

NO MERCY...

NO ABSOLUTION...

THE
DARK SAINT



GEOFF LOFTUS

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By

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The Dark Saint is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people is unintentional and coincidental. While a serious attempt has been made to portray the details and geography of Block Island accurately, once or twice the dramatic needs of the story may have gotten the better of me, and I exercised poetic license.

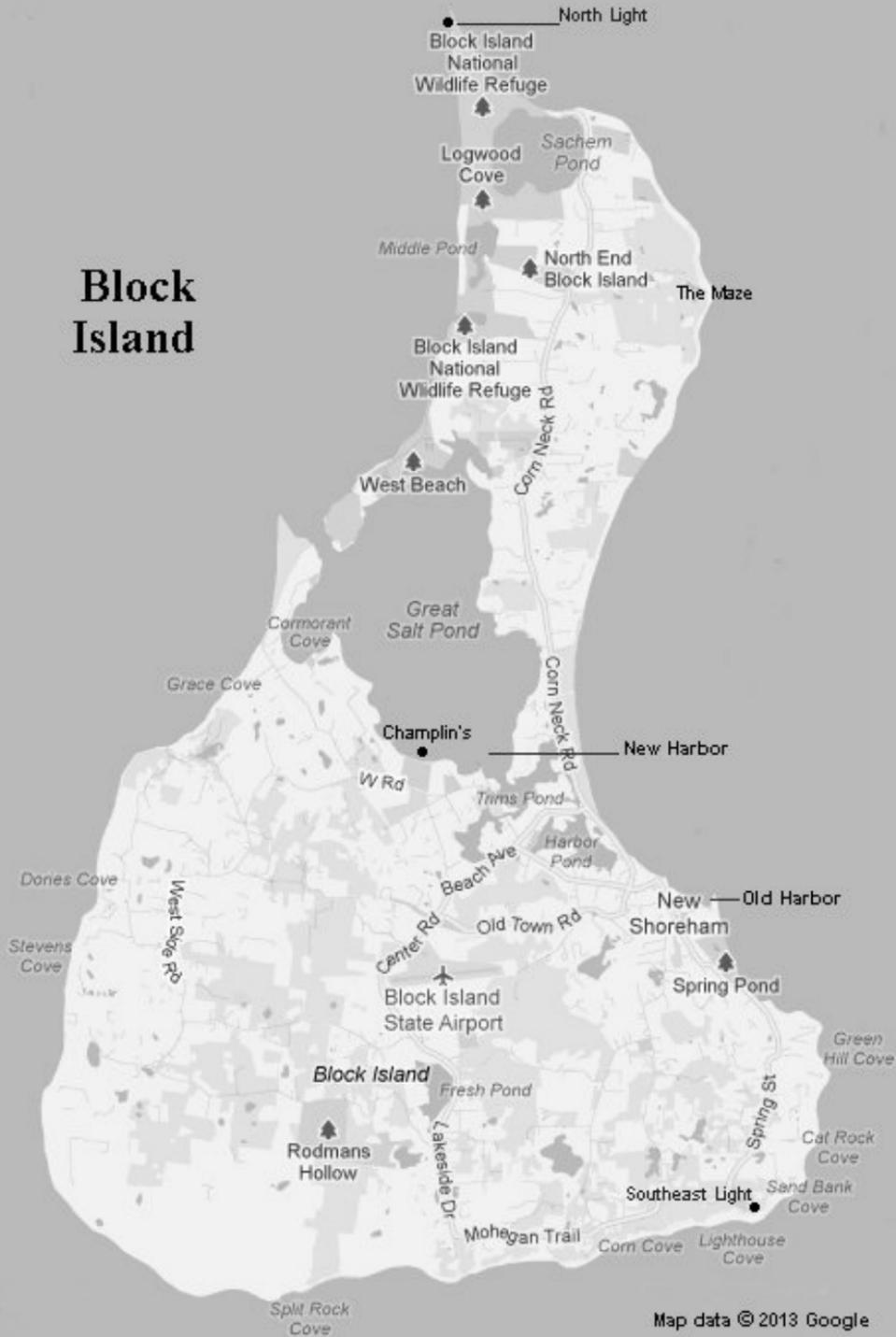
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For Greg

*My son, co-writer, and editor — the person who showed me
what it means to dream astonishing dreams
and have the courage to pursue them*

Block Island



Time for the nightly dose of fear, he thought. Hell, I wouldn't know it was the middle of the night if I weren't having an anxiety blast.

It was 2:00 A.M., and he was alone, staring at the harbor lights. His fears weren't anything a short, neat scotch couldn't chase away. Actually, if I'm going to be honest, he thought, I'd be better off with coffee and a plate of Toll House cookies. Scotch never works for me quite the way I hope it will. I should pass on the scotch. Maybe holding off on coffee and cookies is a good idea, too. I'll just wait this out. My fears are very patient, but I can outlast them. My fears tell me I'm not good enough. That I'll be alone. My father would be ashamed of me. My son hates me. I'm . . . not . . . good . . . enough.

He had had the same conversation with himself almost every night. And he always came to the same conclusion. Tonight

he sat at the end of Payne's Dock, looking at the waters of New Harbor. The mooring lights from the boats were like low-lying stars, glittering here and there, reflections bouncing off the black surface of the water. He took a deep breath of the harbor air. He loved the smell of the dock's weathered wood and tar, and the salt water. Why couldn't the nighttime setting of the harbor be enough for him? It should have been, but it wasn't enough to keep the fear away.

Hundreds of feet behind the man on the end of the dock, police officer Tommy Ball was on patrol. Ball was twenty-six years old but seemed younger, six-foot tall, thin as a rail, sandy-brown hair. He stopped his patrol car on the road, near the landward end of the dock and looked toward the harbor. The man at the end of the dock was almost invisible in the night, police but the young officer spotted him. Ball hadn't expected to see someone, but now he had no choice but to check out the guy. He used the car radio to call the station, alerting the desk officer to his location and the fact that he was about to leave the police cruiser.

“You need backup?” came the response.

“No, I think I can handle this alone. If I don’t call you again in five minutes, send the cavalry.”

“Will do.”

Working the overnight tour on Block Island was rarely dangerous. The worst problem was rowdy, drunken tourists who resisted the notion that it was time for them to go home. But last summer Joe Esposito had stopped a driver weaving all over the road in the wee hours of the morning; the driver had refused to show Esposito his license, climbed out of his car and beaten Espo bloody for good measure. Espo had spent weeks with his broken jaw wired together. Now, whenever Ball approached a man in the middle of the night, he wondered if the guy was going to lose control and what to do. The use of his firearm seemed extreme, but spending time in the hospital didn’t seem like a good idea, either.

Ball let his police car roll slowly to the edge of the dock. He turned off the interior light and eased the door open. Before stepping out of the car, he grabbed his police baton, a dark black

club that used to be called a night stick. Given the circumstances, Ball thought “night stick” was pretty appropriate.

He walked slowly down the pier, figuring he’d play the scene quietly, keep everything low-key. No point getting the man excited. The last thing Ball wanted was to use his stick or gun. Hopefully, they’d just talk for a moment or two and he would send the guy home.

As he approached, the officer could see that the man on the pier was sizable. Ball could only guess in the dim light cast by the pier lamps, but he estimated six foot two or taller, probably in the 220-240-pound range. Brown hair, broad shoulders, a solid-looking type in blue jeans and a faded-red T-shirt. Great, Ball thought, probably a charter-boat worker with an attitude. Then again, maybe the man was an aging Ivy League rugby player, all brew and bullshit. Either way Ball assumed he was trouble. Ball gripped the baton’s handle a little more tightly and continued to walk slowly and quietly.

“Hey there,” he said, when he was within a few feet of the

man, “Isn’t it a little late to be out here?”

“Depends.” The man turned toward Ball. “If you want to be first in line for donuts at Payne’s, I’d say this was right on schedule.”

Ball relaxed, “Shit, Chief, don’t you think you’re a few hours ahead of donut time? Besides, you know they moved the donut shop over to....”

“Yeah, well . . . ,” Mark Sheridan stood up and extended his hand in greeting. “You thought I was some drunk in a bad mood considering taking a long, long swim.”

“Something like that.”

Mark glanced past the younger man, toward the end of the dock to the road. “You spotted me from back there?”

The officer nodded.

“Good eyes. Well, I suppose you’d appreciate it if I moseyed along home, right?”

“Well, since it’s you—”

“What would you say to me if I weren’t the police chief?”

“I guess I’d say, ‘It would be better if you went home, sir.’”

“In that case, I’ll cooperate, officer. No need to use your stick on me.”

“You want a ride, Chief?”

“I can walk. Thanks, Tommy.”

They turned and walked up the dock, toward the police car.

“Excuse me, but what are you doing out at this hour, Chief?”

“Can’t sleep.”

The young officer didn’t know his boss well, but he knew enough not to ask any more questions. As they reached the police cruiser, he said, “Sure you don’t want a ride?”

“You got a thermos of coffee and some donuts in there?”

Tommy grinned and shook his head.

“No thanks,” Mark said. “I’ve got this donut obsession I just can’t get rid of. It’s what keeps me up at nights.”

“See you round.”

“Later,” Mark said and walked along the road, past the quiet fronts of Dead Eye Dick’s and Smugglers’ the restaurants that sat on the harbor shore just beyond the pier’s end.

He turned right and followed the road as it climbed a small hill next to the the Narraganset Inn, a shingle-sided Victorian hotel. He was aware of the hundreds-of-years-old stone walls along the road, of the aromas, of the quiet night, but none of them touched him. Once upon a time he couldn’t look anywhere on this island and not be captivated by it. Now he wandered around in the middle of the night, untouched by any of it. Have I died and just forgotten to drop? he wondered. How long before I begin to enjoy things again? Maybe as soon as I stop feeling so sorry for myself. Once I lose the self-pity I might have room for some other emotions.

Another half-mile brought him to the shingle-sided cottage where he lived. He climbed the steps to his porch, unlocked the front door and went inside, turning on a lamp in the

living room. The light bounced softly off the cream-colored walls and wooden bookcase. A couch covered in a fabric of earth tones—Kim had called it his “man couch”—sat at a slight angle to an upholstered chair in the same fabric. Mark dropped onto the couch and thought about reading and listening to some music.

It was too bad he didn’t drink anymore. A whiskey would take care of the sleeplessness. But God only knew what other problems it would introduce. Drinking had cost him a career, a marriage, and fatherhood. It had cost him his father's respect. A little insomnia seemed a small price to pay to avoid those kinds of trouble.

He reached for a blue-covered book. It was one of two copies of *Alcoholics Anonymous* he owned. The first was worn and battered and, he told himself, he should throw it away. But it seemed wrong to throw away the book that helped him turn his life around, so he had hung onto it. In the meantime, he had been given a new copy. There was an inscription inside the jacket:

To Mark, Thanks for being sober and

giving me the chance to love you, Kim.

He closed the book without reading further. He wanted to smile when he thought of Kim, to remember her warmly. After all, she had died two years ago, wasn't it time to remember without pain?

But remembering her still hurt. He did what he did most nights when the memories came at him—he lay on the couch and refused to recall the face he had loved. Blocked the time they had shared from entering his head.

One of these days, he thought, I'm going to get my head on straight. Have myself one of those normal lives I keep hearing about. Eventually, he drifted off to sleep, sprawled on the couch with Kim's gift of *Alcoholics Anonymous* lying on his chest.

Another man was out in the dark of Block Island that night. It was hours after Mark Sheridan had gone home but well before dawn. The man made his way to the north end of the island. He wanted to find his hiding place before daylight broke.

The northernmost end of the island had been set aside as a nature preserve. Rolling sand dunes covered with foot-high beach grass and occasional dense growths of bayberry, beach plum, and wild rose surrounded Sachem Pond and were home to thousands and thousands of sea gulls and the North Light.

Built in 1867, the stone lighthouse stood near the very tip of the island, looking north toward the Rhode Island and Connecticut mainlands. A long, sandy track made its way to the lighthouse by winding along the beach and through the dunes. The track began at a parking lot at the southern edge of the nature preserve. Just a few yards off the track that the man found his hiding place—a sandy hollow in the dunes under a thick growth of wild rose—almost as comfortable as a recliner. The Army had trained him to make the most of cover, and almost thirty years later he was still utilizing that training.

The Army had also trained him to kill, and he had no plans to let that formidable talent go to waste either.

He lay back in a sandy hollow under dense brush and

noticed the bright pink wild roses hanging overhead; this was going to be an easy place to wait. He opened his small field kit and set out his water bottle, raw vegetables, and home-made trail mix. Just a little patience, he thought. Just wait out the day, about fourteen hours, and then you can kill.

He clenched his fists tightly, turning the knuckles white with tension. With a deliberate effort of will, he opened each fist, stretched the fingers and forced himself to relax. Six years was a long time to wait between kills, but he had needed the time for his desire to grow. For his anger to build sufficiently to send his father the same message he had sent before, the same message but composed of new victims.

He gently rubbed his hands, going hand over hand. He focused on his fingertips—his trademark. Not that the police would recognize his prints right away. It would take the FBI a little bit of time to identify them. After that, the police would know. The whole world would know.

The Dark Saint was back. The sky was turning red with

the sunset as Melissa Boudine sat on the beach at the base of a dune. Her friends had gone back to their rented cottage; she stayed, needing time alone. Nothing was settled with Frank and they were supposed to catch the mid-morning ferry tomorrow. By afternoon, they would be back in Hartford, the “real world” as Frank always called it. No more late nights on the front porch, watching the lights in the harbor. No more easy days on the beach. Melissa sighed; she could accept the end of the vacation. It was facing the real world—and Frank—that bothered her.

Overhead, gulls wheeled and dipped in the air, constantly crying. Their calls sounded forlorn and lost. Melissa smiled at the thought. She was making too much of things, the gulls sounded like birds, nothing more. She was the one who was forlorn and lost. She gazed over the dunes at the North Light. It seemed lost, too, standing alone on the northern tip of the island, surrounded by the water on three sides and by dune grass on the fourth, southern side. Like many old structures that stand at the sea’s edge, it seemed haunting and romantic to her.

Melissa checked her watch and saw that it was time to leave. Dinner was approaching, and it wasn't fair to keep her housemates waiting while she tried in vain to find a way to salvage her relationship with Frank. She stood up, brushed sand from her shorts, and headed down the sandy track that led back to the parking lot where her moped was waiting.

From his hiding place in the dunes, the Dark Saint watched Melissa Boudine walk down the track. He had been watching her for hours, waiting in the hope she would be alone at some point. Now, his patience was about to pay off. She was only about thirty feet away.

The early evening sun was casting long shadows among the dunes. Soon it would settle into the ocean for the night, but now the sunlight was soft and warm. Melissa stopped to soak up the last of the afternoon. She ran her fingers through her hair, brushing it back from her face.

It was beautiful hair, the man thought, long, blonde, and blowing in the ocean breeze. It had a red tint and held the light of

the setting sun. His hands clenched involuntarily, and he took that as his body's signal that it was time for action. He slid out of his hiding place, keeping low, out of the woman's line of vision. He took a fraction of a moment to look around, to ensure no one was in sight.

Melissa began walking again. He kept low and crept closer to the crest of a dune only about ten feet distant now. In a few steps, she would be directly opposite his position. His fists clenched again. His legs were straining, ready to rush at her. He could feel the tension throughout his body but made no effort to relax himself. Six years of waiting was long enough.

The woman was walking slowly, lingering. She was directly opposite; he waited for her to take a step past him, and another. He was behind her now, out of range of her peripheral vision. It was time.

His legs churned in the sand, and he charged over the dune and leaped.

She heard something behind her, saw a dark blur out of

the corner of her eye, and twisted to look. The man crashed down on her as she moved, the weight of his body slamming her to the ground. The impact stunned her, leaving her unable to cry out. Sand jammed into her mouth and nose. She was blinded as her face was pushed into the ground. Her panic was overwhelming. She was terrified she was about to be raped and killed. Everything in her screamed to lie still, curl into a ball, and pray for it to be over. Another remote part of her screamed back: Fight. Fight or you'll die.

Struggling against the weight on top of her, Melissa tried to push off the sand with her hands, but it was useless, and she knew it. She stopped pushing and rolled suddenly, trying to hit the man as she rolled onto her back.

He dodged the blow effortlessly and reached for her neck. His fingers sank into the reddish blonde hair, slid through it, circled, and tightened around her neck. The woman was kicking and trying to shout. He sat on her chest and concentrated on her neck and his hands.

A sharp, desperate kick from the woman made him slip. As his weight shifted, she jerked away and rolled out from under him. The man was on his feet before she was. Melissa was struggling to see or to shout for help. She was choking on the sand and knew screaming was useless. She ran.

The man lunged and caught her around the waist and pulled her savagely down to the ground. She twisted and hit him, her fists catching him in the shoulders and the side of the head. The blows didn't faze him. Suddenly, his right fist smashed her head into the sand.

He rolled her over onto her stomach and straddled her, his legs pinning her arms to her sides. Melissa was too hurt to realize what was happening. His fingers went around her neck again, closing until the tips of his right fingers met those of his left.

Melissa had a vague awareness that breathing was hard. There was pain. Her throat was unbearably painful, as if it had burning embers inside. She couldn't breathe; there was no air.

She wriggled and tried to break free but couldn't move.

She had no strength, no air. The pain in her throat spread. She hurt; her whole body hurt. There was a burning in her chest. She wanted to open her eyes, to see what was happening. She was too weak. The burning in her chest was spreading, and then, strangely, it was fading. The pain in her throat was dimming as well. The pain was leaving. She didn't hurt anymore. No air.

The man opened his hands and let her neck drop. Her head rolled slightly as he released her, and his fingers brushed her reddish blonde hair. His first patrol was a success. He had announced his presence to the enemy.

He'd sent the dead girl as a message to his father.

Overhead, the seagulls still circled, oblivious to the death on the sand below.