

AN HONEST MAN

MICHAEL
KORYTA



MULHOLLAND
BOOKS

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK BOSTON LONDON

I

The yacht appeared nine weeks after Israel returned to his father's house, and even from a distance and under the squeezed red sun of dawn, he could see that the vessel was in trouble. Adrift, rudderless, a possession of the sea rather than a partner of it.

Like anyone who'd grown up on an island off the coast of Maine, he'd seen boats adrift before—five of them, he would later recall for investigators—and in four of those circumstances, the boats had been empty. In the fifth, a child had been aboard, alone after cutting the lines at a dock and letting the tide take him. The boy's goal had been to teach his parents a lesson, and Israel supposed he'd succeeded, because the boat was in the rocks before they got to it.

So five times he had watched the meandering, listless behavior of a boat without a human hand to direct it, that drunkard's drift, and five times no one had been hurt. The sixth time would be different.

Why? What was so different about this one? the investigators would ask.

He told them the obvious things—the size of the craft, the knowledge that there would be a crew aboard, the lack of response to his shouts. What he didn't tell them was the way the stillness of the yacht contrasted with the ceaseless energy of the sea and made him think of stories his grandfather had told him in the old Pike and Sons Shipyard, cigar tucked in his mouth, twinkle in his eyes, tales of ghost ships, of frigates washed ashore with skeletons in the hold. Israel spoke instead of the ship's path toward the rocks that

ringed Salvation Point and how he felt like he needed to get out there in a hurry or the damage would be swift and severe.

He crossed the channel in his skiff. He'd had two months of daily rowing by then, and he could make the little boat move when he needed to. That morning, he put everything he had into it.

The yacht was at least a hundred feet long, maybe a hundred and twenty-five, and it was hard to anticipate the rudderless craft's motions. Israel came in from the port side, where he had protection from the wind. The yacht had turned in almost a full circle, as if fighting to point south again, to head back home. He put fenders off the sides of the skiff, aligned his path with the yacht's stern, then rode the waves down and into the stern, the contact jarring even with the fenders down. He got hold of a stanchion and tied the skiff off. When he stood, the yacht's superstructure towered above him, its bulbous radar antennas reaching skyward. The vessel's name was scripted in gold across deep blue paint on the stern: *Mereo*.

It was not a pretty name. The word felt harsh, sharp-edged.

Mereo.

He waited out another wave and then stepped off the skiff and onto the ladder. He was halfway up to the deck when it occurred to him that he hadn't even attempted to call out or get the attention of anyone aboard.

Sometimes you knew.

He shouted a "Hello" then. Got nothing back. He hoped, all the way up the ladder and over the stern rail onto the deck, that they'd abandoned ship, although he could not imagine why they would have. He kept that hope even though the yacht tender that would have been used for shore transport still hung from its lift and the gulls rode the wind at a distance. Later that day he asked people about the birds—tentatively, because he didn't wish to describe the scene yet again, but diligently, because he needed to

AN HONEST MAN

know. No one could explain it. Gulls were not repelled by blood, the detectives told him. They should have been drawn to it.

All Israel Pike knew was that on the morning he'd boarded the *Mereo*, they had not been.

The yacht was a Ferretti 1000, which meant nothing to him. There were stairs with glass-and-steel railings leading up to the raised pilothouse with a flybridge to his left, and just beyond them, the door to the salon, its interior murky behind tinted windows. He should have gone up to the pilothouse first, but the door to the salon was open, so he did what you do when confronted with an open door—he walked right on through.

Sometimes, the person who benefits most from a closed door is the one outside it.

Inside the salon was a full bar flanked by U-shaped settees in white leather. The mahogany accents gleamed. When the investigators asked him what he was thinking in this moment, he answered honestly: He was thinking that he had seen wood like that only once in his life, when he'd helped prep a vacation home on Islesboro for painting. The wood in that house had been cherry, not mahogany, but it had shone like a bride on her wedding day. He'd never seen anything like it before and had not again until he entered the salon in the yacht called *Mereo*.

The first body was slumped beside the dining table—a man in a black polo shirt and olive pants, shot in the head. The corpse should have commanded Israel's attention instantly, but instead he focused on the white carpet, once bright as fresh snow, now ruined by blood. Ruby sprinkles mixed with jets so dark they looked like motor oil. There would be no fixing that rug. People had died here, and yet for one long moment the only question in Israel's mind was: *Who in the hell put a white rug on a boat?* Then reality rode in on the red tide of shock and he focused on the dead man.

He was muscular, with close-cropped blond hair, probably about forty. Hard to tell with so much of his head missing. The bullet that had killed him had been fired at close range.

Beyond him, across that ruined carpet, armchairs and couches sat beside marble end tables, each with a drawer pull shaped like a lion holding a chrome ring in its jaws. High-backed chairs bordered a table set with china and crystal, four glasses at each place. Israel asked about this later. For water and three wines, he was told—white, red, and champagne.

The glasses were all different shapes, he said.

That's right, sir. They are.

Who knew?

He stepped over the body. At the far end of the opulent salon were stairs with polished railings above mahogany steps leading down to the staterooms belowdecks. He crossed the salon, walking on the white portions of the rug and avoiding the blood, like a child determined not to step on a crack in a sidewalk.

Why did you proceed after you saw the first corpse? the investigators asked him.

To count, he answered.

They'd been puzzled by that. They'd been thinking that he'd say something like *To search for survivors* or simply *Because I was in shock*.

The latter might have been true, but the former was not. His mind had accepted what his body already knew: There was no one alive on the *Mereo*.

He'd come to count the dead.

He found two murdered men in a stateroom; given the blood trails, Israel thought they'd been killed somewhere else and dragged there. They were naked, their flaccid cocks pale against blood-stained thighs. Gutshot, both of them. A man wearing a pale pink polo shirt, pants at his ankles, lay in a hallway. He'd been shot in the

AN HONEST MAN

chest. Streaks of dried blood meandered across the floor like lazy mop strokes.

Four dead men.

So far.

Israel thought most of the shooting had happened between the salon and the stairs. It was hard to tell for sure. It was hard to breathe, let alone think about how the place had looked when the men were among the living. Even with the spaciousness and the wide windows granting the view of the bright blue sea, Israel felt claustrophobic, trapped, a sensation he hadn't known since he'd left prison. That was probably why it took him some time to find the dead man in the shower; he hadn't anticipated how the rooms wound on, with curves and corridors, all of this in a boat.

The man in the shower had been shot in the head, the tiled walls now rinsed in red. He was fully clothed. Hiding in the shower, probably. It hadn't worked.

Five dead.

He found the crew's cabins—small, spartan, with bunks instead of king-size beds—but they were empty. He went out to the deck and saw another victim slumped against a stanchion. No more than thirty, dark-skinned and dressed in a crew member's uniform, he'd been shot in the ribs and back. His blood trail suggested that he'd been fleeing from the salon.

Six dead.

Israel went up to the raised pilothouse. There he found one more, this man also in uniform, shot in the side of the neck, the wound drained of blood so that it showed white ribbons of tendons. The radio microphone was still in his hand.

Seven dead.

He walked through once more to make sure. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.*

So much death.

The gulls circled high and at a distance. They didn't even shriek or caw. The first sound he heard other than the water on the hull was the bullhorn from the Coast Guard boat. He hadn't heard the engine as it approached. They asked him about that: *How did you not hear a boat arriving on a calm morning?*

Israel Pike didn't have an answer for that one.

They kept him all that day. Moved him from ship to shore to town police station to state police station. So many questions, so few answers. As he was waiting on the arrival of an FBI agent, he asked the desk sergeant if he could borrow her computer for one minute, one Google search. She had declined to let him sit at the desk and use the police computer but offered to search for whatever he needed so badly.

He told her that he wanted to know what that name meant. *Mereo*.

It was Latin, according to Google, and meant "something earned, deserved, or won, usually by a soldier." The word probably derived from ancient Greek, from an idea of receiving a due portion or allocation from service. It was also related to a Hittite word meaning "to divide a sacrifice."

Before the FBI agent arrived, Israel Pike decided that the Hittites had it right. He did not tell this to the FBI agent, of course. It was not his role to volunteer information. All he had to do was answer questions honestly. He did that.

He would tell them no lies.

It was not up to him to make sure they asked the right questions.