

## CHAPTER 1

*I*n the promising light before sunrise, he gears up for the long swim, doing stretches and jogging on the sand where Long Beach meets the ocean. This is the day he turns eighteen and he's thinking about the challenges in his life and how nearly ten years have passed since the wreck.

The sun inflames the eastern horizon. He wades out, wearing only swim briefs and a swim cap and goggles, no wetsuit. He wants the shock of the chilly water, a form of intimacy with the ocean. He begins swimming straight out from shore — long-reaching strokes, deep steady breaths, climbing the swells and swooping down through the troughs, warmed by his internal fire. Roughly a half-mile out, he angles south, measuring his progress by landmarks along the shore that are barely visible now, mainly the top of the twenty-story Galaxy Towers. After a while, he pauses to scan the surface for any sharkfin, turns around and swims north. He guts it out for his goal, swimming four miles.

Back on shore, he puts on the Hawaiian shirt and walks

*up the bluff to the grassy park along Ocean Boulevard, overlooking the water. Resting on a park bench, he pulls out his phone and re-reads the email from the Montana State University football coach. It's an offer — a scholarship for a university education if he goes to Montana State and plays halfback for the football team. He's been strong running the ball for the Cabrillo High team, and six universities that need a halfback are interested in him. Montana State offers the most financial aid. He gazes at the water shimmering out to the horizon and stretches out his thoughts.*

*Playing hard to make the dead proud, ever since I lost my parents. Yeah, that's part of it.*

*Heading back to the house he shares with Aunt Cecie, he rides the 121 bus through the array of skyscrapers downtown, then the 191 bus inland, across the concrete-banked LA River. The views coarsen with industrial buildings and parking lots filled with cargo containers for the Port of Long Beach. In his short-of-money neighborhood, Upper Westside, as he walks the last blocks to the house, he kids around with a group of big Pacific Islanders who've played football with him over the years toughening up his game.*

*He knows Aunt Cecie will have her special apple cobbler ready for his birthday. She's letting him make the decision. He pauses on the front porch and sends an email accepting the Montana State offer. He'll sign the contract and have the official phone talk when the Montana State coach schedules it. He's thinking, guess I'll find out what winter is.*

## CHAPTER 2

They released him from Montana's Deer Lodge prison when they got tired of trying to break him. That's how it seemed to him. Two guards and a captain — good ol' boys but not the worst — opened the cell door after the morning count.

“Dawson Koloko, step out.”

He took his time obeying the command, a few seconds to make his point. Tossed his essentials into a paper bag and buddy-hugged his cellmate, Billy Redcherry, “Thanks for everything, Billy. I'll be in touch.”

He stepped out to the unit's hallway carrying the paper bag. The guards relocked the cell and walked him through the world of steel and concrete and shatterproof glass, past many White convicts who tracked him with their eyes. Some said versions of *good luck* and some yelled the standard racial slurs. A few flicked cigarettes that had been smuggled in, the embers hitting him like hot bullets.

Of course the prison bureaucracy required procedures

and paperwork, then the guards walked him all the way outside, where the wind riffled the Montana flag. He saw the whole sky crackling blue and the mountains shined by snow. He breathed the cold fresh air. The twenty-first of December — he'd remember this date. The lawyers were waiting for him by the flagpole. MaryAnn Meloy hugged him, with tears on her cheeks, and Langdon Burns gave him backslaps.

“The governor made it a big deal, announcing your pardon at his prayer breakfast,” Burns said. “Covering his ass with religion.”

Beyond the lawyers, a crowd had gathered — roughly a dozen journalists, and a few crusaders who held signs about reforming the system. Some of them wore masks even though the latest predatory virus was almost tamed. The journalists came at him with questions and cameras and microphones, and he gave them what they wanted, brief answers that were honest enough, until one said, “Now that your lawyers proved you didn't kill your girlfriend, who —”

“Nikki Fontaine,” he cut in. “That was her name.”

“Sure, Nikki Fontaine. Who do you think killed her?”

“Maybe the Montana cops will figure it out someday.”

He looked for Rose while he dealt with the questions. Wondering if she'd show up for for this. He spotted her standing by herself behind the crowd. Her hair was different now — blond, not black. She seemed further disguised by her long wool coat and large sunglasses. Most people

wouldn't recognize her as Nikki's identical twin.

Rose, he thought, maybe you haven't given up on me.

Burns leaned in with the Texas drawl and the tailored Western suit and the slim-brim cowboy hat, very much the hotshot reversing wrongful convictions across the country. "What we proved is, Montana's crime lab bungled the original evidence," Burns told the journalists. "Put this in your stories: At eighteen, Dawson lost five precious years along with his football scholarship and his chance to be drafted for pro football. Other convicts assaulted him repeatedly just because he's a Black man. He's limping on a bad leg where they stabbed him a while ago. He should be compensated for damages — meaning, money."

Burns enjoyed talking like that, the drawl and the poking of hornet's nests.

"What's your percentage, Burns?" somebody asked.

Burns ignored that question.

MaryAnn did the champagne toast, "Here's to justice!" — a joke. Her public-defender sense of humor. She flashed more of it with her Frosty Snowman sweater and the sassy purple streak in her hair. "Here's to *correcting* justice!"

"Dawson," another journalist asked, "are you heading back to California?"

"I'm heading any direction that looks good. Haven't done that in a while."

He watched Rose turn her back and walk away, the wind riffling her hair same as the flag. The crusaders took

over the press conference, talking about the system's bias against people of color. He went along with the lawyers, walking toward the parking lot. He saw Rose get into the driver's seat of a newish pickup truck. He walked toward her but she peeled away, her tires shrieking.

"Is that Rose?" MaryAnn said. "The blonde? If you haven't heard, along with brightening her hair, she's married to the sheriff now. Probably she still thinks you're a murderer."

"Hell," Burns said, "probably half of Montana still thinks you're a murderer. We shocked them out of their boots — but it's more difficult to change their minds."

## CHAPTER 3

He rode in the front passenger seat of MaryAnn's Volkswagen, a sleek all-wheel-drive with the heater vents blowing. Burns sprawled across the back seat and MaryAnn stomped the gas pedal. That Montana sport — driving fast on icy roads.

He watched the prison get smaller behind him. Waves of snowdrifts and evergreen forest stretched all around. He buzzed his window open to feel the wind that was faster and colder with the speed of the car. The colors were so intense his eyes almost hurt. The air smelled so fresh it almost choked him. That quickly, he was about to overdose on freedom. He buzzed his window closed, to protect himself, and heard Burns making a phone call about some Georgia case, Burns telling some assistant, "Book me a suite in the Atlanta Four Seasons for the week after New Year's."

"Dawson, there's good coffee in the thermos," MaryAnn said. "And cinnamon rolls in the bag. Your aunt

couldn't make the trip from Long Beach — she says have fun and call her when you can.”

MaryAnn understood that he needed to not talk. He thanked her and looked at more Montana scenery, the beautiful emptiness that could fill up a person. Some of the mountains were rounded off, kind of gentle, and some were jagged, looking like accidents. In the side-view mirror he saw vehicles behind them — a prison habit, looking around to see if anybody was a threat. Roughly seventy yards back, there was an older SUV, maybe a Chevy Suburban, that had only one daytime headlight shining. It made that SUV distinctive. When MaryAnn slowed going up a mountain pass, the one-eyed SUV slowed about the same, and when she increased her speed going down the pass, that SUV maintained the gap, as other vehicles passed them or dropped back or turned off. Maybe it meant nothing.

They went over another forested pass and down to a valley where subdivisions grew. The clutter increased and they came into Bozeman, the trendy town where he'd done his college football until the cops hit him with the bad rap. MaryAnn lived in Bozeman and Burns had become a part-time resident for pushing the appeal and squeezing money from the system.

Probably Rose still lived here too.

Some of his thoughts were too much to say out loud. Yeah I'm going to figure out who killed Nikki and framed me. And Rose, I need your help.



## CHAPTER 4

*F*lying from the LA airport to Bozeman to begin his college football adventure, it's his first time above the clouds. When he lands, he discovers a town of White people dressed for hiking. Bobcats — that's what they call the Montana State University team. The late-summer football practices begin on grass that's lush compared to Long Beach grass. One of the other Black recruits, cornerback Ka'Deem Adams, feels so out-of-place, Ka'Deem quits and goes home to Chicago. And right away, two Bobcats catch his attention. They're identical twin sisters on the cheerleader squad, often practicing beside the football team.

He asks around and learns, they're Nicole and Rosalette Fontaine, going by their nicknames, Nikki and Rose, same age as him but a year ahead in college. He sees Nikki and Rose are fellow athletes — they're small and slender but muscled, the flyers on the squad, getting flung around and held aloft by the beefy cheerleader guys. They spend hours practicing flips and other tumbling and balancing as if

*gravity doesn't apply to them. And they have an intense look with their blue eyes and straight black hair that whips as they make their moves. When they finish each practice, for fun they do easy cartwheels on the grass and strike a pose, arms spread — ta-daah! They're laughing, chitchatting and wisecracking. So they're only serious sometimes.*

*One restless night around 2 a.m. he's surprised to encounter the twin sisters as he walks from his dorm exploring the quieted campus. In a construction zone where campus streetlights are off, he hears whispering and laughter, and he walks through the darkness toward the sounds and makes out the twins hanging around a flagpole. They're barefoot, wearing gym shorts and t-shirts, despite the nighttime temperature drop. Their jackets and shoes are heaped on the sidewalk, out of the way.*

*"Nikki? Rose? It's me — Dawson Koloko."*

*They shush him, "Shhh!" He lowers his voice to whisper, "What are you twins doing out here in the dark? This late?"*

*They answer interrupting each other:*

*"Today's our birthday —"*

*"We always do something wild on our birthday —"*

*"We're going to climb this flagpole —"*

*"Vow of silence, Dawson!"*

*They wiggle their fingers at him, imitating spiders, and start climbing, opposite each other on the pole. Only their bare hands and feet touch the pole — they get traction with skin against the smooth metal as they race upward. He watches them become vaguer shapes blending with the dark*

sky. The pole seems about thirty feet tall with no flag at the top, probably somebody removed the flag because of the construction zone and lack of lighting. He gets ready in case they slip, he might be able to slow their falling. Right.

Then he can see them descending and hears the squeaking of skin against metal. "Give us space," one says and she releases from the pole to land in a barefoot crouch on the concrete. Then the other one lands. In the darkness he can see their grins, their teeth glowing white.

"Vow of silence," one of them says again.

"You never saw us here," says the other.

And they run off.

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About twelve hours later, during the afternoon practice, one of them approaches him as he takes a water break. In the daylight he can see her much better. Her eyes are even darker blue the closer she gets. She gives him a little poke in the arm. "Thanks," she says.

"For what?"

"Keeping the flagpole stunt our secret. You've got some grit yourself, Dawson. And that's a nice smile on your face."

She's poised, inches from him, looking up into his eyes, in her sports bra and gray-and-blue gym shorts, maybe not the 2 a.m. shorts. Sweat gleams on her skin and dampens her hair. The elastic wraps on her wrists emphasize her muscles. The flecks on her are fragments of grass. "Are you Nikki or Rose?" he asks, even though he thinks he knows.

"Nikki."

*“OK Nikki. When you added that twist to your backflip a few minutes ago, and you kept wiping out, I thought you might hurt yourself or give up. Then you landed it, cool.”*

*She smiles too, and shrugs, “It’s who we are.”*

*He sees the sharpness of her face, her lips finely edged. He’s been around many tight-bodied attractive cheerleaders, and he tells himself, it’s not her looks, her spirit is what’s zinging me. Sure. Since last night, he’s been wondering. “How come you twins go wild on your birthday?”*

*She hesitates as if she’s deciding whether to trust him for this too. “Rose and I have an unusual family story,” she says. “Our mother died giving birth to us. ... So we honor our mother on our birthday by doing risky stuff, like climbing flagpoles.” She pokes him again. “We don’t talk about it, don’t want to burden anybody with it.”*

*He fills a paper cup from the water jug, rinses his mouth, spits the rinse to the side, and sips slowly while she waits for a response. He’s aware his own t-shirt is soaked with his sweat, wondering how he appears to her. “Both my parents died when I was eight,” he tells her. “They were on their motorcycle, caught in a crash of many vehicles, not their fault. I got into football then, it was good for me.”*

*She’s looking at him differently now.*

*He keeps it casual, “Nikki, we could go out after practice. Rose can come too, if that would make it less risky.”*

*“Just you and me,” she says. “One date. Our tryout.”*