The Tiger in the House

Chapter 1

Jen and Richard ate dinner at the seafood place over in South Portland that their daughter raved about all the time. And it was as good as expected. She had the lobster roll and Rich had a mountain of fish and chips. It was the sort of place where you go in and order, pay, and then they give you a number, like Hannaford’s grocery store where the deli crew takes your order.

The best part was the picnic table behind the seafood shack overlooking the ocean. Jen imagined how the meal would have gone if they were twenty-five years younger and still had the relentless yearning for each other, or if Rich could think of anything to say at all, even that. They ate mostly in silence. Jen liked it better when they were in the active years of parenting, working as a team, laughing so much.

When they were done eating, they each slid into the Chevy Silverado pickup and buckled up. Rich turned to her and said, “Let’s take the long way home, over where they’re selling off the big Johnson farm.” Okay, that felt good. She slipped in a CD of early Bruce Springsteen and grew a little younger, rolled her window down, and tapped her fingers along the side view mirror. They sailed past sea grass and red-winged blackbirds perched on top of cattails. The houses grew smaller, more like the old days, less monstrously rich. Jen nudged her sandals off and wiggled her toes.

It was the end of August and the hint of lengthening nights announced itself already at eight o’clock.

“Look up there,” said Rich, taking his foot off the gas and reaching over to turn down Bruce Springsteen.

A cloud slid over the low-hanging sun. Up ahead, there was a small child in the road, thumb in mouth. The road had turned to gravel a few miles back and they crept along. The gravel sounded like Styrofoam balls crunching beneath the large truck wheels.

The child wore white shorts. There wasn’t another car parked along the road, no houses, just a bulldozer that had torn into the earth, making way for a new foundation.

Jen pulled her hand into the truck, getting ready for something. She slipped her sandals back on. The truck would be terrifyingly large to a child.

They pulled up close to the child, who was sucking her thumb. Jen was a small woman and she knew how to talk to kids, and she wouldn’t be as frightening as a man or a truck.

The child was a girl with soft brown hair. The white shorts were actually underwear; she wore white underpants and a T-shirt with a faded Disney princess. Jen wasn’t sure which princess it was.

She tried to think of something nonthreatening to say that wouldn’t alarm the child. The girl looked to be about five.

“Hey there,” said Jen, six feet away. The child was barefoot. “My name is Jen. Can you show me where your mommy and daddy are?”

Jen took two more steps to the child and pointed back at the truck. “That’s my husband, Rich.” She stopped in front of the child and squatted down to be eye level with her.

The girl had been crying; her face was covered with dust, and the tears left two stripes along her cheeks.

“I’d like to help you find your family,” said Jen. What was that along the kid’s arm and neck? Jen stopped breathing. It was blood.

“Sweetie, are you hurt?”

The thumb stayed firmly in the girl’s mouth. Jen forced a smile.

“Everything is going to be okay. You wait right here.”

She turned at the sound of the truck door closing. “I’ve already made the call,” Rich said, sliding a cell phone into the front pocket of his jeans.

He had a Windbreaker in his hands. “Here, put this on her.”