



MAD MOUSE

A JOHN CEEPAK MYSTERY

CHRIS
GRABENSTEIN

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This one's for my mom & dad.
She always knew I could do it.
He would've loved seeing you read it.

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Thank You

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Then I think of those three pennies I lost that night we played "Left, Right, Center" with Dave's green dice.

I demand a rematch.

CHAPTER ONE

August 30th is National Toasted Marshmallow Day, so, naturally, we're celebrating.

Sure there's some debate: Is National Toasted Marshmallow Day August 14th or August 30th? We go with the 30th because it's closer to Labor Day. Besides, if you dig a little deeper, you'll discover that August 14th is also National Creamsicle Day, and we firmly believe Creamsicles deserve their own separate day of national recognition.

Five of my longtime buds and I are driving out to Tangerine Beach. Here in Sea Haven, New Jersey, the beaches get named after the streets they're closest to. On the way, we pass Buccaneer Bob's Bagels, Sea Shanty Shoes, and Moby Moo's Ice Cream Cove. In case you can't tell by the waterlogged names, this is your basic down-the-shore resort town: We live for July and August because our visitors go home in September and take their wallets with them.

I'm a part-time summer cop with the Sea Haven Police. That means I wear a navy blue cop cap and help elderly pedestrians navigate the crosswalks. This year I might go full time when summer's over, which is, basically, next week. They usually offer one part-timer a job at the end of the season. The chief gets to pick. We have a new one. We'll see. Anyhow, I put in my application.

Riding up front with me, twiddling her sparkly toes on the dashboard, is Katie Landry. She's a friend who I hope will soon become a "friend." Like the Molson billboard says: "Friends come over for dinner. *Friends* stay for breakfast." So far, Katie and me? We're just doing takeout. Mostly Burger King or Quiznos.

In the second row are Jess Garrett and Olivia Chibbs—a sleepy-eyed surfer dude and an African American beauty queen slash brainiac. Jess and Olivia are already buttering toast and squeezing orange juice together. She comes home from college every summer to make money to cover the stuff her med school scholarships don't. Jess lives here full time. He paints houses when he's not busy goofing off.

Then there's Becca Adkinson and Harley Mook. Becca's folks run the Mussel Beach Motel, she helps. Mook (we all call him Mook) is short and tubby and loud. He's in the wayback, popping open a bag of Cheetos like it's a balloon. He's just in town for a week or two, which is fine. You can only take so much Mook. He's in grad school, working on his MBA.

According to Jess, that means "Me Big Asshole."

"Hey, Danny ..." Mook hollers. "What's the biggest crime down here these days? Taffy snatching. Overinflated volleyballs?"

Mook's not funny but he's right: People typically come to our eighteen-mile strip of sand for old-fashioned fun in the sun. It's not the South Bronx. It's not even Newark. But Sea Haven *is* where I saw my first bullet-riddled body sprawled out on a Tilt-A-Whirl over at Sunnyside Playland. I remember that morning. It wasn't much fun.

"Traffic!" Becca says. "That's the worst!"

I'm driving because my current vehicle is a minivan with plenty of room for beer and gear. I bought the van "preowned," my mother being the previous owner. She sold it to me when she and my dad moved out to Arizona. It's a dry heat.

I'd say half the vehicles in front of me are also minivans, all loaded down with beach stuff. Bikes, racks off the backs, cargo carriers up top. You can't see inside anybody's rear windows because the folding chairs and inflatable hippopotami are stacked too high. I have plenty of time to make the observations because our main drag, Ocean Avenue, is currently a four-lane parking lot.

"Take Kipper!" This from Mook. Now he's chugging out of a two-liter bottle of grape soda.

"Hello? He can't," says Becca. She points to the big No Left Turn sign.

~~"Chill, okay?" Katie teaches kindergarten so she knows how to talk to guys like Mook.~~

"For the love of God, man, take Kipper!" Now Mook's kneeling on the floor, begging me to hang

Louie. For the first time all day, he's actually kind of funny, so I go ahead and make the illegal left.

Oh—the streets in this part of town? They're named after fish. In alphabetical order. Only the
couldn't find a fish that starts with a Q so Red Snapper comes right after Prawn.

As soon as I make the turn, a cop steps into the street and raises his palm.

And, of course, it's my partner. John Ceepak. He signals for me to pull over.

There's another cop with him. Buzz Baines. Our brand-new chief of police. Some people thought
Ceepak should've taken the top job after what happened here in July. Ceepak wasn't one of them.

I'm not sure if Buzz is Baines's real name or if it's just what everybody calls him because he's real
an Arnold or a Clarence or something. Anyhow, Buzz is the guy I hope will give me a full-time job
next Tuesday. Today he's going to give me a ticket.

"Danny?" Ceepak is startled to see me behaving in such a criminal fashion.

"Hey."

Ceepak is a cop 24/7. He's 6'2" and a former MP. He still does jumping jacks and pushups—what he
calls PT—every morning, like he's still in the army. He also has this code he lives by: "I will not lie,
cheat or steal nor tolerate those who do." An illegal left turn? That's cheating. No question, I'm busted.

"Hey, Ceepak!" Becca sticks her head over my shoulder. She loves his muscles. Maybe this is why
Becca and I don't date anymore: Where Ceepak's beefcake, I'm kind of angel food.

"Who we got here, John?" Baines hasn't recognized me yet.

"Auxiliary Officer Boyle."

I hear Becca sigh. Ceepak? He's handsome. Buzz Baines? He's handsomer, if that's a word. Sort of
like a TV anchorman. You know what I mean, chiseled features with a lantern jaw and this little
mustache over a toothpaste-commercial smile.

"Of course. Boyle. You and John cracked the Tilt-A-Whirl case."

"Roger that," says Ceepak. "Officer Boyle played a vital role in that investigation."

"Keep up the good work." Chief Baines winks at me. "And don't break any more laws."

"Yes, sir."

"Call me Buzz."

"Yes, sir. Buzz."

I hear Ceepak rip a citation sheet off his pad. It's all filled in.

"You're writing him up?" Baines asks.

"Yes, sir. The law is the law. It should be applied fairly, without fear or favoritism."

Baines nods.

"John, when you're right, you're right. Sorry, Danny. If you need help with the fifty bucks, come see
me. We'll work out a payment schedule."

"Drive safely," says Ceepak.

"Right. See you tomorrow."

"No. Thursday's my day off."

"Oh, yeah. Mine, too."

Ceepak eyes our beer coolers. Marshmallows aren't the only things that get toasted at our annual
beach party.

"Then have a cold one for me, partner."

"Roger that."

"But pace yourself. It takes a full hour for the effect of each beer to dissipate."

"Right. See you Friday."

“That'll work.” Ceepak smiles. No hard feelings. He even snaps me a crisp “catch you later” salute

I pull away from the curb, real, real slow. I can't see any signs but I assume 10 m.p.h. is below the posted speed limit.

I can't afford two fifty-dollar tickets in one day.

The late-night guy on the radio is saluting “The Summer of '96,” reminding us what idiots we were back then.

“Tickle Me Elmo was under every Christmas tree and Boyz II Men were climbing the charts with Mariah Carey...”

Great.

He's going to make us listen to her warble like a bird that just sucked helium.

It's almost midnight. We're the only ones on the beach. Most of the houses beyond the dunes are dark because they're rented to families with kids who wake up at six A.M., watch a couple of cartoons, and are ready for their water wings and boogie boards around six fifteen. The parents need to go to bed early. They probably also need vodka.

I like the beach at night. The black sky blends in with the black ocean and the only way to tell the two apart is to remember that the one on top has the stars and the one below has the white lines of foam that look like soap suds leaking out from underneath a laundry room door.

Katie's sitting with the other girls around our tiny campfire, smooshing marshmallows and gooey Hershey bars between graham crackers. I bet she's the kind of kindergarten teacher who'd let you have s'mores in class on your birthday. She's that sweet, even though she grew up faster than any of us. Her parents died eight or nine years ago. Car wreck.

I need another beer.

I slog up the sand to the cooler. Mook and Jess are hanging there, probably talking baseball, about the only thing they still have in common. Mook wears this floppy old-man bucket hat he thinks makes him look cool. He has one hand jammed in the pocket of his shorts, the other wrapped around a long-neck bottle of Bud, his thumb acting like a bottle cap. The world is his frat house.

“Hey, Danny ...” Mook shakes the Bud bottle. “Think fast.”

He lifts his thumb and sprays me with beer. Now it looks like I just pissed my pants.

Mook's belly jiggles like a Jell-O shot, he's laughing so hard.

“Jesus, Mook.” Jess says it for me.

I forgot about Mook's classic spray-you-in-the-crotch gag. One of his favorites. He also used to buy plastic dog poop at the Joke Joint on the boardwalk and stuff it in your hamburger bun when you weren't looking.

“Very mature, Mook.” I wipe off my shorts.

“You're not going to arrest me, are you, Detective Danny?”

“No. I'll let you off with a warning. This time.”

“You want a beer, Danny?” Jess fishes a long-neck out of the watery ice.

I check my watch.

“What's with the watch?” Mook saw me. “You're actually waiting an hour between brewskis? What a weenie! Your cop pal is a hardass. And that haircut! Who does he think he is? GI Joe?”

If Mook knew Ceepak like I do he'd realize: GI Joe probably plays with a Ceepak Action Figure. The guy's that good. I shake my head, ignore Mook, and mosey away with my beer.

Becca, Olivia, and Katie are sitting in short beach chairs, the kind that put your butt about two inches above the sand. I plop down with them.

“Someone please remind me why we hang out with Mook,” I say.

Becca shrugs. “Because we always have?”

I guess that nails it.

~~On the radio, the deejay's yammering about "Sea Haven's gigantic Labor Day Beach Party and Boogaloo BBQ. MTV will be broadcasting live. So will we..."~~

They've been hyping this Labor Day deal all month. Come Monday, the beach will be so crowded you'll be lucky to find enough sand to spread out a hand towel, maybe a washcloth.

"Here's another hot hit from the sizzling summer of '96!"

The radio throbs with "C'mon 'N Ride It (The Train)"—a bass-thumping dance tune from the Queens City DJs, the same people who gave the world "Whoot, There It Is." The choo-choo song was big in 1996, the summer The Marshmallow Crew first got together and somebody said, "You know what we should do this again next summer!"

"Hey, let's dance!" Katie pops up, like she's ready to teach us all the hokey-pokey—the adults-only version.

The girls fling off flip-flops, kick up sand. Becca cranks up the volume on the radio, shimmies her blond hair like she's in a shampoo commercial. I attempt to get my groove thing going. Basically, when I dance, I stand still and sway my hips back and forth. Tonight, I also "move my arm up and down" as the singer suggests. Lyrics like that are extremely helpful for those of us who are dance-impaired.

"Hey, isn't dancing on the beach against the law?" Mook brays like an annoying ass. Actually, the herky-jerky moves he is currently making should be ruled illegal. "You gonna haul us off to jail, Danny? Get your picture in the paper again?"

Ceepak and I got some press back in July. The wire services and magazines picked up the Tilt-A-Whirl story. I was semifamous for about a week. On top of being obnoxious, Mook sounds jealous.

Fortunately, any thoughts of Harley Mook drift away when Katie sashays over to dance with me instead of the whole group. She opens up her arms, swings her hips, invites me to move closer.

Then I hear these pops.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Like someone stomping on Dixie cups up on the street.

I'm hit.

My chest explodes in a big splotch of fluorescent yellow.

Katie's hands drop down and fly behind her. She must be hit, too.

Pop!

A paintball hits the radio and sends it backwards. The batteries tumble out. The music dies.

Pop! Snap! Pop!

We're all hit—splattered with this eerie yellow-green paint that shines like a cracked glow stick. My sternum stings where the paintball whacked me.

"Danny?" It's Becca. She sounds hurt. "Danny?"

She sinks to her knees and brings a hand up to cover her eye.

It's fluorescent yellow and red.

The paint is mixing with her blood.

CHAPTER TWO

Call nine-one-one," I yell. "We need an ambulance."

Jess is on it. He whips out his cell phone while I check out Becca.

"Danny?"

She has her hand cupped over her eye. Blood trickles down her cheek, streaking through cake paint.

"It hurts."

"I know ..."

"Motherfucking kids." Mook's right but not much help.

"Grab some ice, Mook."

"Danny—you're the cop. Go catch the little fuckers!"

"Go grab some ice," I say again.

"I'll get it," says Katie. She's keeping cool, like she must when one of her kids topples off the monkey bars.

"We need to cover the eye socket." Olivia takes a tiny penlight out of her purse to examine Becca's eye. "It's a blunt trauma injury."

"Is my eyeball bleeding?"

"You're going to be okay," answers Olivia. "Danny? We need to tape a protective cover over her eye to prevent further damage. Cut off the bottom of a plastic cup ..."

"What about tape?" I ask.

"Don't need it."

I hear a rip.

Olivia is tearing some strips off her T-shirt.

Becca is rocking slightly to punch through the pain.

She shivers. I grab Jess's beach towel and drape it over her shoulders like a cape—a cape with a gigantic red-and-blue Budman plastered on it, the superhero of beer drinkers everywhere.

Katie returns from the cooler. "Here's some ice."

"Danny? I need that cup," Olivia says while she picks crud off Becca's cheek.

I race up to the cooler where we have a stack of Solo cups.

"The EMS guys are on the way," Jess says and closes his phone.

"Hey, Jess?" I shout.

"Yeah?"

"You and Mook head up to the street. Flag down the ambulance."

"Right."

"You should go after those fucking kids who did this!" Mook screams at me. His floppy hat is glowing. They tagged him with a headshot.

"Come on!" Jess gives Mook a shove and they run as best as they can with feet slip-sliding on sand.

"Here you go." I've managed to tear the cup bottom away from the sides pretty neatly, if I do say so myself.

"Owww."

Olivia spreads Becca's eye open, spotlights it, checks for debris. The eyeball's iris is purple on the bottom.

Olivia places my plastic circle over the injured eye like a pirate's eye patch. Katie hands her a strip of fabric and she ties a knot behind Becca's head.

I look at my friends and realize we look pretty ridiculous, like we've got some kind of glowing yellow-green skin rash—the Neon Plague.

...

Jess meets the rescue squad ambulance up on the street. He sends the paramedics down to the beach to go get Becca.

“Where's Mook?” I ask.

“Off chasing the bad guys.”

“You saw who did it?”

“No. Mook just ran up the road screaming, ‘Come back, you motherfuckers.’ ”

“Yeah. That usually works.”

“What seems to be the problem, fellas?” This bald guy stands in a driveway near the ambulance. He's what cops call a looky-lou—wants to take a look at whatever brought swirling roof lights to his street at twelve fifteen A.M. “Is somebody hurt?”

“Minor beach accident,” I say.

“Friend of yours?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, try to keep down the noise.” The guy is probably fortysome-thing. Balding. He's wearing a T-shirt, shorts, and sandals. With socks. He's one of those dads who have to wake up in five or six hours when his kids start heaving Cheerios at each other. He shuffles back toward his rented beach house. “Some people are trying to sleep around here!”

Yes, and other people are trying not to go blind.

Jess and I hurry back down to the beach.

Becca lies down on the stretcher. The two burly guys from the rescue squad get ready to carry her away.

“I feel like Cleopatra.” She notices the one paramedic's muscles. “What's your name?” she asks, half sitting up.

“Becca?” says Katie. “Down, girl.”

The patient obeys. Olivia takes one hand. Katie grabs the other.

“And don't touch your eye,” says Olivia.

“It hurts,” Becca moans.

“I know, honey.”

“You're going to be okay,” Katie says. “Okay?”

“Yeah. Happy Toasted Marshmallow Day, everybody.”

“Should we go find Mook?” I ask Jess.

“Fuck Mook,” he replies.

“Better you than me,” Becca groans. We all trudge slowly up the sand to the sea grass and the dunes and the pressure-treated boards that lead down to the dead end of Tangerine Street.

“Danny?”

It's Ceepak. He climbs off his eighteen-speed trail bike.

“I heard the call come in. Heard Becca's name.”

“Hi, Ceepak.” Becca sounds woozier.

Ceepak has a police scanner in his apartment. It's his favorite form of entertainment when he's not watching *Forensic Files* or listening to Bruce Springsteen CDs.

“Is she badly injured?” he asks.

“Eye trauma,” Olivia says. “Possible hyphema.”

Ceepak nods. "You noted a reservoir of blood in the anterior chamber?"

Olivia nods back.

"She needs to see an ophthalmologist. Stat."

Ceepak turns to the paramedics who have just secured Becca inside the back of their box ambulance.

"Guys? Light 'em up."

"Will do, Ceepak," says the muscle man. I think everybody in town who wears any kind of uniform or badge has heard about Ceepak. Knows he's a standup guy.

Ceepak gives them one of his famous two-finger salutes. "Appreciate it."

The paramedics hop in, spin their flashers, and race away.

I dig into my shorts for the van keys.

"We should follow."

A cop car crawls down Tangerine Street. No lights. No siren. Just the soft crunch of seashells under tires.

"Danny," says Olivia, "maybe you should stay here. Tell the police what happened."

"Yeah." I turn to Jess. "You good to drive?"

"Yeah." Jess never gets plotzed. Besides, the paintball incident was pretty sobering. I toss him the keys. They all hop into my van and take off after the ambulance. Ceepak and I will hang here because we speak Cop.

Well, Ceepak speaks it better than me, but I want to make sure we nail whoever the hell did this to my friends.

CHAPTER THREE

Probably juveniles,” Chief Baines says after taking a quick survey of the crime scene.

Everybody has a flashlight swinging around except me. The beach looks like it's hosting some kind of sand crab movie premiere.

“Punks with paintball pistols,” Sergeant Dominic Santucci shares his opinion.

“More likely a rifle,” says Ceepak.

“Because of the range?” asks Baines.

“Roger that. We can assume the shooter or shooters were positioned up there.” He points to the road. “They knew no one would hear them approach.” He points to the paint-spattered boom box lying dead in the sand. “The music was turned up to full volume.” Now he indicates the footprints circling the charred remnants of our campfire. “Danny and his friends were oblivious to any intrusion because they were busy dancing.” I haven't told Ceepak what we were doing. He can see it all in the sand.

Baines smiles. “Good work. I like the way you read a crime scene, John.”

I still can't believe the new chief is the one who caught this call. Apparently, he was riding along with Santucci on a routine night patrol as part of his “orientation process” when the ambulance call went out.

“Who do we like for this?” Baines asks Santucci.

“Well, there are these punks who hang out on the boardwalk. You know: tattoos, skateboards. Weird haircuts.”

Santucci isn't much of a profiler. He's just described half the guys who cruise up and down the boardwalk all summer long.

“There's a paintball place on the boardwalk,” I offer. “They might have a few names for us.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Baines thinks a minute. “The girl injured badly?”

“Blunt-force impact,” Ceepak says. “Possible hyphema.”

The new chief nods and thinks some more.

“Okay. Here's how we need to play this thing. Quiet. Almost like it didn't happen.” Baines flashes his Ultrabrite smile my way when he sees my jaw drop. “Take it easy, son. We'll catch the bad guy. But summer's officially over in five days. We don't want or need any more headlines, not this year. So we all do our jobs, but—we keep it quiet.”

Baines is probably right. No need to stir up another panic. In the few weeks he's been in town, he's done a pretty incredible job of restoring faith in the local forces of law and order. Most folks, especially the visitors, have already forgotten what happened here back in July. I think that's why the town fathers hired Baines: He looks and sounds like he should be on TV telling you the truth, the handsome hunk sitting in the anchor chair. It's also why, from what I've heard, they're paying him a small fortune.

“Sergeant Santucci's theory is most likely correct,” Baines continues. “I suspect we're dealing with some bored kids who think they're being funny.”

Santucci points at my Hawaiian shirt. It looks like the flowers have exploded with neon-colored pollen.

“You got to admit, it *is* kind of funny.” He snaps his gum, does his donkey laugh. “Especially on Boyle there.”

Santucci has been busting my chops all summer long. If I go full time with the force, he can torment me daily, seven-to-seven, the whole twelve-hour shift. Longer if I pull any overtime.

“Chief?” says Ceepak. “We could look into this tomorrow. Both Auxiliary Officer Boyle and I have

the day off. Might prove a valuable field training exercise. Help our minds stay active, help us keep our investigative techniques sharp.”

Baines nods. “But you'll keep it on the q.t.?”

“Right.”

Baines puts his hands on his hips and sniffs in some salty air.

“You sure you guys don't mind? Working on your day off?”

“I look forward to it, sir,” says Ceepak. “I welcome the challenge.”

I nod. “Me, too, sir.”

“Fantastic. Here's how we play it: Ceepak and Boyle investigate. Meanwhile, we alert all units to be on the lookout. We see a bunch of kids crammed in a car looking like they're looking for trouble, we pull them over.”

“That'll work,” Ceepak says. “Provided, of course, we have probable cause.”

“Oh, we always have probable cause,” Santucci sneers, like he thinks the whole Bill of Rights is a lousy idea dreamed up by a bunch of dead guys with their faces on coins.

“I look forward to hearing what you two dig up,” Baines says to Ceepak. “Might help me decide which summer cop to hire next week.” Now the chief gives me this meaningful glance.

Great.

The Case of the Perilous Paintballs is going to be my final exam, the homework assignment I need to ace to win full-time employment with the Sea Haven Police Department.

If we don't crack this case by Labor Day, I may have to find a job pushing carts around the parking lot at Wal-Mart.

CHAPTER FOUR

Everyone's gone, and I'm dancing on the beach again.

Well, not quite everyone. Ceepak's still here.

I'm doing a solo number without any music to show him my approximate location during the paintball bombardment. The campfire's long gone and he's shining his Maglite on me.

"I was here ..."

"Facing the street."

"Right. Katie was facing me. She took a hit in her ... you know."

I don't want to say "ass" or "butt."

"Her gluteus maximus." Ceepak helps out. He looks up toward the beachfront homes on the far side of the dunes. "The shots were probably fired from the street. Or off one of those balconies."

I look to the left and right of our entrance to the beach. There are three or four houses on either side. Modern jobs. All windows and right angles. They look like vinyl-sided shoe boxes stacked on top of each other, and, since this is beachfront property, every level has its own balcony or sun deck. Some of the houses even have widow's walks—a platform up on top of the roof. I think they call it that because that's where the widows of ship captains used to hang out and hope their husbands weren't really dead. Probably cursed god and the ocean some while they were up there, too. The higher elevation made it easier to scream at heaven.

"Danny? Focus."

"Right."

When I drift off like that, Ceepak usually reels me back in.

"Where was your radio located?"

"There." I point to the trash barrel. "Propped on top."

He takes one more look at the boom box lying in the sand on the ocean side of the trash barrel.

"Confirming that the shots came from the west."

"From one of those balconies?" Ceepak crouches.

"I don't believe so. You say the paintball smacked you square in the chest."

"Like somebody heaved a medicine ball at me."

"I'd like to do a more comprehensive trajectory analysis, but judging from your impressions of the incident and the position of the radio, I'd say the shooter operated at street level. Perhaps firing from a car window."

Ceepak stands. His face, as usual, doesn't say much, but I think he's relieved we're not dealing with some kind of rifleman up on a rooftop. He saw enough of those back in what the soldiers all call Bagdad nasty-dad. Snipers, mostly. Ceepak went in with the first wave, the guys hunting for the weapons of mass destruction nobody ever found because they never actually existed. Later, he was in this convo that was almost blown up by one of those roadside bombs the locals like to hide inside everything from rusty oil drums to tricycle tubing. When the bomb blew, Ceepak's Humvee gunner went ballistic. Did some horrible stuff to several civilians. I think that's when Ceepak decided to rotate stateside when his tour and bounce-backs ended. Decided he'd pack up his medals and say so long to the army, which, up to that point, had been his whole life.

I hear him suck in some night air.

The way Ceepak squints up at those balconies and widow's walks? I know he's seeing bad guys with rocket-propelled grenades and AK-47s. He lost a lot of buddies back in the "sandbox." Every now and then, he talks about it.

Every now and then.

“Come on,” he says. ~~We start working our way up the sand. “The midnight gang’s assembled and~~ picked a rendezvous for the night.”

Now he’s mumbling Springsteen lyrics. It’s one of Ceepak’s auto-focusing techniques. He remembers every song the Boss ever wrote—even ones Bruce has probably forgotten.

“They’ll meet ‘neath that giant Exxon sign that brings this fair city light.”

This one’s a classic. “Jungleland.” But I don’t see any Exxon sign. The only light is off in the distance, about a half block up Tangerine. One of those orange-ish street lamps, its hazy beacon over a dance club for the big flappy bugs that only come out at night.

We reach the dunes and seagrass. Ceepak crouches in front of a bench made from pressure-treated two-by-eights. It faces the ocean right where the beach ends and the rolled-out dune fencing starts. Nothing special. Just a place to sit and shake sand out of your shoes.

“See something?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Too many footprints.”

Ceepak stands up and dusts some sand off his pants.

People stop here to put on their sneakers or flip-flops or whatever before walking down to the street. You walk barefooted on hot asphalt in August, your feet are going to talk to you about it. Ceepak realizes it’s such a high-traffic zone there’s no way we’re going to pick up any usable footprints or clues.

“We need to talk to some people.” He nods at the dark houses. “Find out if anybody saw or heard anything besides your music.”

“Right.” We had the radio blaring pretty loud, especially during the dance number. Mook was sending up his own personal noise pollution long before that. I’m sure some of the neighbors would give me an earful if they knew it was *my* Toasted Marshmallow Day party that disturbed their peace.

We crest the dune and walk down the short stretch of planks to the street. Ceepak hunkers down again. I do the same thing. Sometimes, it’s like we play Simon Says.

He pulls a magnifying glass out of one of the pockets in his cargo pants. All I have in my shorts is a beer-bottle opener.

“Same story here.”

“Tire tracks?”

“Dozens,” he says.

He points to the sweeping arcs of tread marks and I see what he sees: Car after car drove down the dead-end street, dropped off the kids, unloaded all the beach stuff—much of which also had wheels—little red wagons, rolling ice chests, beach carts. We’ve got tire tracks on top of tire tracks.

“Nothing.” Ceepak bites his lip, shakes his head. TMI. Too Much Information. Nothing stands out. It all blends in.

“I don’t believe paintball weapons expel shell casings.” Ceepak pulls out a notepad and jots something down. “I believe they act more like a cannon, propelling the ball out of the chamber. The ball stays intact until it strikes its target.”

“Yeah.” As one of the targets, I know how it strikes. I also know how it hurts.

“I need to do some research. But first, we need to knock on a few doors.”

It’s almost one A.M. I’m sure the neighbors are going to *love* us.

“What about the q.t.?” I ask.

“Come again?”

“You know. The chief told us to keep this thing quiet. If we start asking questions, people will

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