

HUNGRY
MOTHER
CREEK



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HEATHER W. COBHAM

Hungry Mother Creek

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*This book is dedicated to my women's circle,
with my deepest respect and all my love.*



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PROLOGUE

FRIDAY AUGUST 26, 2005, BAY ST. LOUIS, MISSISSIPPI

Maya pressed the accelerator a little harder and raced home to catch Steven before he left for his guy's weekend. After talking with her co-workers, Maya felt they should be taking this storm more seriously. Several of the women who worked with her in the medical records department were heading out tonight. They were going to stay with friends or family who lived out of the direct path like in Houston, Shreveport and Tallahassee. Her sister Kate in Raleigh was begging her to leave first thing in the morning to come to North Carolina. She had called her three times already today.

Maya lifted her left leg to push in the clutch and shift into fifth gear. She could feel her slip sticking to her, courtesy of the Gulf Coast humidity so she pulled her skirt and slip up around her knees to cool off. Maya occasionally wore skirts to work because it was cooler than pants, but outside of work she lived in her running shorts and sneakers. She was an avid runner which kept her fit, and looking younger than her 37 years, but the primary purpose of her runs was to provide an escape from Steven's unpredictable moods.

The wind from the open car windows blew Maya's shoulder length brown hair into a crazy swirl. She grabbed it with one hand and twirled it around her fingers as she drove down Drinkwater Boulevard, beautiful

historic homes off to her left. Maya remembered the first time she came to Bay St. Louis to see Steven. It was a month after she had met him on vacation in Key West and she'd been thrilled that their long distance telephone relationship had culminated in an invitation for her to visit. Steven had the long weekend perfectly planned with a picnic lunch on the beach by the Gulf, dinner in a historic café, dancing and gambling at a casino in Gulfport. Steven was spontaneous and self confident and when she was with him, Maya felt alive and in the moment. No one had ever made her feel as special as he did that weekend, and she hadn't wanted that feeling to end. It didn't at the beginning of their marriage, but over the last couple years things had changed as Steven pulled away emotionally and his focus turned towards his friends and partying. Maya kept the hope alive that the Steven she had fallen in love with was still within reach. Occasionally her hope was rewarded with an evening where he once again made her feel special. They would cook dinner at home and talk about their frustrations and dreams. A couple of times they even talked about starting a family with both of them declaring they would be different from their own parents, more loving, more attentive. Maya wondered if these infrequent times when they connected emotionally and physically should be enough. She had watched her parents lead mostly separate lives, coming together only occasionally for some event she or Kate had or when it was a mandatory family gathering such as Thanksgiving dinner or Christmas morning. Growing up, she and Kate had always said they would never have a marriage like that, and Kate had been able to create a much happier marriage, but why hadn't she?

Maya turned down St. George Street toward the yellow bungalow she and Steven had rented since they married six years ago. Her heart pounded in anticipation of either confronting Steven and asking him to stay home for the weekend or finding him already gone, leaving her and Doodle Bug to fend for themselves. Their house came into view and Steven's car was still in the driveway. Maya pulled in beside him, leapt out of her Saturn and bolted towards the house. She pushed the screen door open and almost tripped over Doodle Bug, her two-year-old yellow lab, wagging and waiting for a greeting. Maya scratched her behind the ears and then hurried back to the bedroom.

She hoped he hadn't starting drinking yet and screwed up her courage to face him. Steven was standing by their bed with his back to her, folding several shirts to take with him. His physical presence always unnerved her. He was tall with broad shoulders that tapered down to a trim waist, although that waist had softened in the last year with more time spent in bars than at the gym. Steven, sensing her presence, turned and as his green eyes locked into hers, she felt her stomach tighten and she took a breath.

"Steven, haven't you watched the news today? You can't go to New Orleans for a guy's weekend now. One of the largest hurricanes we've ever had is heading our way and everyone at work is evacuating."

"My God, Maya, why are you even listening to those women at work? There's no way I'm going to miss out on this trip because of a warning for a hurricane that won't even happen. When I was a kid we wasted money on gas and hotels and would come home to only a few branches down in the yard. I don't have the time or money to waste on this storm. It'll probably blow on out to the ocean. Now, move out of my way!"

Maya was leaning against their dresser and Steven pushed her to the side to grab a wad of underwear out of the drawer and then stuffed it into the gym bag he was using as a suitcase. Maya's eyes filled with tears. She felt anger rising at him for how he treated her, and at herself for letting him. It hadn't always been like this.

"I'm worried this time. What will I do if it gets bad? I can't believe you would leave me and Doodle Bug here while you go off and get drunk with your friends. You just went out with them on Wednesday night, anyway. Can't you postpone this for a few weeks?"

"Come on. You and that mutt will be fine. If you get scared you can always go over to Zoe's house next door for company. Worst case scenario you can go to one of those shelters at the school and besides, I deserve a break. I've worked my ass off this week and need to blow off some steam."

Maya's eyes darted out the bedroom window, over to Zoe's driveway and she didn't see her car. She's probably already at her parent's house 40 miles inland, Maya thought. She also knew she couldn't go to a shelter because dogs weren't allowed and she would never leave Doodle Bug alone in a hurricane.

As Steven zipped his bag, Maya caught sight of a roll of twenty dollar bills. Where in the world did he get that? She kept a running balance of their checking account in her head and knew that was more than they had. She held back, knowing her questions would only fan his anger, but made a mental note to check their credit card balance. Steven swung his bag over his shoulder and grabbed his keys and wallet off the night stand as he headed out the bedroom door.

Maya followed him silently out to the kitchen, torn between her unease of being alone in the hurricane and her relief at being alone without his anger. Steven grabbed a Samuel Adams from the fridge and poured it into a large plastic cup Maya had gotten in her goody bag when she ran the New Orleans marathon last year. Maya sat down at the kitchen table with a sigh.

“Don’t even say it. I can drink one beer and drive, no problem. I’m running late and don’t want my boys to get ahead of me.”

Maya bit her tongue. They’d just finished paying off the lawyer who got him out of his second DUI a few months ago. She knew one beer wouldn’t affect him much but she also knew he probably had a cooler behind the seat of his car with a twelve pack in it. He would drink three or four more on the 45-minute drive to New Orleans.

“Maya, I’ll be back sometime Sunday night, but don’t wait up. I’ll definitely be back in time to be at the car lot by ten Monday morning.”

“Where are you staying? Did you pack extra insulin? Will you leave your cell phone on in case I need you?”

“You worry too fucking much. I won’t get stranded and I can live without my insulin. You know I’ve gone days without taking it before. Just let it go! You’ll be fine too. You won’t need me for anything. We haven’t decided where we’re staying yet but I’ll leave my phone on. Of course, it’s hard to hear if we’re in a bar.” Steven leaned down and gave her a soft kiss on the lips. “Have a good weekend. Everything will be fine and on Monday night we’ll go get a pizza at The Sycamore House.” He always did this, seduced her with soft kisses and promises of things to come. It infuriated her but at the same time she knew it kept her hooked into the relationship.

Steven turned and headed out the back door to the driveway. Maya walked to the front of the house and watched him pull away in his used BMW 325. You won't need me for anything Steven had said. You won't need me for anything. For once he actually spoke the truth. Maya really didn't need him for anything. So why did she stay? Her sister and Zoe had asked her this in the past few months and she had no good answer. She just felt she didn't have the energy it would take to leave him. She was exhausted; drained of energy from trying to make her marriage work, trying to seem happy at work, trying to live with the disappointment in her life.

Not liking her train of thought, Maya plopped down on their couch and turned on the Weather Channel. Doodle Bug jumped up beside her and they watched the latest projected path of Katrina. The hurricane was headed straight for them. She could only hope that Steven was right and Monday night they'd be eating pizza at The Sycamore House, but the sinking feeling in her chest told her otherwise. Her cell phone rang. It was her sister again. Maya let it go to voicemail.



CHAPTER 1

SATURDAY APRIL 14, 2007 ORIENTAL, NORTH CAROLINA

Maya watched Travis' strong, tanned arms flexing as he lifted the kayaks onto the trailer attached to his jeep. A local kayak guide recommended by the B&B where Maya and her sister Kate were staying, Travis was taking Maya on a half day kayak trip down Beards Creek. His jeep was parked in front of the Neuse Paddle Company, located directly across from the town dock where sailboats, power boats and a couple large trawlers were moored. They'd be driving to a more secluded creek known for its cypress trees with Spanish moss, fish nurseries and osprey nests. Maya was looking forward to some time out in nature, something she hadn't had since living in Raleigh where she'd moved after Katrina, and Steven's death. For the past two years she'd kept herself distracted with her medical records job at Wake Med Hospital during the day and her personal training clients in the evenings and on the weekends. She'd focused on paying off the debt she and Steven had acquired and had little free time. Perhaps that was more of a blessing than a regret.

Maya and Kate were having a girls retreat in Oriental, North Carolina. They had decided a weekend away was in order since Maya had just become debt free for the first time since the early years of her

marriage to Steven and Kate only had six weeks until her due date. It would be a while before they would have sister time again. Oriental was a quiet town of about 900 residents located where the Neuse River empties into the Pamlico Sound. It used to be a fishing village, but now it's the homeport for the best East Coast sailing and the sailing capital of North Carolina. Besides the sailors, Oriental was also sustained by a population of retirees from across the United States, but from the accents Maya had heard, it seemed like most were from the North. And then, there were the folks looking for a quiet waterside retreat, like she and Kate.

"Have you ever been kayaking?" Travis asked, bringing Maya back to the present. She realized the jeep was packed and ready to go.

"No. On the Gulf Coast I was close to lots of paddling options but never tried. I guess I stuck to running by the water or swimming. I usually had my yellow lab, Doodle Bug with me and couldn't fathom her sitting quietly in a kayak." Maya had left her back in Raleigh with Kate's husband, Rob. This was the first time they'd been apart for longer than eight hours since Katrina. She knew Doodle Bug would be fine as she had grown fond of Rob while they were living with him and Kate immediately after Katrina, but Maya still felt a little lost without her sidekick. Travis motioned for her to get in the passenger side of the jeep as he started the engine.

"So you're a dog person?" Travis asked.

"Well, not always, but after getting Doodle Bug about four years ago, I became a card carrying member of the certifiably crazy over their dog club," Maya smiled. "She's more faithful than some people have been in my life." Maya tensed, realizing she divulged more than she had meant to. Luckily, Travis didn't seem to notice and continued with the topic.

"I know how you feel. Elvis, my hound dog mutt, is my best buddy. He's great company and always listens to me. Sometimes I wonder if I'm going crazy cause I talk to him so much."

"No. I think that is totally normal," Maya said with a smile and then sat back against the worn, brown leather seat. Her right arm hung out the window and the warm late April air blew through her hair. She loved this time of year when the air was beginning to warm and the trees were aglow with golden green buds. As they continued their drive

down deserted country roads to reach Beards Creek, the smells of spring filled the jeep, the earthy smell of freshly plowed dirt and then the sweet smell of the wisteria that decorated the trees along the road.

Out of the corner of her eye, Maya watched Travis as he maneuvered the jeep and trailer with kayaks down the winding road. His face was tanned from many hours out in the eastern North Carolina sun and had a shadow of a beard which added to his outdoorsy look. Maya guessed he was close to her age and without thinking, her eyes traveled to his left hand. No ring and no suntan mark, so most likely he wasn't married.

As they reached the final turn down to the boat ramp, Travis moved his feet to depress the brake and clutch and Maya couldn't help but admire his quads as they flexed and strained against the fabric of his shorts. Maya blushed when she realized what she was doing but was relieved that Travis was oblivious as he backed the jeep down towards the water. This was the first time she'd really paid attention to a man in a long time. She had felt numb after Steven died and hadn't thought about men or dating much since then. She also struggled with conflicted feelings about his death and their relationship. Why hadn't she had the strength to leave him on her own? Why did it take a natural disaster to propel her into a new life? Maybe if she had left him, he wouldn't have gone to New Orleans before Katrina and would still be alive today. Maya could feel her thoughts begin to race and didn't want them to ruin her afternoon so focused on the present. This was helped when Travis slammed his car door. She was jolted back to the boat ramp, on Beards Creek in Oriental, North Carolina, miles and miles away from Bay St. Louis and her former life.

Travis jumped out and started untying the kayaks from the trailer. "Grab your water bottle and snack and head over to the ramp. I'll bring everything over."

Maya could tell Travis had done this many times and in just a few minutes they were in the water of Beards Creek, heading north.

Maya's athleticism made her a quick study of the balance and strength needed to kayak. With just a few pointers from Travis, she was moving swiftly through the water, dark from the bark of the cypress trees lining the bank. Their knobby knees stuck out of the water like her

grandmother's knees used to when she took her evening bubble bath and Maya would sit on the toilet and talk with her. Maya smiled at the memory and felt gratitude for the summers she and Kate had spent with their grandmother at her home on Kerr Lake in Clarksville, Virginia. They basked in the love and attention from an adult and were always sad to see summer's end. Maya and Kate had canoed on Kerr Lake those summers but now Maya was enjoying the new sensation of being in a kayak. She felt almost like she was part of the water, with only a thin layer of fiberglass separating her from the tea colored water that occasionally bubbled with schools of small bait fish.

The rhythm of her paddle strokes was relaxing. She and Travis paddled for about twenty minutes in silence. Even without words, there was plenty to listen to from the entry of her paddle in the water, the call of the kingfisher searching for fish and the gentle rustle of the river grasses that grew on the bank. Maya sighed, leaned back, and let her body be rocked by the undulations of the kayak. Suddenly, tears sprang to her eyes as the power of the moment hit her. This was the first time since Katrina that nature had comforted her rather than be a source of tragedy. She had always found joy in nature, especially on her daily morning runs, the waxing and waning of the moon, the seasonal changes of the morning light or deer feeding at dawn all provided her with inspiration. The death and destruction she witnessed in Katrina had been a sharp contrast to her usual experience of nature.

A tear slid down her cheek and Maya felt her heart crack open just a bit and warmth spread across her chest. She tilted her face up to the sun, forgiving nature for her power to destroy and grateful for all her gifts. But maybe she should also be grateful for the destruction. Wasn't that a part of life's cycle? Hadn't some good come to her life from the devastation of Katrina? Oh, there was the guilt again, working its way to the front of her consciousness but Maya stopped it by focusing on the gentle caress of the breeze on her face. She floated with the current of the creek until a scraping noise startled her when her kayak's bow hit the shoreline.

"You all right?" Travis called.

“Yes. Yes.” Maya said as she opened her eyes to see what she had hit. “I got so relaxed that I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going.”

“Well, sometimes just going with the flow is the best option. Are you planning on visiting Miss Hazel?” Travis asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You just beached yourself on the property of Hazel Underhill.”

Maya’s eyes lifted from the shoreline and she saw a beautiful nineteenth century farmhouse facing the creek. There were wraparound porches on the first and second floors both decorated with ferns in hanging baskets. The house was white with colonial blue shutters and was surrounded by huge hydrangea bushes that were starting to fill out with new bright green leaves. A worn path in the grass led from the house down to the boathouse and dock. The dock had three boat slips, one empty, one with a small motorboat and one with a 30-foot sailboat, showing its age with peeling paint, green algae and barnacles growing where the boat met the waterline. As Maya looked at the Underhill property she could imagine family picnics in the yard and children fishing off the dock and catching blue crabs with the bones left over from fried chicken.

“Does anyone live there now?”

“Miss Hazel still lives there in the big farmhouse. She’s in her late 70s and somehow manages the upkeep inside her house, but sometimes I’ll help her with small repairs outside and yard work.”

“So she’s there all alone, in that big house?”

“Yep. I don’t think she’ll ever give up this place.” Travis’ kayak now drifted up the shoreline beside Maya. “Her grandmother was born in the house and Hazel grew up here. I think she lived in Raleigh for a long time but then came back to Oriental after her husband died. I was a teenager, so that must have been about twenty years ago. My grandparents are from here and my grandmother and Miss Hazel were in the same women’s circle at church so they knew each other quite well. In the summer when I would stay with my grandparents, Miss Hazel would sometimes take me out in her sailboat. I thought I was something when she’d let me take the wheel out in the middle of the sound.”

“Does she have any sisters or brothers? I wonder if she ever gets lonely in that big house without any company.” Maya couldn’t imagine being old without her sister around.

“She’s never mentioned a brother or sister but I see her at church and around town so she must have somewhat of a social life. She’s fun to be around. I always try to get her talking when I go to help her. She has some interesting life stories and knows a lot of the history of this area.”

Maya used her paddle to push her kayak off the bank and back out into the creek. Travis followed her lead and then stopped. “Well, look at that. Maybe Miss Hazel is getting lonely. She’s finally put a ‘For Rent’ sign up in her boathouse. I helped renovate it into a one bedroom cottage a few years ago but once it was finished she seemed hesitant about someone actually living there.”

Maya’s eyes rested on the small boathouse. It was painted in the same color scheme as the house and she could see Travis had added a small porch on the back that looked out onto the creek. Maya could imagine herself sitting there reading while Doodle Bug swam in the creek. She wondered if she lived here if she would feel as peaceful as she did now or if that was just a vacation fantasy everyone has, dreaming about moving to the place you’re visiting. Any place can seem idyllic when you don’t have any responsibilities. The phone number, 779-0831 was written in purple magic marker at the bottom of the For Rent sign. Maya, living out her vacation fantasy, made a mental note of that number.

Maya slid out of Travis’ jeep at Oriental’s town dock. As she shut the door, she could feel soreness in her upper back.

“I noticed a little grimace there. Are your back muscles sore?” Travis asked as he untied the kayaks from the trailer.

“Yes. I can’t remember when my upper body felt this tired. Usually it’s my legs that are sore.”

“If you keep this up you’ll get used to it. Have you thought about buying a kayak? I know of several places near Raleigh to kayak and you could always come back down here.”

“It was great today but probably need to kayak a few more times before I invest in one of my own.”

“I have an idea,” Travis said. “When are you and your sister leaving?”

“Sunday, after lunch. Why?”

“I think you should try a sunrise paddle to experience kayaking again before you leave. After seeing the sunrise over the Pamlico Sound from a kayak, I know you’ll be hooked. I’ll check with Pat, my boss, but I’m sure she’ll be fine with me leaving the kayak for you around the corner at Town Beach. In the morning, you can walk over, slip into the water and watch the sunrise.”

This was very thoughtful but Maya wondered why Travis was so interested in her becoming a kayaker. Well, maybe he gets a cut of the profit if she buys a kayak or maybe he’s just being nice, sharing his enthusiasm for something he loves. Maya realized over the last few years she had become more cynical and looked for ulterior motives instead of believing in their inherent kindness.

“Thanks. I may take you up on that. I’m an early riser anyway and love to see the sunrise over the water. I don’t think I’ve seen that since I left the gulf after Katrina.” As the last sentence slipped out, Maya silently cursed herself. She didn’t usually share that she was a Katrina survivor. It often brought lots of unwanted sympathy and questions. Maya looked up at Travis, now leaning against his jeep. The wind ruffled his hair and he had a streak of gray mud from the creek across his cheek. He was pretty close to Maya’s age, but seeing him now, Maya could imagine him as a seventeen-year-old with lots of energy and mischief. Travis’ eyes held hers for a few seconds.

“You’ve been through a lot. We’ve had hurricanes here, though nothing on the magnitude of Katrina. I don’t think anyone could understand what it’s like without experiencing it. I’m just glad you made it out okay.”

Maya silently thanked him for not asking any questions.

“I’ll leave the kayak on the left side of the Town Beach for you to use tomorrow morning. Pretty much no crime here, so it’ll be fine overnight. I’ll have Pat pick it up tomorrow afternoon as I’ll be tied up.”

“OK. Thanks for such a wonderful afternoon. The creek was beautiful and I just loved the kayaking.”

“No problem. Glad you enjoyed it. Make sure to let Pat know. It always helps for the owner to know my customers are satisfied.”

For a second Maya had forgotten she'd paid for this trip. She and Travis had such a nice rapport that she felt more like friends. Well, she guessed that was part of what he was paid for, to make people feel comfortable. Even if she did have to pay for it, it was fun to hang out with a guy for a change. Since living in Raleigh, Maya had mostly spent time with her sister, her personal training clients and the women she worked with in the medical records department.

“Can I drop you off at The Captain's Quarter's?”

“No. It's not far and I need to stretch my legs a bit before dinner.” Maya turned and began heading up Water Street. She could feel Travis' eyes on her back and then heard his jeep starting.

It was almost five thirty when Maya pushed open the door to the room she and Kate were sharing at The Captain's Quarters. She paused in the doorway when she saw Kate asleep on the twin bed by the window, a fleece throw keeping off the spring breeze coming in the open window. Kate was lying on her back and Maya smiled at her protruding belly which was in marked contrast to her otherwise thin frame.

Kate was only two years younger than Maya but seemed to have settled into her life more easily. She and Rob had been married for five years, and in six weeks would welcome a new baby into their family. Maya remembered Kate talking about the type of mother she wanted to become as they drove down to Oriental, and like most new mothers, her goal was to be totally different from their own mother.

Kate and Maya's parents loved them and provided for all their physical needs, but there was always some emotional distance. Their father maintained his distance in a physical sense by spending long hours at the bookstore he owned near the grounds of the University of Virginia. At night he drank glasses of Merlot to take the edge off. Usually this led to an impassioned speech on his favorite author of the moment with little time for his daughters to share their day with him.

Their mother was always physically present, taking them to and from school each day. She taught kindergarten so had the same schedule as Kate and Maya. At home, she would retreat to her study to read or go out to her “animal” garden where she had flowers with animal names like snap dragons, tiger lilies and lamb’s ear. One whole corner of the backyard was filled with lavender bushes that in June would be harvested and made into wreaths, lavender wands and sachets to be sold at the farmers’ market.

Maya sat in a chair by the door, letting Kate continue to sleep. She remembered when she was about eight, watching her mother out the window in her lavender. She and Kate sat at the kitchen table with their snack of milk and mint Girl Scout cookies that their mother had just prepared before grabbing her gardening gloves and heading outside. Maya studied her mother kneeling by each bush, sprinkling fertilizer around the base and gently sculpting a mound of fresh mulch. At that moment, Maya wished, with all the wishing power of an eight-year-old, to be a lavender bush and to bask in the love and attention her mother seemed to reserve for her garden and her books. The saving grace for Maya and Kate was their relationship.

They shared the small details of their day, a test score, a mean look from a popular girl, their latest crush. They often talked long after they went to bed about their dreams for the future. At least Kate did. She was clear that she wanted to teach and be a mother. Maya had less clarity but many ideas, a writer, a news reporter, a ranger in a state park. They were lucky that unlike other siblings, they had little rivalry. Both excelled academically but their interests were different, Kate preferring ballet and piano and Maya soccer and cross country.

They both chose to go to the University of Virginia, not so much to be close to their parents, but to be close to one another. Their first separation came when Kate graduated and moved to Raleigh to work in the Wake County School System teaching third grade, following Rob who’d gotten an IT job in Research Triangle Park. Maya, who was working in the medical records department at UVa medical center, remembered the empty feeling the day she watched Kate leave. Her best friend and life long support would now be four hours away. It was only a few months after that when she had met Steven in the Keys.

Thinking of him startled Maya. Since the kayak trip, the thoughts of Steven had retreated. Maybe it was being in a totally new place and spending time on the water. As she continued to watch her pregnant sister sleep, Maya wondered if Steven would have ever come to a town like Oriental, or would it be too quiet for his tastes? Would they have started a family like her sister? Maya felt her thoughts beginning to pick up speed. Occasionally this happened as she contemplated what life may have held if Steven had lived. Maya took a deep breath like her counselor instructed her, stopped her cascading thoughts and brought herself back to the room with her sleeping sister. She tried to ignore her rising guilt at the sense of relief she felt as she returned to the present moment without Steven as a part of her life.

Kate stirred, moving her hand unconsciously to rest on her belly. Her eyes slowly opened, weighted with the heaviness of a good sleep.

“Did you have a good day?” Maya asked.

“Ahh. It was perfect. I walked around town after we had lunch, read a little and have slept about two and a half hours,” she said as she glanced at her watch. “How was your kayaking trip?”

“Fantastic. It was relaxing, peaceful like that Sunday morning quiet time before you’ve finished your first cup of coffee.”

“So how was your guide? He was a cutie,” her sister said playfully.

“He was fine,” Maya replied looking at her sister with unblinking eyes. “He showed me the basics of kayaking and shared a little history of the area. He really seemed to want me to like kayaking. He said he’d leave me a kayak at Town Beach down the street so I can take a sunrise paddle tomorrow morning.”

“Is he going with you?” Kate asked with a smile.

“No, Miss Smarty Pants. He’s busy. Anyway, I think he wants me to become enamored with kayaking so I’ll buy one and he’ll get the commission.”

“Oh, Maya, always the cynic lately. Maybe he saw how much you enjoyed your time and wanted to give you another opportunity to experience that feeling.”

“Well, maybe. Right now, let’s talk about where we are going to eat dinner. I’m starved.”

Maya awoke at 5:45 a.m., just five minutes before the alarm, like she almost always did. For the most part she thought of this trait as a blessing, waking up naturally, and not being blasted from her sleep by the shrill alarm or worse yet one of Madonna's hits from the 80s on the clock radio. She rolled over in the twin bed and moved the curtain to look out the window. It was still dark, but the stars indicated clear skies. Maya pulled the comforter up to her chin, her body warm from her heat captured under the covers. It would be easy to stay right here and drift back to sleep, Maya thought, but the sunrise promised by Travis and the memory of that peaceful feeling of being on the water lured her out of bed.

Maya carefully closed the front door of the B&B making sure the antique and rusting door knob slowly clicked back to its resting place. As she walked east down Church Street, she saw a soft pink glow on the horizon. She estimated she had fifteen minutes or so till sunrise, so picked up her pace to a jog. She passed a mixture of one story bungalows, two story Charleston style homes and a new three story condo unit that seemed out of place next to the homes built when Oriental was a fishing village.

Town Beach was only a half mile from The Captain's Quarters and after a couple minutes, Maya was there. Calling this area a beach seemed to be a stretch. The sandy area was about the size of her mother's lavender patch, but it was sandy and did meet up with a large body of water, so technically met the definition for a beach.

The kayak was easy to spot, pulled over to the left side of the beach like Travis had promised. The sky was slowly turning from pink to a pale yellow. Maya pulled the kayak down to the water's edge, threw on the PFD Travis had left in the cockpit and pushed herself out into the Neuse River.

This was a totally different experience compared to yesterday's creek. Travis had told her that at this point the Neuse River was five miles wide. It created a more expansive feel than the narrower creek she'd been on yesterday. A slight breeze lifted Maya's hair and she zipped up her

windbreaker against the cool morning air. She turned her kayak straight out towards the ever brightening eastern horizon and paddled steadily.

The top crescent of the sun burst into sight and with surprising speed it grew and presented its full orb to Maya. Like yesterday, she floated without paddling, the first rays of the sun warming her face. The kayak gently rocked with the pulse of the water and she felt suspended in time, so fully present in this moment that no intrusive thoughts of the past or worries of the future entered her mind. Once again her heart was filled with gratitude for the ability to feel this sense of contentment in nature again and about life in general.

As the sun climbed higher, Maya's stomach began to growl, ready for the gourmet breakfast of quiche, fruit and blueberry muffins. What a perfect way to start the day. Travis had been right, Maya thought as she began paddling back to shore. Without intending to, Maya mentally recited the phone number on the For Rent sign at the boathouse she'd paddled by yesterday.