

## Swift Hermit

By Margaret Evans

Red and gold slashed the September sky and coated the rippling waters on the eastern rim of the Chesapeake Bay. It was a good year for Maryland crabs, and the Ballinger Marina Restaurant was jammed with patrons enjoying the delicacy soaked in Old Bay seasoning. The mild air and gentle breeze enchanted everyone as shallow, gray clouds, casting vellum shadows upon the earth, streaked effortlessly across the tawny hues. As the sun fell closer to the horizon, it left behind a sweet sadness.

Steven Walker sat alone at a table, cracking open a crab and extracting its meat. His wooden mallet lay next to his work, a pile of discarded shells just beyond the uneaten crabs. His dark, close-cropped hair reflected some of the sunset, and he looked fairer than he was as the glowing sun washed over his tanned skin. His hands were grimy with seasoning and his blue eyes narrowed in concentration on his food. He'd been there for well over two hours, his mind on a woman at a nearby table.

Shouts reached him from the sand where volleyball was in progress. He looked over the heads between him and the game. Students, he thought, and a brief memory teased him, bringing with it pleasures from the past, sweet and sad, like the sunset. The coolers had been filled with beer as these most likely were, and there was a girl. She couldn't play the game well, but she had been a good sport, and Walker hadn't forgotten how crazy he'd been about her. But that was a long time ago, in the years when he felt alive.

Walker glanced at a group of diners three tables away. He had grown up on the Chesapeake Bay, loved crabs, but today his mind was focused on a woman whose life was his responsibility, no different from any other assignment he'd had with the Justice Department over the past eight years. Only this woman had no inkling of what was about to happen. Her abusive ex-husband had agreed to testify against his old boss, a world-class bag of evil. Her only chance to stay out of the vortex was to vanish. It would come as shock, but it was necessary.

Walker's thoughts touched briefly on his own life which began on the Chesapeake Bay and veered to the open sea, as well as the events that ended his career in deep water. He'd loved the SEALs, living on the edge. Now he lived on a different edge, alone yet part of an extraordinary team that saved lives. Yeah, that's what he did best: save other people's lives.

All the years. The secrets. Job and real life. Would anyone ever know the whole truth?

It's all about being a twin, he thought. Having someone look so much like you that you switched places all the time and nobody knew. Sometimes it was fun; other times it backfired. But you kept doing it because you could. Once in a while, you looked in the mirror and thought maybe you were a copy, not the real thing. Had Eric ever felt that way?

He regarded the crab pile and the shells. They were each unique, like everybody's personalities and souls. His brother's and his. Yet no one could tell them apart. How would his life have been different had he and his brother not swapped names on that Tuesday so many years ago, the day

on which everyone's lives changed? Would Eric still be alive? Would Steven be saving anyone besides himself?

One swap too many, perhaps. Wrong place, wrong time. Wrong seat in the car. Wrong time to swap drivers' licenses. Wrong day to insist he drive. But it was all a game, wasn't it? And they laughed about who would quarterback the game on the weekend.

Wrong day for the truck who hit them head-on.

His brother died; he walked away with bruises.

Light laughter caught his attention, and he glanced at its source, then her companions. They were obviously friends, three women and two men, all in their twenties. Several pitchers of beer had been drunk and the empty crab shell pile had been scooped away by their table server more than once.

Walker finished his drink and went indoors to wash. He'd seen all he needed of the redhead. He had to act quickly, as usual, and he hoped they could relocate this woman safely.

His own life, his past, and his brother's death, were safely tucked away once again, hoping, also as usual, for future resolution.

One day.

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