion of Casper the friendly ghost. The true definition of a type A personality - A plus, for that matter, his elevated blood pressure caused his face to glow red at the least provocation. Easily provoked, this happened several times a day. Rachael cleared her throat, preparing to speak, but before she could utter a word of her prepared edict Dan barked out in typical fashion.

"I need to talk with you for a minute," he said as he hurriedly passed her.

Rachael made an about-face and followed Dan down the hall, running to catch up to him. Perpetually in a rush, he ducked into his office to grab some papers off his desk, then turned around, almost running into Rachael as he hurried out the door again to resume his journey down the hall. Rachael ran up alongside him.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" A bit of worry could be detected in her voice. *Am I in some kind of trouble?*

Dan stopped, turned to her and scratched his temple.

"There's a story I want you to cover on Tangier Island."

"What is Tangier Island?"

"It's a small island in the Virginia Chesapeake Bay."

Rachael hoped it was anything but a "day in the life" story.

"I want you to do a story on the commercial fishermen of Tangier Island."

"So much for hoping," she said aloud.

"What?" Dan looked puzzled.

"Oh, nothing, but I was supposed to be off this weekend."

"Take next weekend off instead."

“But what if I have plans?”

“Do you?”

“No.”

“Problem solved,” Dan laughed as he walked away. “Shelly will fill you in on all the details.”

Shelly was Dan Robey’s assistant. She’d been with him for more than ten years. Matronly, and very dignified, sometimes Dan’s brash ways made her blush.

Rachael took off after Dan. “But why do I always get stuck with these softball stories?” Dan yelled back over his shoulder, “We’ll talk about that next week,” his usual answer.

“How long do I have to be on this island?”

“Talk to Shelly, she’ll fill you in.”

He turned the corner at the end of the hall and vanished, leaving Rachael standing there alone. She leaned against the wall with her arms crossed, the lines in her forehead growing deeper with every breath. “Damn!”

“Hey, Rachael, wait up.” She saw Bill Reed, her cameraman, coming up the corridor. “I just bumped into Shelly, and she said we ...”

Interrupting him ... “I know. I know. We’re doing a story on the commercial fishermen of Tangier Island.”

“How’d you know?”

“Dan told me. How long do we have to be there?”

“Just a couple of days.”

“A couple of days? That’s just ducky! Marooned on an island with you covering a bunch of red-neck watermen.”

Glancing down at his watch, Bill interjected, "I was coming to get you. We need to get going. We've got that clown convention to cover at the Inner Harbor Marriott."

"Oh, how could I forget that?" She chided.

"Come on, I'll walk with you to get your things."

"I just don't understand Dan."

"Who does?" Bill laughed.

Rachael cast him a serious look, her eyes gazing at him as her face stiffened.

"I've been trying to get him to take me seriously. I've been a reporter here for almost two years now, and I'm still covering this lifestyle stuff."

"Well, you *were* hired as a lifestyle reporter, weren't you?"

"Yeah, but that was supposed to be temporary, until a beat became available."

"This is your beat. And, quite a beat it is." He snickered.

"It sure is. But two positions have opened up and I never got either assignment. Every time I bring it up to Dan he has some lame excuse or puts off our conversation and the subject never seems to come up again. I want to cover more serious news."

"It's not so bad, Rachael. At least you've got me by your side every day. What more could you really ask for?"

A slight smile broke the tension on her face as she stopped and turned to him.

"You know? You're right about that, Bill. You're a good friend and we have had some great times together."

As they walked the remaining way to her office Rachael said nothing, thinking about Bill's calming demeanor and the way he had about him of making her feel better about herself.

“Let me grab my things and I guess we’ll be on our way to cover this important clown story.”

Her smile broadened.

A crowd stood watching as Rachael interviewed a man dressed in a bright yellow clown suit with a floppy green hat, his face colorfully painted and accentuated by a red rubber ball stuck on the end of his nose. He handed her a bouquet of paper flowers. As she reached for them the bouquet exploded into a flash of paper confetti, covering her. She recoiled with surprise, reflecting an initial expression of annoyance which quickly faded when she observed the joy on all the children’s faces. Laughing, she brushed the paper from her blouse, turning to the camera, “This is Rachael McFarland for Channel 2 News at the Inner Harbor Marriott where the fun will continue until tomorrow evening.”

As she packed up her things an elderly gentleman in a clown suit approached her.

“Hi, honey. Remember me?”

How could she forget? He’d been following her around since she got there.

“Oh, hi,” she said trying to be polite.

“Would you like to go to dinner with me tonight?”

You’ve got to be kidding me! But, unfortunately he wasn’t.

“Oh, thank you. It’s kind of you to ask but I have to be getting back to the station.”

His offer triggered a sense of anger from deep within her. His invitation encapsulated all of her frustrations with the assignments she had been given ... this one in particular, leaching up through her emotions to expose a raw nerve, reminding her of the disappointing conversation she had with Dan earlier in the day.

As Rachael placed her microphone in her bag she noticed the old gentleman still standing there, a look of disappointment prominent on his painted face. A nagging feeling of guilt haunted her, causing her to look up at him and smile. Suddenly, she felt compassion for the old man. After all, none of this was his fault, he was just here doing something that he loved. Her heart lightened.

“I’ll tell you what. I could use a glass of cold iced tea. Would you care to join me? I’ll treat.”

The gentleman’s face lit up and he quickly accepted her invitation. They walked to the hotel restaurant while Bill went to get some more crowd shots.

“My name’s Roger.” He extended his hand.

Rachael cautiously shook it, fully expecting it contained a buzzer or something as a gag, almost disappointed when she learned otherwise.

“Glad to meet you, Roger. My name is Rachael.”

“Oh, I know who you are. I watch you on TV all the time. I’m a real fan.”

“Well thank you, Roger. Where are you from?”

“I live in Western Maryland, Hagerstown.”

“That’s a beautiful part of the state.”

They spent about a half-hour together talking and learning more about each other. Roger asked her to autograph a napkin which contained the hotel’s name and logo. She thoughtfully wrote a short note and signed her name, feeling a bit awkward, yet flattered at the same time.

“I better be getting back to the van. My cameraman will be looking for me. We need to get back to work.”

As Rachael stowed her gear in the Channel 2 news van she smiled when thinking of the old gentleman asking her for her autograph. Then her mood changed when she recalled her

“meeting” with Dan earlier in the day, frustrated at how he just blew her off when she tried to talk to him about getting more serious news assignments. The more she thought about it, the angrier she became.

Looking up she saw Bill walked up to her, his sweat-soaked shirt gave evidence of the day’s sweltering heat. As he approached, Rachael could detect the slight odor of his perspiration. He’d been slogging along with her and hundreds of other people at the convention for several hours, juggling his camera equipment on his shoulder. Tall, with a slender build and a disarming smile, round wire-rimmed glasses anchored his face.

“Where’ve you been? I’ve been looking for you.”

“I was having an iced tea with one of my fans,” she laughed.

“Oh, that’s right, I saw you and that old clown going into the restaurant. Finally got a date, did you?”

“Funny. Actually, he was a very nice man. It was kind of cute. He had me sign a napkin for him.”

“Yeah, that’s right ... you’re a bona-fide celebrity, I forgot.”

Rachael gave him a steely glare, then broke into laughter.

“Careful there buddy, or you’ll *never* get one – no matter what level of fame I achieve.”

“My loss, *I guess.*”

“I can’t believe I got stuck with another lame assignment like this. A magician’s convention? Are you serious?”

“Relax, Rachael. Your time will come. You’ll get that big story you’ve been waiting for.”

“Sure I will, when Hell freezes over. Seven years in this business and I’m still covering clown conventions and 4-H cattle shows. I’m sick of these sorry stories.”

Bill heard this many times before, a common theme when they were together. He slid the side door closed before walking around the rear of the van, letting out a sigh and shaking his head as he opened the driver's door and climbed in. Rachael leaned against the side door. Looking up at the sky, she angrily stomped her foot on the ground and banged her open hand against the side of the van.

“Oh ... I hate this!”

Bill gave the horn a slight toot. Rachael slid into the van and slammed the door hard. Then, the fun began. Bill began needling her unmercifully about the unwanted attention she garnered from the old men at the convention, and the forward advances of one older magician in particular.

“You certainly had your pick of the litter,” Bill laughed. “Why didn't you pick up the old geezer who did the neat card tricks? At least he'd be entertaining.” Bill continued to annoy Rachael.

“Yeah, well at least I wasn't robbing the cradle.” Rachael reminded him about the college sorority story they shot the week before when all the girls singled out Bill as the hottie on the crew. They followed him everywhere. “You acted like Rico Sauv . I'm surprised you weren't passing out your business cards with your phone number, you pervert. Or ... were you?” She laughed.

“I guess I look young for my age,” Bill teased with a chuckle. “You're the one who attracts the geriatric crowd.”

Rachael rolled her eyes. “I'm so glad you've updated your comedic material. That's so mature of you.”

By the time they got back to the station, Rachael had become weary of all the bantering and geriatric jokes, a pain-in-the-ass reminder that she was barely taken seriously as a reporter. To her, every beat of her heart sounded like a bass drum, and the veins in her neck protruded and throbbed uncontrollably, her face the shade of a freshly waxed fire engine. She went straight to her office, slamming the door behind her. Her shoulders slumped as she plopped down on the worn vinyl chair in her small but tidy cubical. A meticulous person, nothing could be out of place. She was anal about it - a real neat freak.

She rifled through her desk for a candy bar she stowed there the day before for just such an occasion. *I know it's in here.* Frantically spreading the contents of the drawer around with her hands the candy bar was nowhere to be found.

“Damn it, Bill! Rummaging through my desk again? I’ve told you about this before!”

Abandoning her search, she slammed the drawer shut and leaned back in her chair, replaying the day.

Before her job with Channel 2, she worked for a small TV station in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania covering the same type of stories. The only real “hard news” assignments on her resume were from her stint at a Philadelphia radio station. There, she covered the city council and the state legislature. She knew she wasn’t going to catch her big break covering the type of stories she was assigned at Channel 2.

Anger welled up inside her, climaxing when she flung her Sharpie across the room. It struck the wall, leaving a blue streak. *Great!* Slowly, she lost the rhythm of her breathing. Her face got tight, and her vision blurred as tears welled in her eyes.

She reached into her drawer and pulled out her resume, which she had circulated to other stations in the region, but the job offers she received were similar to that which she already had

and dreaded so much. At times, she thought about hanging it up, but her desire for recognition and her fear of failure were driving forces that kept her going. To quit would also prove her father right, something she could never live with. The one thing she wanted most in life was escaping her.

Chapter Two

It was an unusually sultry day on Tangier Island. The July sun scorched the docks and the gentle breeze which regularly caressed the island absent, the air stagnant - a foul fishy odor lingered. Sweat dripped from John Crockett's bronzed shirtless body as he crouched over the engine compartment of his commercial fishing boat.

"Damn!" He yelled indignantly, tossing a wrench hard against the cast iron housing of the boat engine over which he toiled for hours. The case-hardened metal tool ricocheted off the motor block and skinned John's forehead just above his right eye triggering a string of obscenities. Grabbing his head, he danced a jig that would have made his Irish ancestors proud – that would be if he *had* Irish ancestors. The blood mixed with sweat and ran down his face. He pressed a greasy rag against the cut to stop the bleeding. After hours of working on the filthy engine he twisted off a bolt while trying to reattach the water pump. Disgusted, he'd had enough, surrendering at least for the moment, to the gremlins which had made this day so dismal.

John walked to the edge of the dock. Stretching his tall muscular frame, he raised both arms above his head and arched his back. Then, he sat defeated, dangling his legs off the pier. A handsome young man of thirty-four, and quite different than most on the island. Though he was the name sake and descendant of the island's founding father, he spoke without the distinctive native twang - an accent with origins dating back to the island's forebears from Cornwall, mixed with a bit of a southern drawl. He wiped the perspiration from his torso with the rag he had in his

hand, mopping up the water that clung to the skin of his lean yet muscular body. The muscles of his well-developed arms glistened in the waning sun. His dark hair cut short, he had the physique of a model, his face and neck, unlike most men on the bay, were not yet weathered by the long days in the sun and salty air.

John watched as the sun began to set in the western sky. The colors were spectacular. A slight breeze began to blow. He craned his neck in an attempt to see beyond the horizon to the shoreline of the Virginia coast, but even on the clearest of days it was impossible to see. All he saw was water. Surrounded by it, sometimes he felt as if he was drowning.

John made a good living on the water. He captained *The Bay Lady*, which had a crew of three, counting John. He also owned two other work boats, *Sunrise* and *Sand Dollar*, each with a crew of three. *The Bay Lady*, *Sunrise* and *Sand Dollar* harvested hard-shell crabs in crab season, and oysters during the oyster season. He owned an additional two boats used exclusively for harvesting soft-shell crabs. Jerry Kapp ran John's soft-shell crab operation. In all, he had fourteen employees.

Most residents of Tangier Island lived there by choice, or by destiny. John Crockett was a reluctant resident, haunted by the unfulfilling life he led ... yearning for more, longing for his former life, interrupted by a tragic phone call that compelled him to return to the place from which he spent most of his life trying to escape.

While growing up on Tangier, John failed to see what others saw in the place. He always looked to the horizon and wondered what adventures awaited him on the mainland. As a youngster, he felt restrained, almost claustrophobic, in the confines of what he saw as a small pile of sand in the middle of nowhere.

As a young lad, John had a passion for books and learning. In the third grade, they singled him out because of his intelligence and he was schooled on the mainland, returning to the island on weekends and to spend the summers there working in his father's commercial fishing business. He came from a long line of watermen, from as far back as anyone could remember. If you lived on Tangier Island, you worked the water, for there was little else to do.

A place without traffic jams, Tangier Island only had two cars and three pickup trucks on the entire island, and at any given moment, at least two of the vehicles were out of service. People got around mostly on foot, bicycles or by golf cart. The island did boast a small airport used mostly by rich tourists who came to spend weekends at one of the island's two inns, or at one of several bed and breakfasts that dotted the island ... tourists who looked upon the residents almost as novelties. In many respects, the inhabitants of the Tangier Island *were* novelties. Their culture an anomaly, and their numbers dwindled with each generation being less willing to do the backbreaking work of harvesting seafood from the floor of the Chesapeake Bay for little in the way of recompense. Those who remained did so out of their love for the Chesapeake and the lure of working on the open water.

“What do ya see out there, Johnny?”

John recognized the approaching voice of Zachariah Thomas, a seasoned waterman and a living legend on the island, eighty-one years old and still going strong. His fishing boat the first out on the bay every morning, and he usually caught his limit of crabs early in the day ... a testament to his skill as a waterman. He had white hair, a matching scruff on his face and walked with a distinctive limp. His face rich with deep wrinkles and the texture of leather, remnants from years of baking in the unforgiving sun while he worked on the water. Zachariah Thomas personified the essence and spirit of Tangier Island. Truly in love with the place and eternally

optimistic, Zachariah had an extremely positive personality that would even make a hanging seem like a pleasant experience.

John's grandfather's best friend, they were like brothers and he was a good friend to John's father and to John, as well. Quite a character, and loved by all who knew him, he was a fanciful storyteller always eager to spin a yarn about life on the Chesapeake Bay. A willing mentor to many of the younger watermen, all yearning to discover what made Zachariah so successful.

John turned and watched ol' Zack hobbling down the dock toward him.

"I see nothing out there but water, unfortunately," John replied to Zack's question.

Zachariah groaned a little as he labored to sit down on the dock next to John, his face wincing with arthritic pain as he took his seat.

"Ahhhh, Johnny Boy. Ya see - you're not really lookin' if all you can see out there is the water."

He could never understand John wanting to escape the island and leave behind the splendor of the place.

Zachariah pulled a pack of Camels from his shirt pocket. Tearing off the filter, he put the cigarette between his lips and lit it, drawing on it hard. Exhaling, he said, "That's a nasty lookin' gash over your eye. What happened?"

"Oh ... I was working on my motor and hit it with a wrench."

Zachariah looked at John's cut, then he bellowed in laughter.

"What's so damn funny?"

"You are. I saw the whole wrench throwin' thing."

They both laughed aloud, though John felt embarrassed. Next to Zachariah, he was the most respected waterman on the island and didn't take kindly to embarrassing moments. He felt it rather demeaning.

"Just look at that sunset, John. Look at how it makes the water appear like it's ablaze. And the sky ... have you ever seen such beautiful shades of orange, pink and blue?"

"Well, Zack, you may have a point there."

Taking another drag on his cigarette, "It's truly God's canvas, and what a treat He's givin' us this evenin'. We're lucky we're here ta witness it. There's nothin' like a Tangier Island sunset."

"There are times when I wish a hurricane would come and sink this place," John quipped sarcastically, though inwardly he meant every word of it.

"As a matter of fact, I remember when Hurricane Agnes blew through here. She *did* almost sink us. But, alas, why would God destroy one of His most prized possessions? He spared Tangier Island so we could enjoy this evenin's show."

"You sure are something, Zack."

"You need to slow down and smell the sea spray, Johnny Boy."

"All I get from the sea spray is wet!"

Zack laughed. "You owe your life the bay, John."

"What life?"

"You should be more proud of your heritage. Your father worked hard to give ya all this, and his father before him."

"Somehow, I don't look upon all this as a gift."

Zachariah flicked his cigarette butt into the water.

"You should, and a wonderful gift at that."

John shrugged his shoulders and looked back out onto the water. *Why did I ever come back here?*

“You have a real talent, John. You’re a natural waterman. It’s in your blood.”

“My blood?” John laughed as he held up the bloody, sweat drenched rag. This is my blood. The kind that flows when you’re stupid enough to throw a wrench against an engine block.”

They both got a belly laugh out of this.

Zachariah sat and talked with John for a while. He began telling him old tales that John heard a hundred times before. But, John indulged him, listening intently as the stories kept flowing off Zachariah’s lips.

“You’re pa was a good man. I looked after him like he was my son. He worked hard and he played pretty hard, too.”

“Yeah, you’ve told me about some of his shenanigans when he was younger. He must have been quite the jokester.”

“He sure was. And, he could throw a mean right hook, too.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, I remember one time a drunken tourist began makin’ inappropriate remarks to your mother. Your pa belted the guy into the next week.”

John laughed. “I would have liked to have seen that.”

“Well, Johnny Boy ... I’ve got to get goin’. Cats need fed. It’s their supptime.”

Zachariah put his hand on John’s shoulder to steady himself as he attempted to rise. It took him several tries and a number of grunts and groans before he managed to get to his feet. He stood, lit another cigarette, and began walking away. Without turning around he called back to John. “Better put somethin’ on that eye or else you’ll have a real shiner tomorrow.” Then he

joked, “Where’d ya learn to dance like that?” reminding John that he saw his entire tantrum. Zack laughed aloud as he walked, then broke into an old sailor’s song.

John, amused, shook his head while a smile played across his face. He returned to the task of repairing his boat. The Bay Lady was a forty-five foot “dead rise” work boat, one of the most popular models used by the watermen of the bay. It had a V-hull with a small cabin forward and an open cockpit aft. An older boat, with paint peeling and the presence of rust, John managed kept it clean and well maintained.

It was well past ten o’clock when John finished working on his boat. As he made the short walk home, a large, floppy-eared brindle boxer dog greeted him, barking enthusiastically, lifting his spirits.

“Hello there, Max.”

John got Max as a puppy about six years before. They’ve been best friends ever since. Excited to see his master, Max jumped up on him several times, his stub of a tail whirling like the blade of a fan. John stopped briefly to pet him and they walked the rest of the way home. Sweaty and hot from the oppressive humidity, John went straight to the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of Budweiser, holding it up to the cut over his eye for a moment. He opened the cabinet door and gave Max a treat before stepping out on the front porch to sit and drink his beer. Max followed.

John took a seat on an old wooden rocker that belonged to his father. This always brought back pleasant memories. Propping his foot against the railing, he began to rock in the chair as it creaked in rhythm. He closed his eyes and could almost see his dad. He loved doing this, sitting in his father’s chair, eyes closed while having long talks with his pa.

As John sipped on his beer, he looked out over the water, illuminated by a near full moon. *If I still lived in Richmond, I wonder what I'd be doing tonight? Certainly something more exciting than this.* His mind flashed back to an earlier time, a happier time. He saw the image of himself standing in front of a mirror fashioning the last of a Windsor knot in his tie. He glanced in the mirror, running his hand through his hair, patting it into place. One last look, then another. *You handsome devil,* he smiled. John slid into his suit coat. A set of keys lay on the kitchen table next to *The Wall Street Journal*. He reached down for the keys and his eyes focused on the newspaper address label: *John Crockett, Attorney at Law, 475 Cantor Avenue, Richmond, VA.*

A smile crept onto John's face. Max rolled over on his back, catching John's attention. He bent over and gave Max a belly rub causing him to moan as he wallowed in ecstasy.

"Alright buddy, it's time for bed."

Max jumped up, bolting toward the screen door. Way past his preferred bedtime, Max, a one hundred-pound baby, was usually in bed and fast asleep by nine. John opened the door causing the dog to gallop towards the bedroom. By the time John arrived in the room his canine pal lay at the bottom of the bed, his chin propped up comfortably on a blanket. Too tired to even brush his teeth, John pulled the covers back and got into bed, falling asleep in no time.

With the morning sky still dark, John arrived at the docks where *The Bay Lady* departed promptly at five A.M., as she did every workday. The crew, Tommy Koontz, a young man who looked much older than his twenty-five years and Jimmy Bennett, a skinny forty-something with missing teeth, readied the crab pots. Max, his front paws resting on the edge of the bow, stood looking out over the water, enjoying the occasional spray as boat plowed through the waves.

"Nice shiner you're wearin' there," Tommy observed.

“I’d sure like to see what the other guy looks like,” Jimmy chimed in, laughing.

John ignored them as the boat sped across the sound leaving a considerable wake which caught up to them when John slowed, positioning the boat to retrieve the first crab pot which they had baited the day before. John had 274 crab pots adrift in the bay that his three boats attended to, all to be pulled up, hopefully full of blue crabs, and then baited with chicken necks and fish heads before being tossed back overboard. The crew had hopes of luring the largest of the Chesapeake’s blue crabs into the traps. Prior to a few days ago, John had 275 crab pots, but one “mysteriously” disappeared, a rare occurrence. Anyone who knew anything about the bay was wise enough not to fool with a waterman’s crab pots. However, sometimes the mainlanders would pull their boats up to a buoy that marked a crab pot and steal its contents, and in some incidents they’d take the whole trap, as well.

The morning started off slow as the first several crab pots were brought up nearly empty. Later in the day things began to look more promising as the many bushel baskets aboard the boat began to fill. By ten o'clock, their passes yielded an abundance of crabs. It was a waterman’s dream. The morning winds died and the waves in the bay calmed, paving the way for the dreaded heat and humidity to return. By noon, the air became stagnant and the water as smooth as freshly rakes sand. You could literally toss a feather straight up in the air and it would fall at your feet. Max retreated to the cabin to avoid the overbearing heat of the sun. Tommy and Jimmy peeled of their shirts, which were soaked with sweat.

While piloting his boat, John thought about what Zachariah had said the evening before. He looked out over the bay and to the horizon, but he failed to fully appreciate what Zack saw through his eyes. John shook his head and smiled to himself; *Zachariah is a hopeless optimist. He could find something good in a bucket of shit.*

Jimmy and Tommy, as they often did, began horsing around. Jimmy grabbed a stinking fish head and stuck it in Tommy's face.

“Makes ya hungry don't it?”

“Git that thing out of here!” Tommy swatted Jimmy's hand away.

John turned around to see what was going on. When he saw Jimmy with the fish head, he began to laugh. Jimmy placed it into an empty crab trap and tossed it overboard.

Suddenly, the engine began to sputter, then it stopped. The boat drifted aimlessly on the water.

Speaking of “buckets of shit!” John jumped up and walked laboriously towards the engine. Tearing off the engine cover, a puff of blue smoke hit his face making him to cough. He waved his hands to clear the smoke, then stood there with his thumbs tucked into the two front belt loops of his pants, the muscles in his arms twitching. He stomped his foot.

“Damn this thing! What a pain in my ass.”

He turned and walked to the starboard side. The thought crossed his mind to jump overboard and swimming back to shore just to get away from it all. Turning, he glared at the engine, still smoking.

“What is it, boss?” Tommy asked.

“I have no freakin' idea. It just died.”

Jimmy and Tommy hunkered over the engine trying to diagnose the problem, looking over everything, but they were unable to come up with a solution.

“This is simply wonderful!” John yelled. “Here we are sitting dead in the water and the crabs are practically crawling over themselves to get into our pots. Looks like we're done for the day.”

The Sand Dollar and Sunrise were working the lower bay, so John knew it was useless to contact them. He got on the radio and tried to scare up Zachariah.

“This is The Bay Lady calling Tangier’s Song – over.” No answer.

“This is The Bay Lady calling Tangier’s Song – over.”

“Ten-four there, Johnny. What’s happenin’? The crabs are runnin’ heavy today, eh?”

“They were for us too, but we’re out of business.”

“What’s wrong, good buddy?”

“We’re dead in the water. The engine quit.”

“I thought you fixed that thing yesterday.”

“Sure did.”

“Well, then why ain’t it runnin’ now?” Zachariah retorted playfully.

“Don’t rub it in Zack. I’m not in the mood. Could you pick us up and give us a tow back to the island?”

“Oh, come on John, we’re making a killing out here. I’d hate to have to stop now and miss this run.”

“Zack, I’ll owe you a big one if you can do this for me.”

“I’ve got to get my catch into Crisfield then I’ll come by and pick you up. And you’re right ... you owe me a big one. What’s your location?”

John filled Zack in as to their whereabouts. It took Zachariah about an hour and a half to motor to Crisfield, unload and get paid. John became impatient.

“Where the hell is he?”

Finally, on the horizon, John caught a glimpse of Tangier’s Song heading their way.

Max began barking, anticipating Zachariah tossing him a dog biscuit, as he always did.

“I thought you’d never get here,” John shouted.

“Be patient young man, be patient.” Zachariah smiled.

John wasn’t smiling. “I’m a waterman, not a doctor. Doctors need patients. I need a tow to shore.”

John heaved one of Zack’s crewmen a tow line and Zack began towing them ashore, all the while busting John’s chops about the faulty handy-work on his engine. The shoreline of Tangier Island now visible, and not a moment too soon for John’s liking. As they tied up at the dock, John hurried to unload their catch and get it to the buy boat which waited at the docks with a hull full of crabs destined for Crisfield’s seafood market. Max, famous for going from shop to shop begging for handouts, headed into town for whatever treats he could scarf up from the shop owners and tourists.

“Hand me that wrench, will ya, Johnny Boy?” Zachariah said as he deliberated over John’s engine.

John and Zack spent the remainder of the day working to fix The Bay Lady so John wouldn’t miss another day of crabbing. Finally, they solved the problem.

“Fire her up, John.”

John went to the wheel house and turned the ignition. The Bay Lady started right up and ran as smooth as glass.

“There ya go, John. She’s runnin’ good now.”

“Thanks, Zack. How about a cold beer?”

“Sounds like an answered prayer.”

John gave the caps a twist. The sound of the carbonation escaping the bottles sounded like a song from heaven on this sweltering day. They sat, talking until early in the evening. John

discussed his tiring of life as a waterman. Zachariah, as always, tried to convince him that being a waterman was a way of life few others would ever have the opportunity to enjoy.

“I want more out of life. I want to make something more of myself ... to earn a better living.”

“You *have* made something of your life. Your pa would be proud.”

“I do appreciate what’s been passed down to me. I’ve made a decent living as a waterman, but I just want to do something more fulfilling in my life, something more meaningful.”

“Like going back to Richmond and practicing law?”

“That’s my dream, someday.”

“I think you’d miss it, John. You know what they say ... “The grass is always greener ...”

“I don’t know about that, but I sure would miss spending time with you. John thought for a moment. “How can I ever repay you for helping me so much, not just today, but for all the things you have done for me.”

“Try to have a better understandin’ and appreciation for the life you live here on the water. Havin’ you realize the significance of what you do will be more than enough compensation.”

John laughed, “You sure do drive a hard bargain.”

They talked for a while longer before going their separate ways. John headed for home. Max was already on the front porch, his jowls dripping in anticipation of supper. As John crouched down to pick up the newspaper, Max’s sloppy tongue licked his face several times.

“Max! I love you too, but this is ridiculous.”

Wiping his face with his arm, John opened the screen door, and Max ran to the kitchen. He nudged at the cabinet door, behind which he knew was treasure. John fed Max and made himself a sandwich. He sat at the kitchen table and thumbed through the newspaper while eating. John’s eyes lifted from the paper and he stared into space. Thinking of Zachariah brought a smile to his

face. He struggled to appreciate his life on the island. Being a waterman was liberating and it gave him a sense of freedom, but he didn't get a law degree to be stuck on an island fishing for a living.

Steam rose from the shower and filled the room like a London fog. The hot water felt so good against John's skin that he decided to take a few extra minutes to enjoy the experience. He had plenty of time. Forcing himself to turn off the water, he climbed from the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist. Wiping the smog from the bathroom mirror, he looked at his reflection. Running his hand over his two-day beard, he contemplated shaving, but decided against it.

The coffee was about ready. Two eggs, sunny-side up, sizzled in a frying pan as John's mouth watered anticipating how good they would taste. The toast popped up in the toaster and he hastily grabbed it, spreading a generous slab of butter which quickly melted into the bread. He poured the last the orange juice from the carton before tossing it in the trash. It dawned on him that he hadn't seen Max all morning. He called, but Max didn't come, unusual as he normally would be begging for his breakfast by now. John went into the bedroom where he found Max on the bed, snoring away. "Sleeping in this morning, eh boy?" Max jumped to the floor and followed John out to the kitchen, his chops dripped like a hard rain while he waited for John to fill his bowl. As John sat down at the table, he took his first sip of coffee. "Ouch!" He could feel his tongue and upper lip begin to blister, taking a healthy swill of OJ to sooth the burning. His singed taste buds were unable to do their job and his eggs tasted bland. He ended up giving the remainder of his meal to Max. A quick glance at his watch showed ten of five. Time to go.

He poured himself a cup of coffee into a to-go cup and hurried out the door. Momentarily forgetting about Max, he whistled and called his name. Max hit the screen door running, his nose

nudging it open. He ran straight to John, jumping and slobbering all over him. John rubbed Max's head, ruffing him up a little. Forever a puppy, he loved the attention.

As he walked past Tangier's Song, he greeted Zachariah.

"Good morning, Zack. It looks like it's going to be another scorcher."

"Well, it'll be worth it if the crabs are runnin' like they were yesterday ... and like The Bay Lady wasn't.

"Always the comedian."

Chapter Three

The sun, bright and leaning a little towards the west glittered off the plane's fuselage. Rachael looked out the window of the plane at the Chesapeake Bay work boats dotting the calm waters below. Bill napped in the seat across the aisle providing Rachael more time to obsess about her career.

Despite her outer veneer of confidence, Rachael's fragile inner-core seemed haunted by deep insecurities. Her "*I've got it together*" facade functioned as a thin veil draped precariously over her real feelings and emotions. Few ever got to see beneath this shroud and into the gut of what she really feared most - failure. She often questioned if she had what it took to be a successful journalist. She wondered the same about many aspects of her life. Two years of therapy did little to relieve her anxieties or get to the essence of the matter.

She lived most of her thirty-one years in New York City. A standout at the NYU School of Journalism, she graduated with honors. Her father was an investment banker and she, the product of a privileged upbringing and an only child, became accustomed to getting her way. You might say she was a spoiled brat. You could definitely say that.

Her father, a controlling perfectionist and chronic workaholic, spent little time with her during her childhood, always too busy to attend her ballet recitals, cheerleading competitions and absent from the ceremonies where she received numerous awards in high school and college. He threw a fit when he learned Rachael wanted to become a journalist instead of following in his footsteps. He even threatened to withhold her college tuition unless she changed her mind in favor of majoring in finance. His most conspicuous absence though, was at her graduation ceremony at NYU. She never forgave him for that, often wondering if his nonattendance was some sort of a payback for her choosing journalism over finance. He never accepted this. Rather than encouraging her when she became frustrated by the lack of progress in her job, he reminded her that she made a mistake in her career choice. He always discounted her journalism career as something frivolous - not a real job. Determined to prove him wrong, she worked tirelessly to make her mark. Preoccupied with his own career, not only was he an absentee father, but an absentee husband, as well. Her parents divorced when she was ten, something else for which she never forgave him. She desperately wanted a relationship with her father though, but he could not stop thinking of himself long enough to have a substantive relationship with anyone. For the longest time, she thought all men were like that. Her therapist, whom she saw every two weeks, rehabilitated her perception.

The small plane circled the island once. From the window, a water tower was visible with the words "Tangier Island, VA." After a bumpy landing, the plane came to rest on the small air strip. Rachael and Bill climbed from the plane and began unloading video camera equipment and their bags.

"I can't believe Dan gave me another one of these puff pieces. When am I going to be taken more serious? Besides, it's hot as hell here."

Bill wiped the sweat from his forehead, “Quit whining will you? Just make the best of it.”

“I should have gone into finance like my father wanted me to.” She threw her bag onto a luggage cart.

John and his crew had been on the water for about seven hours and they were drenched with sweat. John started up The Bay Lady and ran full throttle across the sound speeding to the next set of crab pots. Once they came to rest, the heat caught back up to them. Like the day before, the crabs were unusually plentiful. The Bay Lady pulled in her limit and John headed back towards shore. A strong wind began blowing from the south ushering in some clouds which appeared to threaten an afternoon thunder buster.

Most of the rest of the fleet had already called it a day, and toted their record catches to shore. As The Bay Lady approached port at Tangier Island, John noticed a lot of commotion on the dock. As he tied up his boat, he caught a glimpse of an attractive, young woman holding a microphone and talking to a camera, a crowd of watermen and townspeople surrounding her. He hopped onto the dock and asked a Bill Wikel, the captain of Sand Dollar, about all of the hullabaloo.

“Oh it’s some city slickers from a TV station up there in Baltimore doin’ a show or somethin’.”

Max ran straight for Rachael, camera rolling. While in the middle of her report, he made his cinematic debut, sniffing the crotch of her shorts, causing her to jump back.

The crowd exploded in laughter. A few snide remarks could be heard.

“That-a-boy, Max!” Someone shouted from the throng of on-lookers.

The group of watermen broke out into laughter again.

Rachael stopped ... shouting, "Could someone please get this dog out of here?"

Halfway between embarrassed and pissed off, she almost lost it, coming ever so close to throwing a manic tantrum, but instead, chose to remain professional about the whole thing.

John sprinted towards Max, yanking him back by the collar, causing even more banter. Holding onto his dog, he knelt at the edge of the crowd observing Rachael as she resumed her work. Bill, her cameraman, tried to conceal his amusement but wasn't doing a very good job of it.

"Take Two," he said behind a compromised grin.

Rachael glared back at him with discontent before continuing her report. Amazed by the ease with which the words flowed from her full, smooth lips, despite being the subject of the snickering, John hung on every word she uttered. It seemed like poetry to him. He watched as the soft evening breeze swept through her blonde hair causing it to flow like the mane of a wild horse running on the beach. John's eyes browsed her long tanned slender legs, captivated by her beauty.

After she completed her report, John led Max back to his boat to finish his chores. Max laid down on the deck, his head resting on his front paws. Just a few minutes later, John heard a pleasant female voice call out. He turned around and saw that it was Rachael.

"Excuse me," she said as she assertively boarded the boat. "I'm Rachael McFarland with Channel 2 News." She extended her hand to John as Max got up and trotted towards her, tail wagging. Recognizing John and looking down at Max, she said, "Oh ... I think we've met before ... well ... sort of, anyway."

Self-conscious about being so grungy and smelling of crab, John wiped his hand on his pants before reaching out to grasp hers. Rachael's skin felt soft and delicate, but her grip was

memorable. He immediately took in the scent of her sweet perfume as she stood close to him, and when she reached down to pet Max on the head, John took full advantage of the opportunity to study her closer. *Wow! She's hot.* Rachael thought John was a little hot, too.

“I’m John Crockett. This is Max. I’m really sorry about him interrupting your news report. He loves people. Sometimes his heart is bigger than his brain.”

Rachael laughed, “That’s quite alright. But I must admit ... it *was* an embarrassing moment.”

He began to ask her how he could be of help, but she interrupted him.

“We’re down here doing a story. Do you have a few minutes?” Before he could answer ... “I’d like to ask you some questions.”

To John, she seemed a bit forward. Fascinated by her elegance though, he wanted to hear what she had to say.

“What kind of story are you doing?”

“About life on Tangier Island.”

“Oh, one of those lifestyle numbers about us, eh? I don’t think I’m interested. The last time a reporter came down here, he made us look like a bunch of fools.” John knew it was too good to be true.

“Look, I just want to go out on a boat, get some shots and do some interviews.”

“Why me?”

“Do you want to be on television or not?” she said in a matter-of-fact way. “If not, I’ll just go ask someone else.” She acted like she was doing him some kind of favor or something. Irked by her cool, aloof demeanor, he thought, *what a bitch.*

Nonchalantly, he replied, “Suit yourself.”

“Fine! I will.”

Full of confidence, she turned and briskly walked away. *She'll be back*. It was obvious to John that she hadn't done her homework. The people of Tangier Island were an independent-minded bunch, and tight-lipped when it came to talking with mainlanders. These big-city TV stations had bamboozled them before. Being on television wasn't such a big deal to anyone on Tangier. Many of them didn't even own a TV. They tended to shy away from the spotlight.

Kneeling on the deck of his boat tying some ropes to the cleat in the aft, John had to laugh to himself. He watched with smug delight as Rachael went from captain to captain, each shaking their heads "No". She boarded Tangier's Song. Zachariah could be seen shaking his head before cracking a smile and pointing to John's boat. Humbled by rejection from practically every boat captain on the island, Rachael came back to John and tried a more polite approach. She looked desperate, her heart beating rapidly.

"Look, I'm sorry I was so brash before. Can I talk with you for a minute?"

John continued his chores, keeping his back to her. He liked the new, humble Rachael McFarland much better than the old.

"Okay. Climb aboard."

"I really need your help."

"How can I help you?"

"I need to get this story done. My producer's on my case."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"I need you to let me interview you, and help me convince some of the others to let me interview them, as well."

"I can only speak for myself, but I'm not interested."

Rachael turned on the charm. “I said I was sorry. You’re not going to make me beg, are you?”

John got up off his knees and turned around, walking towards her. She stood there with the most pathetic look on her face, causing him to smile just a little, as he felt a bit sorry for her.

“Okay, on one condition.”

“And that is?”

“That you get what you need and stay out of my way.”

Rachael nodded and smiled.

“Now, what do you need to know?”

“I’d like you to be the subject of my story.”

Smiling, he raised his right eyebrow. “Now wait a minute. I didn’t agree to that in this little deal we have.”

A boat passed leaving a strong wake. Rachael became unsteady on her feet, stumbling into John's arms. He caught her.

Looking up at him she said, “Please?”

The boat steadied. Slightly embarrassed, John let go of her when she regained her balance. He laughed, “So you want to make me a star?”

Smiling, she said, “Well, sort of.”

“Well ... start asking your questions. Let’s get this thing over with.”

Rachael invited her cameraman to board the boat, then she proceeded with her initial interview. She asked John about life on the bay and how the fishing industry has changed from previous times. John had difficulty concentrating on the questions, focusing instead on Rachael. After about fifteen minutes of questions, she finished.

“Well, that ought to wrap things up for today,” Rachael said.

“For today? You mean there’s more?”

Yes. I’d like to go out on your boat tomorrow for some action shots.”

“Listen, I don’t know if this is such a good idea.”

“Come on, John. I need the shots to make my story.”

“Yeah, but it’s dangerous out on the water.”

“I’ve done dangerous assignments before. It’s all part of my job. And I promise we’ll stay out of your way.”

John put his hands on his hips, deliberating, while looking down at his feet, then back at Rachael, nodding. “Be here tomorrow morning at five A.M. and not a minute later.”

Rachael looked surprised. “In the morning?”

“Yep ... A.M. would be in the morning.”

Relieved, Rachael said, “It’s a deal.”

As she walked down the dock, John’s eyes followed her. Actually, he looked forward to seeing her again.