

Red Kayak

Chapter One

After all this time, I still ask myself: *Was it my fault?*

Maybe. Maybe not.

Either way, I wonder what would have happened if I'd called out a warning. Or kept my mouth shut later. Would J.T. and Digger still be my best friends? Would the Di'Angelos still be living next door?

One thing's for sure: If none of this had happened, I'd be out there crabbing every day, baiting my pots in the morning and pulling them in after school. Fall's a great time for catching crabs before the females head south and the males burrow into the mud. I could fix the engine on the boat easy if I wanted. It's not broken like I told Dad. Probably nothing but some air in the lines from settin' there so long. I could bleed the engine tonight, set my alarm for 4 a.m., and be on the river before the sun was up over the tree line.

Don't think it didn't bother me, the way those traps sat all summer, stacked four deep against the back of Dad's toolshed. Some never even got hosed off, they were stashed in such a hurry. Be a lot of work to clean'em up and rezinc them, too, so they don't corrode. In just a few days, though, I could have four rows of twenty-five sunken pots out there, each one marked with a fresh-painted orange buoy, and all one hundred of those pots soaked and baited with razor clams. Afternoons, I could be hauling in crabs hand over fist, and right now, a bushel of big number-one jimmies would fetch me seventy dollars from the wholesaler – maybe even more, since the price of crabs has gone through the roof.

But this is all so complicated. I can't go back out on the water. Not yet anyway. I can't help it; I keep asking myself, *What if this, what if that?* And then in my mind I see that red kayak . . .

My dad says stop thinking that way. "You be lookin' backward all the time, Brady, you're gonna have one heck of a crook in the neck." He smiles when he says that. But I know what he means deep down, and it's not funny. You can't keep dwelling on the past when you can't undo it. You can't make it happen any different than it did.

My cousin Carl comes over a lot. He's a paramedic and sees a lot of gross stuff, so he knows about getting things out of your head. "Talk it out there, boy," he keeps telling me. "What? You think you're alone? You think other people don't have these feelings?" But even Carl admits he's never been in quite the same position as me.

Mom has helped a lot too, although I know it was really hard for her, because of my sister.

Mostly, I wish I could just stop going over it in my mind. But it replays all the time. Like waves breaking on the narrow beach down at the river. Sometimes, after school, I walk down there to sit on the bank and do nothing. Just let the sun bake my face and listen to those waves hitting the shore, one after the other.

Tilly always follows me and I let her. Tilly's my yellow Lab. She lays down with her head on her paws and knows to leave me alone when I'm thinking. Despite everything, I still marvel at how all those tiny ripples in the water can catch the sunlight and make the river shimmer like a million jewels were strewn on the surface. Deceptive, how other times the same water can seem as smooth as glass. You'd never know that underneath, the currents run so hard and so fast.

It's a pretty river, the Corsica. But it doesn't have a heart.