

# FORGOTTEN PATH

A BODHI KING NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**MELISSA F. MILLER**

Book  
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# FORGOTTEN PATH

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BROWN STREET BOOKS

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*“The only clear thing is that we humans are the only species with the power to destroy the earth as we know it. ... Yet if we have the capacity to destroy the earth, so, too, do we have the capacity to protect it.”*

*The Dalai Lama, Ancient Wisdom, Modern World: Ethics for the New Millennium*

*“[M]an is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself.”*

*Rachel Carson (1964)*



# CHAPTER ONE

---

*Gulf Paper Industries Headquarters  
Oyster Point, Florida  
late August*

**B**rianna Allen scanned the dense language of the thick, single-spaced memo, looking for words to jump out at her. Words like “harmful,” “deadly,” and “poison.” But the technical mumbo-jumbo avoided such dire and frightening language, no doubt for good reason.

Frustrated and impatient, she dropped the document to her desk and jabbed the intercom button on her desk phone.

“Yes, Brianna?”

Ordinarily, Brianna found her assistant’s smooth, velvety voice soothing, but she was past being soothed.

“Tell Pete Bickman to get his butt in here. Now,” she snapped.

“Right away,” Leah cooed.

“And Carlos Reyes, too,” she added as an afterthought.

When the scientists presented themselves, standing shoulder-to-shoulder in front of her wide glass-topped desk, they wore matching long-suffering expressions.

“You two look like a pair of hostages. Or like your pet just died,” she told them.

Bickman, the senior of the two, mustered up a sickly smile. “Sorry, Ms.

Allen. We assumed you wanted to see us about the marine environmental report. It's bad, as you no doubt know."

She picked up the report, waved it at them, and then slapped it back onto the desk. "No, gentlemen, I *don't* know. I spent the entire morning trying to wrap my mind around the report, but this ... thing ... isn't in English. What does it say?"

The men exchanged a look. Reyes stuck a finger inside his collar and pulled it away from his neck. Bickman fiddled with the arm of his glasses and chewed on his lower lip.

"I'm waiting." She didn't have the patience for body language theater.

"I'm thinking," he hurriedly assured her. "It's a complicated report—it can't be summarized easily."

"Try."

He bobbed his head. "So, the silt isn't the biggest problem. It's the other things that get mixed in and go along for the ride. Chemicals such as phosphorus and nitrogen—"

"—Are we polluting the water? Killing marine life? Yes or no?"

"Well," he hemmed, "it's not that simple."

"Yes, it is," she insisted. "Yes or no?"

"Uh ... no, not exactly."

Her voice was solid ice when she said, "Gulf Paper prides itself on not *exactly* destroying the environment. That's your answer? *That's* what I should tell the Department of Environmental Protection?"

Reyes dropped his eyes and shuffled his feet on the scraped wood floor.

To his credit, Bickman soldiered on—or tried to, at any rate. "It's possible that inadequate procedures at the development site and certain products—possibly the fertilizer being used on the lawns—are combining to result in some nutrient pollution getting into the groundwater and, conceivably, the waterways. As one piece of a larger, multi-faceted problem, it could be harmful."

She stared at him, letting the seconds tick by. At the twenty-second mark, he began to squirm. At second forty-two, sweat dotted his brow.

After sixty seconds had elapsed, he swallowed audibly before continuing, "The chemicals could accelerate the growth of algae in the estuary and the Gulf, which in turn could harm the fish. And the, um, people. But if the development is the source of the problem, that's on the GC. He's responsible for ensuring the installers and landscapers follow the best management

practices set out by the stormwater, erosion, and sedimentation control regulations.”

She seized on the argument he offered, slim though it was. “So the general contractor is equally at fault?”

“Equally, if not more,” he piped up, relief shining on his face.

“Who?”

“Who?” he echoed like an owl.

“Who is it—the GC?”

His shoulders slumped. “Fred Glazier.”

“Cheer up, Pete. At least now we have someone we can point a finger at. You know the saying: don’t fix the problem, fix the blame.”

Pete’s shoulders rounded even further like he was trying to curl himself into a protective ball. “I’m not sure that’s the best strategy. Glazier has a well-earned reputation as a renegade. He’s a serial violator—not just of the environmental rules. I’ve heard stories about worker safety violations, engineering code violations, you name it. Wouldn’t blaming him raise the inevitable question of why we hired him in the first place?”

“You worry about the science. I’ll worry about the rest of it.” She gave them a cool smile to let them know they were dismissed.

As they shuffled out of her office, Carlos whispered, “I think she’s got that saying backward.”

“Shut up, Carlos,” Pete griped, closing the door behind them.

Brianna waited until their shadows fell away from the frosted glass door, then leaned her head back, closed her eyes, and massaged her temples. Some days, days like this, she wondered how she’d ended up this way—as a cynical, hard-nosed public relations flack. It was a far cry from how she’d pictured herself while she was in college, studying sustainability. She imagined she’d be a modern-day Rachel Carson.

She laughed bleakly at the memory. She’d wanted to make a difference. But in the spring of her sophomore year, the career counseling office strenuously suggested she switch her major from Sustainability in Public Policy to Sustainable Business. She’d demurred, promising to think about it over spring break.

On her third day home, her parents made the decision easy for her. “Brianna,” her dad had said, “if you don’t switch to the business program, the money spigot’s cut off. You’ll need to take out loans for the rest of your degree.” Her mouth was still hanging open when her mother chimed in, “And

don't forget about sorority dues and off-campus housing. Maybe you can get a work-study job in the cafeteria to pay for your meal plan." They left her room, pulling the door shut softly behind them but leaving no doubt the threat was real.

She emerged from her bedroom as a hardened version of her former self. Brittle and cold. But, she graduated with her business degree and landed a six-figure job as the Assistant Sustainability Officer at Gulf Paper Industries. Four years later, she was promoted to Chief Sustainability Officer. Now, she spent her days bullying scientists and polluting the waterways. It wasn't exactly fitting work for the spiritual heir to the author of *Silent Spring*, but it did pay the bills.

Pete's question was valid, though: Why the heck *had* they hired this Glazier person if he was so slimy?

## CHAPTER TWO

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*One week later*

**B**rianna gazed out over the water, still as glass and lit silver by the afternoon sun cutting through the haze. A lazy white gull swooped low and dove under the surface, setting off a slight ripple as it caught a fish in its bill. As the bird rose in the air, the conference room door opened, and Brianna turned away from the panoramic view of the beige sandy beach and the Gulf of Mexico beyond it.

Sharon Samovar, Gulf Paper's chief real estate development officer, and Chad Hornbill, the CEO of the entire company, stepped into the room.

Brianna's breath caught in her throat when she spotted Chad. Was this an ambush? She shot Sharon a cool look, then fixed Chad with her warmest, broadest smile.

"Chad, I didn't realize you were joining us. I would have ordered something more substantial." She gestured apologetically toward the coconut water and fresh tropical fruit she'd had catering send up to accommodate Sharon's latest eating regimen—raw fruitarianism, according to her assistant.

Chad waved off her apology. "Sharon and I just had a four-course lunch at Seafarer's. I'm stuffed."

So Sharon was a fair-weather fruitarian. Noted.

Brianna set aside the pang of hurt that she hadn't been included in the lunch and shifted her attention to her colleague. She was pleased to see the

other women at least had the self-awareness to color slightly under the weight of Brianna's gaze.

“I called to see if you could join us, but Leah said you had a meeting with your scientists.” Sharon flashed an insincere smile.

Brianna made a mental note to confirm the claim with her assistant later.

“That’s our Brianna. Always working,” the CEO boomed cheerily, evidently oblivious to the murderous undercurrent coursing between his CSO and CREDO.

He plopped himself into the chair at the head of the table with a deliberate lack of grace. Sharon tittered and perched on the seat to his right. Brianna poured herself a glass of water before pulling out the seat opposite her nemesis and joining them at the highly polished table.

“Brianna,” the CEO began without preamble, “Sharon tells me you have some concerns about the Triple E project.”

Brianna took a long sip of her drink while she formulated her response. The Triple E development—Emerald Estuary Estates—was Chad's current hobby-horse. He made no secret of his preoccupation. He thought the upscale gated community, an enclave of custom waterfront homes with one-acre minimum lots and prices starting in the low seven figures, was his legacy. His ticket out of the grubby world of pulp paper products and into the sparkling company of drippingly wealthy real estate scions.

So, it was no surprise that Sharon was trying to shift the problems with the construction away from her department. But that didn’t mean Brianna had to sit there and let her deposit them in her lap like a steaming pile of ...

“Brianna?” the CEO prompted.

She placed her glass on the marble coaster at her elbow and turned to him. “I don’t have any concerns,” she said sweetly. She held his gaze until he smiled and nodded before she went on. “But the Department of Environmental Protection does. They sent some questions, which ended up on my desk because of the sustainability implications, so I’ve been coordinating with the science team. As may you know, the general contractor Sharon hired for this project has a bit of a reputation with the state.”

It was an understatement if Brianna had ever heard one, but it hit its mark.

“Fred Glazier? He’s cheap as the day is long. That man squeezes a dollar so tight that it squeaks when you get it out of his hand. But that’s a good thing, ain’t it?” Chad slapped his thigh in amusement.

Brianna's smile tightened.

“Precisely,” Sharon blurted, tripping over her tongue to agree with their boss. “Glazier’s bid was the lowest by a mile. It wasn’t even close. Triple E’s going to be wildly profitable, thanks to Fred and his team. Sure, the bean counters and the suits in Tallahassee might get their noses out of joint over teeny little things. But you know how they are. It’s easier—and cheaper—to pay the de minimus fines for not crossing every T and dotting every I than to comply with every picayune demand.”

Chad bobbed his head in agreement and turned to Brianna. “That all sounds okay to me. You don’t agree?”

“As your Chief Sustainability Officer, I need to be sure you understand that the alleged violations aren’t quite as petty as they might seem. The state sent out inspectors who said Mr. Glazier’s workers aren’t following the statutorily required best management practices for erosion and settlement control practices.”

He shrugged.

“They haven’t been maintaining the sediment pond, Chad. That means runoff flows into the streams on the property, then runs into the bay, and ultimately out into the Gulf. Aside from the regulatory issues, I don’t think you want to buy a bunch of lawsuits from ticked-off homeowners who find out that the water in their new million-dollar mansions is full of sewage, silt, and pollutants.”

The drinking water bit was a bluff, but she willed herself not to blink or look away. In the end, he broke eye contact first, dropping his gaze to the table and clenching his right hand into a tight fist.

When he raised his eyes, they were blazing. “Sharon,” he barked. “Get Glazier in line.” The ‘or else’ was unsaid but not unheard.

## CHAPTER THREE

---

*Oyster Bay Marina  
Oyster Point, Florida  
The first Friday of September*

The line stretched down the pier and snaked through the small park. Judith raised her face to the hazy sky. She imagined she could feel the heat of the midday sun baking her skin, the rays spreading across her cheeks and down her neck to her shoulders and chest. Beside her, Craig huffed out an exasperated breath.

“We’re not gonna stand in this line all morning, are we, Gran?”

She twitched her lips to the side and calculated. At least twenty folks were shuffling from side to side, sweating and waiting. The line hadn’t moved since she and Craig had joined it. The prospect of standing out here for hours didn’t exactly fill her with joy. But she’d probably have done it—if she’d been alone. But she knew Craig’s incessant moaning and griping would drive her mad long before she surrendered to thirst, heat, or hunger and dropped out of the line. Sometimes her grandson acted like a twelve-year-old boy rather than the nearly thirty-year-old man he was.

She coughed gently, testing the rattle in her chest. It was soft and dry. Doc had said the real worry would come when it felt wet and thick. She clicked her tongue against her teeth.

“No. Come on. We’ll get lunch at Saint Lou’s. Today’s blue plate special



is the clam stew.”

“With Miss Lou’s homemade bread?”

She gave him a look. “Well, of course.”

He grinned. “Let’s go. My treat.”

Her eyebrows shot up and disappeared behind her curled bangs. “Must be my lucky day,” she muttered.

They crossed the square to the diner, Craig gripping her elbow as if she might dart out into traffic like a child. There was a time she’d have shaken him off with a snarl. But, though she’d never breathe it aloud, Judith welcomed the support of her grandson’s firm grasp on her arm. She felt she was getting shakier and more unsteady on her feet by the day.

Inside St. Lou’s, the paddle fans mounted on the ceiling turned in wide, lazy circles, moving the air even if they didn’t exactly cool it. The thick window shades blocked out the sun, furthering the illusion of respite. Louisa’s husband, the original proprietor, had viewed air conditioning as a luxury reserved for soft snowbirds and had steadfastly refused to install it. After he passed, Judith thought Louisa would surely spend some of her newfound wealth on a window unit, at least. But the tradition continued. Judith couldn’t imagine baking bread all day long in that sweltering kitchen, but she’d never heard so much as a peep of complaint from Lou.

“Hiya, Judy. Hiya, Craig,” Lou herself greeted them from behind the register.

Judith blinked. “Is Marnie out sick?”

“No, nothing like that. I gave her the afternoon off so she could take her dad over to the clinic.” She bustled around the counter to lead them to a booth in the corner.

“Good luck with that,” Craig groused.

Lou shot Judith a questioning look.

“There’s quite a crowd gathered,” Judith explained.

“Ah, well. I guess you’ll have that when the clinic’s only open once a month. And that’s a blessing in itself,” she hurried to add.

“Mmm-hmm,” Judith agreed as she lowered herself onto the ripped vinyl seat.

She and Louisa understood what Craig and his generation had never grasped. The cluster of small communities that made up the Forgotten Coast wasn’t just left out of state tourism campaigns. They’d been forgotten entirely. It was as if they didn’t exist. She could remember when there was no

clinic. Or gas station. Or gainful employment other than working for the commercial oyster harvesters. Now, Oyster Point had the monthly walk-in clinic, two gas stations, a Piggly Wiggly, and more manufacturing and construction jobs than a person could shake a stick at. She made a mental note to give Craig another nudge to get himself one of those jobs. Then she made a second note to figure out where he'd gotten the money to pay for lunch.

Lou started to slap two laminated menus onto the table, but Judith waved her off. "We don't need those. We'll have two bowls of your clam stew."

Lou nodded and tucked the menus under her arm. "An iced tea for Craig and water for you, I reckon?"

Judith smiled. "My grandson's treating, so I'm gonna splurge. I'll have a glass of sweet tea, too."

"My, my. Isn't that nice?"

Before Lou could drift away, Judith stopped her. "How's Deke doing? Has Marnie said?"

Lou shook her head. "Not so good. His memory's getting worse. Last week, she found him sleeping in his chair with a casserole burnt to a crisp in the oven. He put it in to heat and forgot all about it. She's afraid he's gonna burn the house down."

"Is there anything Doc can do?"

Lou shrugged. "He's not sure. Marnie's of the view that it's just part of getting older, but ..."

"But Deke's not that old," Judith finished for her. He was a good fifteen years younger than either of them.

"Right. And it's so, I don't know, sudden. Don't you think?"

They shared a resigned look. Deke's decline had seemed to come on suddenly, but then, didn't it always?

Lou snapped the towel tucked into her apron as if the action would snap them both out of their funk. "Let me go get your drinks."

## CHAPTER FOUR

---

*Sugarloaf Key, Florida*  
*Tuesday*

A bead of sweat ran down the back of Felicia Williams' neck as she rapped on the door to the old camper. The Florida sun was already hot on this hazy September morning, but that wasn't why she was sweating.

She waited for a beat, listening for sounds from inside the camper, but heard none. She swore softly and knocked again, louder this time.

"Joel? You in there?"

No answer came from within. She hopped down to the sandy lot and circled the vintage Airstream. The vehicle was shaped like an oversized bullet. She was sure it had once been sleek and silver. But now it was dented and dingy. The small windows were set too high into the sides of the vehicle for her to peer inside and were covered by bright yellow curtains to boot. A shade screen shielded the front windshield—affording the interior some privacy and a reprieve from the blazing sun that the Florida Keys was known for.

"Come on, Joel," she grumbled as she scanned the ground surrounding the home. Silt and sand, pebbles, scraggly grass. Not the most inspired landscaping, but nothing to suggest anything out of the ordinary had happened here.

And yet. The tight nut of worry in the pit of her stomach that had driven her here was expanding.

She stopped and squatted beside a potted tomato plant. It was a homely, leggy thing, drooping under the weight of the handful of green cherry tomatoes Joel had somehow coaxed it to produce.

She poked a finger into the soil. Dry. Hot.

Frowning, she grabbed the red metal watering can that sat alongside the pot and stalked over to the hose to fill it. As she watered the pathetic plant, she ticked through her options.

Joel's car—an old Jeep—was parked out front. But the armful of mail she'd scooped up from the box out on the road had postmarks dating back five or six days. And his tomato plant hadn't been watered recently.

None of these facts pointed to anything sinister. Joel Ashland was, after all, a grown man. She didn't know his exact age, but it was north of fifty. Maybe north of sixty. He was a full-grown adult with no spouse, no kids, and the freedom to travel as he liked. And anyone who knew Joel knew he was something of a free spirit—an overgrown hippy.

But he was also the county medical examiner, and he hadn't shown up for work. He had no vacation marked on the calendar for the week, and he hadn't called in to say he was sick or otherwise unable to come in.

Despite his laidback, easygoing vibe, Joel took his work seriously. He might fulfill his duties while wearing a Hawaiian shirt and flip-flops, but he fulfilled them. He was a committed public servant, not to mention the only medical examiner for the Keys—he would never leave his office and all the law enforcement departments who counted on him in a lurch.

More than that, he never *ever* missed First Responder Trivia Night at the Kooky Conch. And yet, that's exactly what he'd done. He'd been a no-show last night, and, deprived of his encyclopedic knowledge of sports statistics and U.S. history, the police department had lost its forty-seven-week winning streak. They'd lost to the Sugarloaf Key Volunteer Fire Department, of all the teams.

Felicia *tsked* at the memory. As the rest of the PD Pedants had drowned their sorrows in half-priced draft beer, she'd called his cell phone repeatedly, her irritation morphing into concern. Then, this morning, when she tried him at his office, and Raven informed her he hadn't come in, her concern morphed into fear.

If his Jeep had been missing, maybe she'd be able to convince herself that

he was off on a bender, had met someone and run off to Europe, or had gotten a call about a family emergency. But his car was here, his mail was piling up, and his prized plant hadn't been watered. But she knew none of that justified entering his home—at least not as an officer of the law.

But she wasn't just a detective. She was also Joel's friend. So she returned the watering can to its spot and stepped back up to the camper door. The door was possibly the sturdiest part of the camper. It looked to be solid steel. Shouldering it open wasn't in the cards.

She eyed the lock. She could pick it. She shouldn't, but she could. She could call the department, claim she'd heard a scream from inside, and have them send a battering ram.

Or she could put herself in Joel's flip-flops and think this through. Joel was apt to have left a key hidden somewhere nearby in case he got locked out. She pursed her lips and studied the weed-choked flowerbed, searching for a fake rock with a hidden compartment or a flowerpot that might have a key concealed underneath. Nothing jumped out at her.

Maybe he'd affixed a magnetic key holder to the camper's undercarriage. She jumped off the step, squatted on the ground, and peered up at the underside of the motorhome. No key holder.

A sudden thought struck her. It was too ridiculous to work, but there was no harm in trying. She returned to the door, gripped the handle, and pulled. The door swung open with a soft creak.

She laughed in disbelief. Who left their door unlocked these days?

*Joel, that's who.*

She made a note to chastise him, but good. Then she pushed the door open and stepped into the dark, stuffy interior of the camper.

"Joel? You in here? It's me—Felicia."

She hesitated, ill at ease, in the doorway for a long moment, listening for movement in the back bedroom area. Then she shook her head. In for a dime, in for a dollar. She pulled the door closed and flicked on the lights.

She called Joel's name once more, louder this time. No response. So she made a quick sweep of the long, narrow living space to confirm it was clear. The galley kitchen, small dining area, postage-stamp-sized bathroom, and the dark, vaguely weed-scented bedroom in the back were all empty. Joel wasn't here.

She rested a hand on the wall near his small refrigerator and inhaled shakily.

*Thank you, Lord.*

She'd been half-convinced she'd find Joel, lifeless and open-eyed, on his floor—the victim of a heart attack, a freak fall, or a home invasion. Finding an empty camper was a blessing.

Her relief was short-lived, though. If he wasn't here, where the devil was he?

She poured herself a glass of water from the jug in the fridge, drank it in one long swallow, and started to search Joel's home, inch by inch, for answers.

## CHAPTER FIVE

---

*Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

The chirp of his mobile phone on the kitchen counter penetrated Bodhi King's consciousness. He didn't shift on his meditation cushion or open his eyes. Rather, he noted the sound—*phone, phone*—before releasing it from his attention and returning his awareness to his breath.

The phone continued to ring. Bodhi continued to breathe.

Eventually, the phone fell silent, and a familiar twinge in Bodhi's right knee took its place in an effort to distract him. He noted it—*throbbing, throbbing*. Then he allowed the pain to float away just as the ringtone had.

Back to the breath.

And the phone started ringing again.

"Bodhi, answer the phone!" Eliza Doolittle squawked from her perch.

He opened his eyes. Technological interruptions and physical discomforts were easy enough for him to block out at this point in his meditation practice. But he doubted the Buddha himself could ignore the outraged screeching of a ticked-off macaw.

Slowly, he unfolded his long legs and rose from the floor. He walked out to the kitchen and soothed the bird by stroking her brilliant blue crown.

"You don't like that noise, do you?"

"Bodhi's phone. *Bringgg. Bringgg.*"

He laughed at her pitch-perfect mimicry of the phone's shrill ringing.

“Sorry, Eliza.”

She peered at him, her glossy black eyes alert and curious. “Who is calling Bodhi?”

It was a good question. Who *was* calling him? He wasn’t currently consulting on any cases, and his friends all knew he spent his free mornings in meditation and prayer. They typically didn’t call before noon out of respect for his schedule.

It was a good question with an easy answer. He crossed the room and picked up the phone. He was squinting at the missed calls, trying to place the area code, when the display lit up, and the ringtone blared to life.

He lifted the device to his ear. “Good morning. This is Bodhi King.”

“Hi, Bodhi. Oh, thank heavens I caught you.”

A woman’s voice—tight with worry, a hint of an accent, vaguely familiar—but he couldn’t quite place it. He shook his head.

“I’m sorry, who is this?”

She laughed. “Duh, no, *I’m* sorry. It’s Felicia. Felicia Williams—down in Florida.”

Felicia Williams? Bodhi searched his memory, and the name and an image clicked into place. Detective Felicia Williams had worked the case that had dragged him out of early retirement to investigate a death cluster on a private island. “Detective, of course. It’s been a while. How’s everything in the Keys?”

She blew out a long, loud breath. “I’m not sure.”

He raised his left eyebrow and waited.

“Have you seen Joel, by chance? Is he up in Pittsburgh with you?”

His right eyebrow crawled up his forehead to join the left. “Joel Ashland? Your medical examiner?”

“Right.” The strain in her voice grew.

“No, he’s not here. I mean, I haven’t *seen* Joel since I was down there for the Golden Island Church case. When was that—2017, or thereabouts?”

“That’s right. So you didn’t keep in touch? Not even professionally?”

“Well, sure. We exchange emails from time to time. We coauthored an article about the case, and we’ve sent each other preprints of other articles we’ve written—for comments or suggestions, that sort of thing.”

“That’s it? No other communications?” she pressed.

“Sure, we text now and then. I was down in Alabama several years back, and I thought I might swing down to Florida afterward, but our schedules



didn't sync up." He frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. Joel's ... well, I guess he's missing."

"Missing?"

"We're on a trivia team together, and he didn't show up last night. I know that sounds silly, but he never blows it off. So I stopped by his place on my way to work today. His Jeep is parked in front of the camper, but he's not here."

"Maybe he went into the office early."

"On foot? Anyway, he didn't because I called his office. He's not there, and he hasn't called in to explain his absence."

It seemed to Bodhi that the level of anxiety radiating off the detective—detectable even through the phone—might be excessive in response to an adult male skipping a day of work—especially an adult male who had a fun-loving, easy-going personality like Joel's and especially the first day back after a long holiday weekend.

He probed her gently. "You don't think he might have taken a spur-of-the-moment vacation?"

"I don't know. Sure, maybe." She lowered her voice to just above a whisper. "But I have a bad feeling about this. That's why I came over to his camper to check on him."

"Okay." He accepted her gut reaction.

In his experience, intuition was often correct, and he figured that was doubly true for someone like Felicia, who followed up on hunches for a living.

"Even though Joel can be loosey-goosey about things, he doesn't just blow off work—or his friends."

"I see. Are you calling all his contacts, or is there a specific reason you thought he might be here?"

"I found your name and number scribbled on a note on his workstation in the camper. His laptop is missing, too. So I thought maybe he came to see you about a case."

"A case?"

"Yeah. Hang on, let me grab the note." Rustling sounded over the line, then she read, "Forensic black swan? Effects of subtox combo multiple toxins, e.g., STX, TTX, CDX. What about other HABs? Possible cluster. Talk to Bodhi." She paused. "Does that mean anything to you?"

He answered slowly. "Well, a cluster could refer to a SUD cluster—a

group of sudden, unexplained deaths concentrated in a single geographic location.”

“Like the folks at the retirement community on Golden Island, right?”

He nodded at the reference to the case that had brought him into Felicia and Joel’s orbit. “Right, that was a SUD cluster. Do you know if Joel has handled any particularly puzzling deaths lately?”

“No. I mean, I can’t be sure. And it’s possible another medical examiner reached out to him for a consult, but the recent deaths here have been pretty run-of-the-mill. At least the ones that have involved law enforcement. You know the drill—suicides, car crashes, shootings, more than our fair share of boating accidents. Oh, a telecommunications guy fell off a pole and broke his neck. But no clusters.”

“Hmm.”

“What do all those abbreviations mean?”

“STX, TTX, and CDX are naturally occurring neurotoxins. They were all present in a designer street drug that was briefly the rage in Canada.”

“A street drug? Could it kill someone?”

“Yes. Have you seen a lot of overdoses down there lately?”

She let out a defeated sigh. “Aren’t there always a lot of overdoses?”

“Sadly, you have a point. But these would be something unusual. The victims might be atypical, or the symptoms they present with could be out of the ordinary for a drug overdose.”

“I haven’t heard anything like that. But I’ll reach out to the narcotics task force and see if they know about a new drug. What’s it called?”

“It was known as Solo in Canada, but distribution was shut down, and the manufacturer entered into a deal with the authorities. I’d be surprised if someone resurrected that exact concoction.”

She barked out a bitter laugh. “Never underestimate the entrepreneurial spirit of the drug-dealing community, Bodhi.”

“Another point taken. Well, if it *is* Solo, the good news is there’s an antidote. Will you let me know what the drug task force says?”

“Definitely. And if Joel does call you, will you ask him to get in touch? Please?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks. Wait—what’s HABs, another toxin?”

“I have no clue,” he admitted. “But I’ll look into it and get back to you.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said distractedly. He knew her mind had already

moved on from their conversation, most likely to the possibility that a new designer street drug was making the rounds.

“I’ll be in touch. You take good care.”

“Mmm-hmm. You, too,” she murmured before ending the call.

He returned the phone to the kitchen counter and stroked Eliza Doolittle’s feathers as he considered Joel’s note. If the medical examiner *had* identified an unexplained death cluster, Bodhi expected he’d hear from Joel sooner rather than later.

“HABs,” he murmured.

“HABs, HABs,” the bird parroted.

He blinked at her. He hadn’t realized he’d spoken the unfamiliar abbreviation aloud.

“What is HABs, Bodhi?”

“I don’t know, Eliza Doolittle. But I’ll find out.”

There was no harm in spending a few hours researching HABs. If Joel did reach out for help, it would be good if Bodhi knew what they were dealing with. And he’d told Felicia he’d look into it. He nodded briskly. Right. He was doing this research to lend a hand to a colleague, not to quiet the whisper of unease of his own intuition.

The parrot harrumphed as if she could read his mind and deemed his rationale utterly unbelievable.

“Okay, that’s enough out of you,” he told her fondly before heading into the study to start his research.

Bodhi stared at the words he’d jotted down in his tiny, precise print while Felicia read Joel’s over the phone: *Forensic black swan? Effects of subtox combo multiple toxins, e.g., STX, TTX, CDX. What about other HABs? Possible cluster. Talk to Bodhi.*

The note jolted awake the dormant memory of his time in Canada and the discovery of the dangerous cocktail of drugs that tore through Montreal, leaving dead and nearly dead college students in its wake. The combination of two poisons found in fish—saxitoxin (STX) and tetrodotoxin (TTX)—with a snake venom—candotoxin (CDX).

The drug was incredibly powerful and potentially deadly. Tetrodotoxin was a thousand times more potent than cyanide, saxitoxin was a thousand times more toxic than the nerve gas sarin, and candotoxin was known to heighten sensation but also cause respiratory paralysis. The high the users chased was an electrified yet peaceful bliss. The outcome they risked was

paralysis and, eventually, death or a prolonged coma. In several atypical cases, the users did not remain comatose but awoke as the living dead—zombies of a sort, shuffling through life until the team working in Canada had been able to reverse the damage to their glia, the so-called glue of the brain.

Bodhi and others risked their lives to get Solo off the streets. The idea that, despite their efforts, the scourge might have reemerged six years later and almost two thousand miles to the south to plague the Florida Keys threatened to overwhelm him. His hands shook, and his heart pounded at the thought. He needed to clear the memories from his mind.

*No*, he chided himself, placing his pen and small field notebook on his desk.

While emotions and thoughts could cause physical reactions like his racing pulse, trembling hands, and rapid, shallow breathing, it was equally true that physiological changes could result in feelings and emotions. Taking control of his breath would still his mind just as much as stilling his mind would help him control his physical reaction—and more quickly.

And right now, he very much needed a quiet mind. He closed his eyes and breathed. He took a full, deep inhale and visualized a slow, long exhale, as if his lungs were a tire with a nail hole and the air was hissing out so slowly as to be almost imperceptible.

BODHI ROLLED HIS NECK, working out the kinks in his stiff muscles, and considered his notes. Could Joel really have encountered a new neurotoxic cocktail? Not Solo, perhaps, but something like Solo? A combination of poisons that damages the brain by attacking the voltage-gated sodium channels or through some other mechanism? For evidence of a new cluster or, worse yet, an epidemic, the drug would need to cause not just damage, but death.

And death was the most likely way for an issue to have come across Joel's radar. After all, medical examiners, as a rule, didn't have living patients. If they did, something had gone dramatically wrong. He exhaled with deliberation. Joel was the only person who could tell him what he'd discovered. And Joel was missing.

He capped his pen and closed his notebook. It wasn't in his nature to insert himself into situations. Not because he didn't care to be helpful but because he believed that events unfolded as they were meant to. Interference was an attempt at control. Control, in his view, was an effort to assert the ego. He'd spent a great deal of time and discipline working to release his ego.

Still, acceptance of reality wasn't a license to be passive, to sit idly by. Joel had wanted Bodhi's help. If he trusted Felicia's gut—not to mention his own intuition—Joel hadn't reached out to him because he couldn't. Joel was gone.

The path was clear: Find Joel, then find the source of the potential SUD cluster.

He returned to the kitchen to retrieve his phone.

“What is HABS?” Eliza Doolittle squawked as soon as he entered the room.

He smiled. She had an astonishing memory for a bird and the insatiable curiosity of a child.

“HABS is an abbreviation for harmful algae blooms,” he told her.

She cocked her head and peered at him as if she'd reached the limits of his understanding.

“Seraphina comes home tomorrow.”

She chirped out a sound of pure joy.

Eliza Doolittle wasn't really Bodhi's bird. And Bodhi's house wasn't really his house. He had a long-term tenant who frequently traveled for work. For many years, she'd rented Bodhi's home (although it had been several years since he'd actually collected rent). When Seraphina was on the road—which was often—Bodhi housesat for her in his own home and cared for Eliza Doolittle. When she was in town, he often visited Bette in Illinois, stayed with friends, or took the opportunity to arrange a monastic retreat.

“Bodhi's leaving?” The bird inquired. “Going to the monastery?”

“Bodhi's leaving,” he agreed.

But he had a different destination in mind. He picked up the phone to arrange a flight to Florida.

## CHAPTER SIX

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*Wednesday*

The cubes in Felicia's iced coffee had melted, leaving her with a cup of watery brew. She eyed it with disdain, then shrugged and gulped it down. She didn't have time to run out for a fresh drink. Not if she wanted to fit in the rest of these calls to the county emergency rooms and walk-in clinics. She blew her bangs away from her forehead. Not that the search had borne fruit. Nobody reported any unusual or new overdoses. As the charge nurse at Little Key Clinic had grumped, "Aren't the usual ones enough?"

Felicia rubbed her forehead. The overextended, cranky nurse had a point: there were plenty of fatal overdoses and hospital admissions in the Keys. But they all seemed to stem from the typical sources—meth, fentanyl, the occasional batch of tainted heroin. If there was a new designer drug making the rounds, she hadn't seen any sign of it.

But if Joel hadn't stumbled onto a drug epidemic, what could his cryptic notes possibly mean? And, more to the point, where was he?

Her desk phone rang. The shrill tone cut through her, setting her nerves on edge. She toyed with ignoring the call. But she couldn't blow off her actual caseload to investigate the disappearance of a full-grown adult who wasn't even an official missing person. Not even if he was one of her closest friends.

She grabbed the receiver and ground out a response. “Williams.”

“It’s me.”

Bodhi King’s melodious, measured voice rolled over her like an ocean breeze. Her shoulders relaxed on their own accord.

“Did you find something?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure.”

Patience, she counseled herself. She’d learned through experience that the pathologist couldn’t be rushed. He was methodical, thorough, and unhurried. Felicia, who was always in a hurry, had found it maddening at first, but she’d come to appreciate that there was something satisfying about proceeding at a deliberate pace—even if it wasn’t a pace she could maintain.

Finally, he said, “The neurotoxins I told you about yesterday aren’t the only ones. I think Joel may have encountered a group of toxins that made him think of Solo. That doesn’t necessarily mean he was dealing with the components of the drug itself.”

“That tracks,” she told him. “I’ve been calling around for the past day and a half. Nobody’s seen an uptick in sudden respiratory distress symptoms or paralysis or any unusual fatal ODs. Just the stuff they’d expect to see.”

“Mmm. Are the Keys experiencing a red tide, by chance?”

“What?” She shook her head at the apparent non sequitur.

“A red tide—a bloom of *Karenia brevis*. It’s a dinoflagellate algae that turns the water red and foul-smelling. I checked the national oceanic databases and didn’t see anything, but I imagine the string test would be even more accurate.”

“The string test?” Her confusion mounted.

“Sure. If you want to know which direction the wind is blowing from, go outside and hold up a string. You’ll see it dancing in the breeze.”

She glanced out the window. Her gaze fell on a swaying palm tree, but surely he wasn’t asking her whether it was windy. It wasn’t clear, though, what he *was* asking her.

“I don’t follow,” she confessed.

“How’s your air quality? Any noxious odors? Dead fish on the beach? That sort of thing.”

“Um, not that I’ve noticed. I know what a red tide is. We do get them down here from time to time. But I don’t understand. How could that be related to a street drug or a death cluster or whatever Joel was researching?”

“I’m not sure it is,” he allowed. “But Joel made a note about HABs,

which apparently is an abbreviation for harmful algae blooms. I did some preliminary checking. While there have been freshwater HABs in parts of Florida, down your way, the main HAB is—”

“The red tide?” She guessed.

“Right.”

She shook her head. Even when there was a red tide, the Keys tended not to get the worst of it. As far as she knew, the Gulf Coast around Tampa and Saint Petersburg was ground zero.

A horn blared through the phone. She narrowed her focus and listened hard, making out the rumble of idling engines, the low chatter of voices, and the sound of slamming metal.

“Where are you?”

He cleared his throat. “The airport.”

“The airport? What airport?”

“Your airport.”

“You’re in Florida? Here, in the Keys?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I thought we might have better luck tracking Joel down or pinpointing what he was working on if we combined our efforts. I hope I haven’t overstepped.”

“What—no! Not at all. I could use some help. Especially because nobody else seems concerned that Joel’s missing, and I don’t know the first thing about HABs or neurotoxins or any of that. I definitely want your help.”

“Good.”

She could hear the smile in his voice and started to smile herself. Then a thought poked at her, and her smile died.

“But I can’t ... this isn’t an official investigation. I’m not sure the state will pay you to consult.” She forced the words out and held her breath.

“I wouldn’t expect them to,” he assured her in an easy tone. “I believe I’m the textbook definition of an officious intermeddler in this instance.”

“A what now?”

“Ah, a lawyer friend describes it this way: you can’t show up at someone’s house, paint their fence without being asked to, and then ring the bell to collect the fee for painting it. I’m offering my services as a volunteer, detective.”

She laughed. “Well, on behalf of the department, I accept. And as a



friend, I thank you. I'm really worried about Joel."

"I know."

They fell silent. Then she blinked at her rudeness. "Oh, I'll come pick you up."

"No need," he assured her. "I have a ride share coming. Could you meet me at Joel's place this afternoon, though? I should be there by two. I'd like to see if he left any other notes about his work."

She glanced at the clock. If she grabbed a sandwich and ate it at her desk, she could get her paperwork finished and head up to Sugarloaf Key in plenty of time to meet him.

"Sure." An idea struck her. "You can stay at Joel's instead of getting a hotel room. You know he wouldn't mind."

"Uh..." he hedged.

"He'd insist, Bodhi."

It was true, and they both knew it. Still, he demurred.

"I don't know, Felicia."

"The door was unlocked," she blurted.

"Pardon?"

"When I went to Joel's camper to look for him, I was prepared to break in if I had to, but the door wasn't locked. I just walked right in. It was like he was expecting company. Maybe he was expecting you."

She winced at how woo-woo she sounded. But apparently, the woo-woo held some sway over Bodhi.

"Maybe he was."

"So, is that a yes?"

"It's not a no," he told her.

She rattled off Joel's address in case he didn't have it.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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**B**odhi stood in front of Joel's door, waved goodbye to his ride-share driver, and watched her pull away from the camper in a cloud of dust. He was eager to get inside to escape the sun and pour himself a glass of cool water. Then he thought better of his plan.

He grabbed his backpack from between his feet and looped his arms through the straps. Once the weight was settled evenly on his back, he followed the car tracks past Joel's Jeep and crossed the road to the tiki bar and restaurant he remembered from his last visit to Sugarloaf Key.

He followed the path from the shoulder down to the lot and stopped. His jaw hinged open. The roadside joint was gone. He turned in a slow circle as if the establishment might materialize out of the empty sandlot. After a moment, he shrugged. His memory was usually impeccable, but he must have misremembered. Maybe it was further up the road, around the bend.

He walked about fifty yards before he spotted the food cart tucked in between two palm trees. It wasn't even a proper food truck with the metal paneling and the round exhaust fan stuck on the roof. This was a little cart, the type he'd expect to see hawking hot dogs in New York or soft pretzels in Philadelphia.

He crossed the lot to satisfy his curiosity and thought perhaps he was more like Eliza Doolittle than he realized. When he reached the cart, he ducked under the striped beach umbrella to seek respite from the blazing sun and read the hand-lettered sign: Mango Mike's.

"Wasn't there a restaurant here before?" he asked.

The teenager perched on the stool behind the cart glanced up from his phone. "Uh, yeah. Mangrove Mama's. It's still here, but it's closer to the

beach, my dude.”

“I could have sworn it was right across from the campsite,” Bodhi murmured, mainly to himself.

The young guy bent his sun-bleached head and returned to his scrolling without comment.

Bodhi studied the menu. Even though the kid didn’t seem old enough to serve alcohol, all the drinks were boozy.

“Could I have a mangrove iced tea? Hold the rum.”

“Sure. I ... uh ... I don’t know what to charge you, though. Nobody’s ever asked for a virgin before.” He gave Bodhi a quizzical look.

“I’m working.”

The look lengthened, starting at the top of Bodhi’s mop of too-long curls, paused to take in his thin green tee-shirt and wrinkled cargo pants and finally landed on his sandals.

“Sure, okay.” He shrugged and dropped a scoopful of ice into a tumbler.

Bodhi noticed the description of the Doc-a-ri, a frozen mango and jalapeño daiquiri concoction. He pointed to the board.

“Is that named for Joel?”

The guy laughed. “Yeah. You know him?”

“I hoped to run into him, but he’s not home.”

The teenager handed him the drink, and Bodhi dug a bill out of his wallet. “Oh, you’re probably disoriented because *he* moved.”

“Pardon?”

“His campsite. He used to be down the road a piece. Across from the restaurant. He got a better deal on that scrubby old site where he thinks he’s gonna be able to make a vegetable garden.”

The shake of his head let Bodhi know what he thought of that plan.

“Gotcha.” Pleased that his steel-trap memory was vindicated, at least mostly, he smiled. “Keep the change. It’s hot as blazes out here.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” He tucked the twenty into his cash box.

Surprised that he didn’t take the change as a tip, Bodhi asked, “Are you Mike?”

“Yeah. This stupid little booze cart is paying for my associate’s degree at the community college.”

“What are you studying?”

“Right now, I’m going for my two-year degree in marine environmental technology.” His eyes lit up as he talked about the subject. “I want to get a

job as a conservation or restoration technician, working on the reefs or seagrass colonies. Then maybe get more education once I've got my hands dirty—er, wet.”

“You have a well-planned path.” He didn't know many teenagers, but this one seemed to have thought through his future with care.

Mike jutted his chin toward the road. “It was Joel's idea, as a matter of fact.”

“What was? The degree?”

“Yeah, and the booze cart. I was tending bar at the restaurant, trying to save up for tuition at a four-year college. I wasn't making much progress, though. Joel told me about the associate's degree program over at the college, and he said I could make a lot more money working for myself. He was right.”

“Joel's a smart guy.”

“Yeah.” Mike nodded, then frowned. “Haven't seen him this week, come to think of it.”

Something about his tone made Bodhi ask. “Is that unusual—for him not to come around for a few days?”

“Uh, yeah. You don't get a drink named after you unless you're a regular. He's here pretty much every day. Well, except for the first weekend of the month.”

“What happens the first weekend of the month? Do you close down?”

“No, I'm open every day. But he goes away.”

“Away? Do you know where?”

“He never said, and I never asked. I assumed he has a lady friend he visits.” He eyed Bodhi from under his swoop of bangs. “Or a guy friend. I mean, I don't know.”

Bodhi was thinking. “Last Friday was the first.”

“Yep.”

“So, you haven't seen Joel since last Thursday?”

Mike squinted and screwed up his face. “No, it was Wednesday night. He might have stopped by on Thursday before he left for ... wherever, but I had to buy my textbooks for the fall semester, so my sister covered the cart for me. I don't know if he came over or not.”

“Huh. Okay, thanks.”

“Take it easy, man.”

Bodhi tipped his cup in salute, took a long swig of the cold, just this side

of sweet beverage, and trudged back up the dusty road to Joel's camper.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Judith was watering her garden when the mail carrier leaned over the fence and said, “Did you hear?”

She paused, the watering can hovering over her zinnias, and ground out a response. “I don’t know, Clara. Did I hear what?”

Oyster Point’s sole postal employee seemed to think her job entailed the delivery of gossip along with letters and packages. Clara always had the juicy scuttlebutt, but her nosiness irked Judith to no end.

“I was just at Saint Lou’s, and Marnie told me one of those monstrosities over in Emerald Estates, or whatever it’s called, sold for over two million dollars! Can you believe it? Two million dollars. I bet it’s a celebrity who bought it. An actor, I hope. Not a musician—they party too much.”

As if Clara would know about the partying habits of the rich and famous.

Judith sniffed. “Celebrity or not, you’d have to be a moron to buy a waterfront house on that brackish bay.”

“Now, Judith. That water comes right in from the Gulf of Mexico. It’s clean.”

“It stinks.”

Clara snorted. “Don’t let Louisa hear you saying that. Where do you think her razor clams come from?”

Judith waved her hand dismissively. “Regardless, there’s not a house on this coast worth that kind of money, and you know it. And if someone was going to build one, you can bet your sweet behind it wouldn’t be Fred Glazier. I mean, really.”

Clara sighed, no doubt relinquishing her dreams of delivering some Hollywood A-lister’s mail. “Yeah, you have a point. Do you remember his

first business? He built that entire neighborhood with a drainage problem.”

“That was his second company,” she corrected. “The first one built the townhomes with the mold problem.”

“Oh, that’s right. Well, maybe he learned something from all his mistakes.”

“Yeah. He learned money doesn’t come with instructions and it’s easy enough to fool people with flashy finishes.”

Clara hooted and reached her arm over the gate. “Here. Looks like you got your electric bill and your social security check.”

Judith gritted her teeth as she walked to the fence to grab the envelopes. It ought to be a federal offense for a letter carrier to look at the return address on a person’s mail. Or at least to comment on it. Maybe if Clara didn’t spend so much time nosing through her mailbag, she’d finish her rounds before dinner time.

“Goodbye, Clara.”

A coughing fit came on, and she had to wait until it passed to return to her flower bed and resume her watering.

“Oh,” Clara said in a fake-casual voice that didn’t fool Judith for an instant. “I almost forgot. Marnie also said her dad’s getting worse. She has an appointment at that memory care facility over in Rooster Creek.”

Judith’s chest tightened. She kept her head bent and focused on the flowers’ vibrant orange and pink heads through the tears welling up in her eyes.

“Did you hear what I said, Judy? Deke’s not doing well.”

She threw her free hand behind her back but didn’t turn around. “I heard you, Clara.”

She waited for Clara’s footsteps to recede, then gingerly lowered herself to her knees and dug her fingers into the cool, crumbly soil. Deke was as good as gone. Once they locked him away in the memory care unit, it’d be a short, steep decline. She, Clara, and Louisa had seen it before. Too many times. Before long, they’d be the only three left from their small high school class still alive and kicking.

She gave herself another few seconds of wallowing before she pulled herself to her feet with a fair amount of effort, which resulted in another round of violent coughing that made her feel like her insides might turn outside. She’d better get her rear end in for a checkup the next time the clinic was open if she wanted to continue kicking.

## CHAPTER NINE

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When Bodhi reached the campsite, a white sedan was parked perpendicular to the Jeep. Felicia sat behind the wheel, the engine idling and her phone jammed up to her ear.

She gave Bodhi a wave, then held up one finger.

He nodded, sipped his drink, and took a seat at the sun-faded wooden picnic table that was perched on the edge of Joel's meager lawn. He passed the time finishing his mangrove tea and watching a large green iguana scamper up a tree and out onto a limb before launching itself onto the ladder on the back of Joe's camper and disappearing underneath the vehicle.

The car's engine cut off. A moment later, a door banged shut. He turned as Felicia walked toward him with a bulging brown paper grocery bag in her arms.

"I didn't see much in the way of food at Joel's," she said in greeting. "So I stopped at the Cuban market and picked up some provisions. Rice, beans, plantains, more spices than you could shake a stick at. If we're lucky, Joel has cooking oil."

"It's nice to see you," he told her. "Despite the circumstances."

It was nice to see her. She hadn't changed in the intervening six years. Same long dark hair, serious eyes, and severely cut business attire—trousers and a white button-down blouse.

She laughed in response, and that hadn't changed, either. He remembered his surprise when he'd heard the straight-laced, no-nonsense detective's musical laugh for the first time. He imagined that her well-guarded, joyful side explained her friendship with the easygoing, devil-may-care medical examiner with a daiquiri named in his honor.



She nodded toward the door, and he yanked it open, then followed her inside. While she dumped her bag on the counter, he deposited his knapsack on the chair inside the door, found the switch for the overhead light, and flicked it on.

With her hands now free, she swooped in for a quick hug.

After their greeting, she said, “Sorry for making you cool your heels while I finished that call. The head of the addiction program in Key Largo finally got back to me. She’s been swamped.”

He blinked. “With something unusual?” Maybe his algae bloom theory was off-base.

“No. Same old crap, according to her. She said one of the local dealers has been cutting his heroin with laundry detergent. It’s pretty ugly. And she’s frustrated because she’s been spreading the word, warning people—but folks are still buying it.” She gave a rueful shake of her head, which sent her low ponytail banging off her shoulder blades.

“Renal failure?”

“Yeah. You’ve seen it before?”

“I’ve seen street drugs cut with just about every substance you can imagine and probably more than a few that would never cross your mind. Even when the word’s on the street, desperate people ... well, they need their fixes, no matter the risk.”

A heavy silence filled the small space.

Then Felicia shook her head. “I did ask if she’d ever heard of Solo or anything like it, but she said the closest thing would be the bath salts episode about a decade ago, and that zombie was more violent than numbed.”

Felicia’s contact was right. He remembered the case of the man who ate another man’s face during a drug-induced psychotic episode. Solo had a very different effect than bath salts. More euphoria, less cannibalism.

“So I think it’s safe to say Joel wasn’t looking into a street drug.”

“Right. And you think it could be an algae bloom?” She frowned, and a furrow formed between her eyebrows.

“I do. As I mentioned, two of the three neurotoxins on Joel’s list are found in marine animals—shellfish and pufferfish. And he wrote ‘other HABs,’ which suggests he was looking at algae blooms.”

She sighed. “I just don’t get it. I called his office back again—and before you ask, no, he hasn’t called in. I asked Raven to check on the algae bloom thing. Nobody has died as the result of an algae bloom in the Keys, like

ever.”

“That’s not surprising.” Most of the neurotoxins found in seafood usually caused a bout of serious food poisoning but, thankfully, rarely resulted in death—at least in humans. There was a reason ‘I must have had some bad fish’ was a saying.

“So where did he run across these harmful algae things if they didn’t turn up in the morgue?”

He tilted his head and considered the question before answering it with one of his own. “Maybe wherever he goes the first weekend of every month?”

She blinked rapidly, three times, then pushed off from the counter on which her hip had been resting. “What?”

He shook his now-empty cup. “The kid with the beverage cart across the road said Joel’s a regular.”

“Yeah, he told me Mike finally named a drink after him because he visits every day.” She threw back her head and laughed her tinkling laugh.

“Every day except for the first weekend of every month, when he goes away on Thursday night, and Mike doesn’t see him again until Monday. Although last week, Mike’s sister covered the cart for him on Thursday. So Mike hasn’t seen Joel since last Wednesday.”

Her smile vanished as her eyes went wide. “Where does Joel go? Did Mike say?”

He shrugged. “He didn’t know. He thought Joel might have a long-distance relationship.”

Her voice was soft and sad when she admitted, “He could. I have no idea. I didn’t even realize he left town every month. Some friend I am.”

He rested his hand on her forearm and locked eyes with her. “Don’t do that. You are his friend. But some people are private. I know I am, and I think you are, too. So is Joel. It’s possible to care for someone and have a true friendship without knowing their deepest secrets and every thought.”

She managed a wobbly smile.

“You don’t have any idea where he might go?”

She shook her head. “I’ll call his office again. Raven might know—if she doesn’t block my number, so I’ll quit bugging her.”

She pulled out her phone and stepped outside to make the call. Bodhi took the opportunity to look around the tiny interior of Joel’s home. The workstation where Joel’s laptop should have been was moderately messy as if

he'd been in the middle of a project when he'd packed up his computer and left. In addition to the note that Felicia had read to Bodhi over the phone, there was a stack of paperwork and a haphazard pile of medical journals.

He flipped through the papers first. They were all official and administrative in nature—supply requisitions for the morgue, vacation approvals for his staff, and a thick memo outlining a new database training program. There was page after page of bureaucratic busy work, but nothing noteworthy. It was the sort of work a man might bring home to catch up on after dinner when he was winding down for the day.

Bodhi remembered the drill. There was never enough time to complete all the paperwork during office hours unless you wanted the bodies to stack up in the freezer while you balanced your office budget line by line. And it was considerably easier to lug home piles of paper than corpses. So, the administrative tasks waited.

He set Joel's documents aside and took a moment to feel deeply grateful that he was no longer constrained in that way. It was important not to lose sight of his great freedom and good fortune. He lifted the corners of his mouth in a small smile before he turned his attention to the journals.

He scanned the covers for their subject matter areas—forensic, anatomical, chemical. Nothing jumped out at him. Then, at the bottom of the pile, he hit pay dirt: Several issues of *The Journal of Harmful Algae, Toxins*, and *Global Food Security*, all with multiple pages tabbed or folded over. He gathered them together and carried them over to Joel's short couch. After retrieving his pen and notebook from his backpack, he opened the journal on the top of the stack.

Before he'd even skimmed the table of contents, the door banged open, and Felicia came inside, pushing her windblown hair out of her eyes.

"The breeze has picked up. It's almost pleasant out there now."

He closed the journal and gave her an expectant look. "Did you reach Joel's assistant?"

"I did. She confirmed that, for at least as long as she's worked there, Joel's been using his vacation time to take the first Friday of every month off. And occasionally the following Monday."

"But not this past Monday?"

"No. I mean, it was Labor Day, so ..."

He nodded. "And I don't suppose she knows where he goes?"

She let out a long, loud whoosh of air. "No. Raven said she never thought

to ask, and now, in retrospect, she's surprised he never talked about it. No funny stories about his weekend shenanigans, no souvenirs on his desk or fudge for the office. Nothing. It's as if it wasn't happening like clockwork."

"Did she get the sense that it was a secret?"

She held his gaze unblinkingly while she considered the question. "I don't think she'd call it a secret. It's more like whatever he was doing was personal. She said something similar to what you said earlier—Joel's so friendly that you fall into a habit of thinking he's a close friend, but, in reality, he's intensely private."

He nodded toward the reading material at his elbow. "I found some journals that might give us a clue about what he's been doing. I'll look through them this evening. Are you staying for dinner?"

She contorted her mouth into an apologetic smile. "I wish I could, but I need to get back. We're doing a big gun buyback at the station tonight, and it's all hands on deck."

"That's a worthy program."

"Joel's idea, as it happens." She smiled. "He put together a public health presentation showing how many shooting deaths each year result from unregistered handguns. He worked with the budget guys to show in hard dollars how much every shooting costs the county and how much money they could save for each illegal gun we get off the street."

"That's an interesting angle to take." He mused.

She laughed darkly. "We went for a beer after the presentation. He could tell the message landed with the politicians. He was low-key disgusted that saving a life isn't sufficiently motivating, but saving money is." She shrugged. "Whatever works, right?"

"Whatever works," he agreed.

He understood that Joel might chafe at breaking the idea down into dollars and cents, and he respected the doctor's willingness to meet his audience where they were instead of clinging to lofty ideals.

"Do you need anything before I take off?"

"I don't think so." Then a thought occurred. "Did you see a set of keys to Joel's Jeep around here anywhere?"

"No, it's weird. I didn't. I guess they're on the same ring as his house key. Although, like I said, the camper wasn't locked. The Jeep is, though—I checked." She shrugged.

"Huh."

“I didn’t search the camper thoroughly. I looked around, but I didn’t go through his things. That felt too violative. But you might find a spare set of keys in the back of a drawer or something. Do you need a car?”

“No. I just thought there might be something in the Jeep pointing to where he goes. A toll ticket or a receipt or something.” He shrugged.

Interest sparked in her eyes. “I should have thought of that. See if you can find a set of keys. If not, I’ll bring some tools over tomorrow, and we’ll pop the lock.”

“Can you do that? Legally?”

There was a long, laden pause before she answered. “Nobody’s seen or heard from him in a week. At this point, we really should open an official missing person investigation. But that’s likely going to cause more problems than it solves. So, let’s say I feel justified in letting myself into his car and leave it at that.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’ll take that as a no.”

She raised one right back at him. “Find his spare keys, and we won’t have to worry about it.”

She let herself out of the camper, and he followed her down to the lot to wave goodbye as she pulled out. She was right. The late afternoon breeze coming in from the ocean was salty and balmy. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the air rippling over his skin for several moments before he returned to the camper to rummage through Joel’s belongings.

## CHAPTER TEN

---

Craig jutted his chin toward the street as the bright yellow convertible rolled slowly down the road, its driver making sure everyone got a good look at the shiny sports car.

“Another new car?”

Jayson narrowed his eyes. “Old Fred’s got more money than God. I guess he’s running out of girlfriends to spend it on.”

Craig chuckled. Fred Glazier’s long line of girlfriends was an open secret in Oyster Point. According to Craig’s gran, the girlfriends used to be mistresses. Eventually, Fred’s wife got fed up, went to some fancy resort on Amelia Island for a girls’ weekend (with one of Fred’s mistresses in her group), and never returned. The mistress had trotted back, apparently thinking she’d slide into the wife’s role. But Fred had never remarried. And now, the girlfriends got younger and the cars got flashier as Fred got older.

“Man, he’s got the life.”

Jayson side-eyed him. “You think so? He’s a joke, dude.”

“Yeah? The joke’s on us, then. He’s driving around in that sweet car, and we’re spending our night sitting on a bench. I wish I had his luck.”

Jayson shook his head. “He’s gross, but luck had nothing to do with it. Nobody ever handed Fred anything. He works his butt off to get it. Nothing’s stopping you from doing the same.”

“Gah, you sound like my grandmother.” Craig waved his hand in disgust.

He and Jayson had been friends for decades. They’d even had a short-lived garage band for a while. But sometimes he didn’t understand the guy.

“I’m serious, man. You need to get a real job. Your gran’s not wrong.”

“Look around. Who in this rundown craphole of a town is gonna pay me

enough to get a Mustang? Huh?”

“I heard Steffi’s hiring.”

“Steffi? You think a part-time job at the Juice Joint is my ticket to the big time, Jay? Get out of here.”

Jayson had a good job, an office job in Tallahassee. He griped about the commute but didn’t seem to mind the benefits or the paid vacation time. Where did he get off telling Craig to take some food service gig where he’d have to wear a hairnet and be covered in sticky citrus juice all day?

“It’s a steady income. Do you really think Keno and scratch-off tickets are the answer?”

He shrugged. “Won fifty bucks the other day. I even treated Gran to lunch.”

Jayson didn’t say anything. They sat like that for a few long, silent moments, watching the cars drive by.

Then Jayson said, “Hey, if you wanna live like your idol, why don’t you ask him for a job?”

“Fred?”

“Yeah.”

“What, like a construction job?”

As far as he knew, Fred didn’t hire full-timers. Craig had seen him pulling into the parking lot of the big home improvement store two towns over so that a group of day laborers could clamber out of the back of a pickup truck bearing a Glazier Builders decal. Fred didn’t support his lifestyle by paying salaries like the one Jayson probably pulled in.

Jayson sucked in his cheeks, indulging in his lifelong bad habit of chewing on their insides. Craig had briefly dated Doctor Webster’s dental hygienist, who told him Jay had more scar tissue on the sides of his mouth than Webster had ever seen before.

“Stop biting your cheeks and just tell me whatever it is you’re trying to decide whether or not to say. Spit it out.”

“He hires guys—off the books—to take care of special projects.”

“What kind of special projects?”

“I dunno. Stuff that only takes a few days. One-off assignments. He pays well.”

Craig was intrigued. “So, an independent contractor?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“Like a consultant.”

“Maybe.” Jayson shifted on the bench.

“Do you know anybody who’s done a special project for him? How good is the pay—I mean, really?”

Jayson huffed out a breath to let Craig know he was getting annoyed. “I don’t know, bro. If you’re interested, go talk to Glazier. If you’re not, then I guess buy some more scratch-offs.”

“All right. Don’t get your boxers twisted.”

The irritation melted off Jayson’s face, and he laughed. “How do you know I don’t wear briefs, you perv?”

Craig laughed, too, and pushed himself to his feet. “Come on, I have some cash left. Let’s get a beer.”

“You treating? You know, to thank me for the lead.”

He knew Jay was only ribbing him, but he turned and looked him in the eye. “If the lead pays off and Glazier hires me to do something that pays worth a damn, I’ll buy you a bourbon at that overpriced tourist trap on the water.”

Jayson raised an eyebrow. “You got yourself a deal.”

As they strolled along the sidewalk, headed by unspoken agreement for Duke’s Brews, Craig felt something like hope stir in his belly. If he could save some real money, he’d leave this dying town and never look back. He’d even take Gran with him, assuming he could convince her to leave.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Fred took his sweet time driving through town at a crawl to show off his new canary yellow baby. He imagined the envy of everyone he passed as a source of energy, fueling his ambition and success. It was a dog-eat-dog world, and Fred wasn't about to be eaten. Against the odds, he'd clawed his way to the top of the heap and intended to stay there.

He'd started writing a business how-to/memoir to tell how a poor kid from a poor town became a big-shot businessman. So far, he hadn't gotten very far—okay, he hadn't gotten past the introduction. But he knew he had a blockbuster story. Maybe he should hire a ghostwriter. Or skip the book and go straight for a screenwriter. Tom Cruise could play him.

That thought put a grin on his face, and he pressed his foot down hard on the gas, flooring it as he blew out of the town limits and took the winding road to his home. With his aviator sunglasses and the wind blowing back his hair, Fred figured he looked like he was straight out of “Days of Thunder.”

He zoomed past the stands of tupelo trees on his right and the long public beach on his left. He cranked the radio, even though he couldn't hear the music over the roar of the engine and the whooshing air.

When he reached the four-way stop, he slowed, checked the perpendicular road in both directions, and blew through the intersection. A mother with a toddler on her hip raised her hand and shouted at him from the curb by the pharmacy. He slowed down again to give her a one-fingered salute, then gunned it.

He was still laughing when he hit the button to open his electronic gates and eased the car up his long driveway. His good mood faded before he reached the six-car garage, though. His Bluetooth earpiece beeped, and he

glanced at the dashboard display. Great. It was the skirt from Chad's office. Again.

He punched the remote button and slid the car in under the door as it was still rising. Then he killed the engine, sighed, and picked up the call.

"Sharon, what can I do for you?"

He clomped through the garage, listening to his sharp footsteps echoing off the stone rather than Sharon's rambling introductory statement.

She didn't get to the meat of her call until he was in his house, kicked back on the couch with a cold beer cracked open and his booted feet propped up on the glass and chrome coffee table.

"...assurances before I meet with Chad and Brianna again?"

"I've already told you. There aren't going to be any more complaints to the state."

"Because you cleaned up the site, and you're complying with the regs, right?" She pressed.

He took a long pull on the beer and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth before answering. "I took care of it."

"Is that a yes?"

"I said it's taken care of, Sharon." He edged his voice with a warning.

She either didn't catch it or didn't heed it. "Fred, that's not good enough. You don't know what a judgmental witch Brianna can be."

"She still giving you a hard time?"

There was a long pause. "No," Sharon admitted, with a hint of whine creeping into her voice. "That's what worries me. Right after we returned from the long weekend, I told her I'd talked to you and assured her you understood how important it was to follow the best practices."

"And?"

He hated when people—but, being realistic, the people were always women—beat around the bush. Why did women make you drag a story out of them bit by bit when it was obvious they wanted to tell you? His ex-wife had been the queen of the doling out a story in dribs and drabs. Drove him straight up the wall.

"And," Sharon continued, the whine in full bloom, "she just nodded and said 'good.'"

"Well, isn't it good?"

"You don't get it. Brianna's the chief *sustainability* officer. She thinks her job description includes saving the turtles and personally ensuring everyone

on the planet has clean air and water. She's a major pain in the ass—always. But with something like this? Something she could use to drive a wedge between me and Chad? She'd be on me like a mosquito in the summertime. The fact that she's not probably means she's up to something. Or she's whispering in Chad's ear."

"I'll talk to her," he finally said so she would stop yammering.

"You'll what?" Sharon yelled.

He pulled the phone away from his ear, drained his beer, and gave a louder-than-necessary belch. "I said I'll talk to her. Send her out to the job site. I'll give her a tour."

He could hear her breath speeding up through the phone.

"Oh, I don't know. Do you think—?"

He cut her off before she could rattle off a list of inane hypothetical questions.

"—You asked me to handle the issue. The issue's handled. Don't call me about it again." Then, worried he was being too harsh with the woman who signed his checks, he hurried to add, "You hired me to a job. Trust me to do it, okay?"

"I do," she assured him. "I'm just not sure sending Brianna to the construction site is a good idea. Even if you are doing everything by the book now, she'll find something to be upset about."

"Then you handle it."

"I guess I could talk to her."

He wasn't gonna sit here and give her career counseling all night, but she needed to go over Brianna's head. "Forget about her. She's your equal, not your boss, right?"

"Right."

"So, talk to Chad. Tell him everything's good. Cut her out of the conversation."

He ended the call, turned his phone off, and wandered into the kitchen to get another beer, promising himself that he'd work on his book afterward. He could do a chapter on handling the fairer sex in the workplace. He'd change Sharon and Brianna's names so they wouldn't come around with their hands out once he was a bestseller.

Keri Russell could play Sharon. Maybe Elle Fanning would be good in the role of Brianna.

He twisted the cap off his beer and tossed it in the general direction of the

trash can while he composed a catfight in his mind. The book would be nonfiction, but the directors would probably take some liberties with the movie. A good fight between two buttoned-up businesswomen would be a hot scene. He grabbed a pen and scribbled a note on the back of an envelope so he wouldn't forget.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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**A**fter his solitary dinner, Bodhi washed the dishes and cleaned Joel's small kitchen from top to bottom. All that was left to do was to dry the dishes and put them away. He pulled aside the curtain to peek outside. The sun was about to set. If he made quick work of the drying, he could walk down to the bridge and catch the last rays before they disappeared behind the waves.

He pulled a kitchen towel from the stack on top of the refrigerator. As he did so, the cloth hit something metal, knocking it from the top of the fridge to the floor. A set of Jeep keys skittered to a stop between his feet.

Dishes and sunset forgotten, Bodhi set the towel on the counter and squatted to retrieve the keys.

He twirled the ring around his index finger and weighed his options. Wait until the morning, when Felicia was available, and search the car with her. Or dig out a flashlight and take a look himself now.

He reasoned that he was effectively a guest in Joel's home and that his host wouldn't hesitate to lend him the car if he asked. So, there was no harm in checking it out.

He paused to assess his logic. It wasn't wholly untortured, but it passed the sniff test. So he grabbed the heavy-duty flashlight from the drawer under the couch and headed outside.

He unlocked the Jeep's driver-side door and slid into the front seat—or tried to. The seat was racked so far forward that his knees and elbows banged against the steering column. He eased himself out of the vehicle and walked around to the passenger side.

He leaned in and reached across to stick the key into the ignition. The

interior was hot and stuffy. He turned on the air conditioning and the interior lights, then switched off the flashlight, cutting its beam.

The radio blared to life, and the lively steel drum music he'd come to associate with the Keys blasted from the speakers. He lowered the volume, then opened the glove box. A mountain of papers cascaded out of the compartment. Expired insurance cards, improperly folded road maps, and a strategic reserve of unbleached napkins from fast food restaurants fluttered into his lap. He stacked everything into a reasonably neat pile and shoved it back into the small space, squeezing it in to fit on top of the faux leather holder for the owner's manual.

He glanced down and spotted a small piece of cardboard, roughly the size of a business card, on the floor near his feet. He picked it up and turned it over. It was a loyalty punch card for the Oyster Point Juice Joint. 'Buy nine drinks, and the tenth one's on us!' it promised. The entire top row of circles was punched, and two holes were punched on the bottom. The tenth hole had a big star printed over it. Joel was three drinks away from his freebie.

Bodhi opened the glove compartment again, planning to stuff the card on the top of the precarious pile, then reconsidered. He slipped it into his pocket instead.

The tropical music faded, and the deejay's smooth voice informed Bodhi that the Keys had just recorded their thirty-seventh consecutive record high temperature, with tomorrow promising to bring more of the same. He switched off the radio and continued his search of the Jeep. Aside from some sand on the floor and a well-stocked first aid kit in the back, he didn't find anything. There were no parking passes or receipts to explain where Joel spent the first weekend of each month. Nothing.

He exited the vehicle and locked the doors, planning his next moves as he walked back into the camper. He'd put away the dishes and read the articles that Joel had marked in his journals. Then, before bed, he'd go online and look up the Juice Joint. It wasn't much to go on, but if Joel was a regular, maybe someone there would know where he went each month.

BODHI JERKED awake from a deep sleep, fully alert. His heart thudded in his chest as he pulled himself up to a seated position. He blinked at the

illuminated face of the clock on Joel's dresser. 4:12 AM.

Something had woken him with a start. An unfamiliar bird call? Light arcing over the window? The camper rocking in the night wind? He didn't know. Then, once he gained control of his breathing and his pulse slowed, he remembered.

It wasn't a disturbance in his environment that had yanked him from his slumber. It was a realization: Joel Ashland was roughly Bodhi's height. In his dream, he'd had a clear mental image of the two of them flanking Felicia as they walked with the shorter woman through the halls of the medical examiner's office all those years ago. Bodhi had glanced over at Joel and met his gaze—at eye level. He was sure of it.

Which meant that whoever last had driven the Jeep, it wasn't Joel. A six-foot-tall man simply couldn't have contorted himself behind the wheel with the seat pushed all the way up. He'd tried it and had failed.

No, given the position of the driver's seat, the last person to drive the Jeep was considerably smaller than Joel. Maybe Joel had been in the passenger seat. But that possibility still left a question scratching at Bodhi's brain: who'd been driving?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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*Thursday morning*

**F**elicia was feeling the burn of Pilates when her phone chirped. She grunted and paused the too-cheerful woman on the video.

“Williams.” She hoped she didn’t sound as breathless as she felt.

“Did I wake you? It’s Bodhi.”

“No, I’m just finishing my morning workout.” She glanced at the time. Not quite six o’clock. “You’re up early.” She recalled he was an early riser, but this was early even for a morning bird.

“I should have waited until a decent hour to call. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I already told you I’m up. Is something wrong?”

“No. I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn’t get back to sleep. So I read Joel’s scientific journals.”

“And the *Journal of Harmful Algae* didn’t send you off to dreamland?” she cracked.

“Shockingly, no.”

“Did you figure out what Joel’s doing?”

“Not yet. But I think I figured out where he’s doing it.”

She tucked the phone between her shoulder and her ear and rose to her feet, wiping her sweaty hands on her tank top as she stood. “You did? That’s progress. Where?”

She paced into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of ice water.



“Someplace called Oyster Point.”

She searched her memory. “Never heard of it.”

“According to the Internet, it’s a little coastal town in Gulf County over on the panhandle.”

“The Forgotten Coast? What the devil would he be doing way up there? That’s gotta be, what, a ten-hour drive.”

“It’s a little over eleven hours door to door, according to Joel’s GPS.”

She blinked and nearly choked on an ice cube. “Wait, what? You’re in the Jeep?”

“Yep. I found the spare keys last night. There was a punch card for a juice place in Oyster Point in Joel’s car. It looks like he goes there pretty frequently. So—”

“So you decided to take off on a fool’s errand? You’re going to drive 700-odd miles to ask if anyone at this juice stand knows Joel Ashland?” She scoffed.

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Well, a guy named Bell invented this thing called the telephone. You’re using it now.”

He gave an easy laugh. “You have a point, but it seemed important that I go in person. I can’t explain it other than it’s a strong feeling. An intuition.”

Felicia went quiet for a long moment, remembering that her gut feeling had led her to call Bodhi.

“Okay, I get that,” she finally said in a grudging voice. “But you shouldn’t just run off by yourself. Let me go into the station and start an official investigation into Joel’s disappearance. I can probably get myself assigned to lead it. We’ll head up to Oyster Point together this afternoon once I have a team in place.”

“Too late. I’ve been on the road for ninety minutes already. I’m almost out of the Keys.”

“I don’t like you running off on your own. It’s not safe,” she groused.

“Look,” he said completely reasonably. “It’s probably a wild goose chase. Using police resources to run down a long-shot lead like this is a sure way to get your investigation shut down before it even starts.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“True,” she conceded.

“And I need you to do something there. Can you pull highway camera footage on the route from Oyster Point to Sugarloaf Key for the weekend?”

“The entire route for the entire weekend? Not a chance. If you’re worried about wasting law enforcement resources, that would be a huge expense. Why?”

He hesitated.

“Bodhi?”

“The seat in Joel’s car was pulled way up to the steering wheel. As if a short person was driving it.”

She frowned and felt her forehead furrow. “But Joel’s at least six feet tall.”

He didn’t say anything.

Her chest tightened. “You think he went to Oyster Point—or wherever he goes—and somebody else drove his car back?”

“Maybe.”

“With or without him?”

“I have no idea. That’s why I want to go to this little town myself. See what I can find out.”

Felicia’s gut clenched. “Be careful, please. And check in regularly.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“I am worried about you. So tell me that you’ll call me when you get there, and then keep me looped in.”

“I will, Felicia.”

“Thank you.” She exhaled shakily. “I can’t get all the traffic camera footage. But I’ll reach out to the Snapper Creek Service Plaza. That’s the one south of Miami. Anyone driving down to the Keys has to come through it. So if Joel’s Jeep left the Keys and returned over the weekend, it passed through Snapper Creek.”

“It’s a start.”

She ended the call and stared unseeingly at her paused workout video. The possibility that someone else might have returned Joel’s Jeep wasn’t an encouraging development. She found she didn’t care about toning her core at the moment. She turned off the video and drank her water, taking small, slow sips in the hopes that the calming rhythm would help settle her racing mind.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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**B**odhi cruised through Oyster Point's small commercial district, searching in vain for an open parking spot. He reached the end of Ocean Street and turned left into a shopping center that housed two restaurants, a bar, and a liquor store. The spots in front of the businesses were all taken. He continued through the lot, intending to turn around and seek out a parking garage or a side street with metered parking. Then he spotted a hand-lettered sign. 'Parking \$10.' An arrow pointed to a road that wound behind the strip mall.

While a ten-spot for a parking space in a town the size of a postage stamp was excessive, he'd been driving for nearly twelve hours, and his stiff, sore back and tight legs urged him to pay the money. So he followed the road, which led past a paper factory and down a small hill. At the bottom of the hill, the paved road gave way to a gravel path that opened into a large gravel lot.

A young boy, no older than twelve, sat on an upturned plastic crate under the shade of a beach umbrella. A small table to his right held a metal cashbox, a sports drink, and another hand-lettered sign. This one read 'Cash Only. Exact Change Appreciated.'

Bodhi coasted to a stop near the boy and dug a ten-dollar bill out of his wallet as the kid popped up from his improvised seat and ran over to the Jeep.

"Hi, mister."

"Hi, there." He leaned out the window and handed over the money.

"Thanks." The air whistled between a gap in the boy's front teeth.

"Can I just park it anywhere?"

A handful of cars sat scattered in no order that Bodhi could discern. The

lot, if that's really what it was, was mostly empty.

"How long are you going to be?" The kid inquired, all business.

"I'm not sure. I'm going to the Juice Joint. Do you know where that is?"

"Course I do. I know a shortcut, too. Go ahead and park in the first spot, right beside my station. I'll keep an eye on it for you."

"Thanks."

Bodhi eased the car past the table and brought it to rest at the edge of the lot. His entire body seemed to sigh with relief when he unfurled himself and exited the vehicle. He paused to stretch his sides and back and roll his neck before locking the door and walking over to the kid's table.

"Can you tell me about this shortcut to the juice place?"

The boy nodded. "Sure can. But it'll cost ya'."

He laughed, and the young entrepreneur gave him a stern look.

"Oh, you're serious."

He was confident he could navigate the two blocks of storefronts without guidance, but he took a closer look at the boy. The toes of his sneakers were worn. His big toe peeked out of a hole in the right shoe, and the fabric on the left was paper thin. His t-shirt was clean but frayed, and he was rail thin. Bodhi didn't know much about kids, but he knew they went through phases when they were all arms and legs and phases when they filled out. He sensed that this particular boy was thin for another reason.

As he flipped open his wallet to take out another ten, he asked casually, "Aren't you a little young to have an after-school job?"

The kid plucked the money from Bodhi's hand as if he feared it might vanish if he waited another second and tucked it into the pocket of his shorts before answering.

"It's not that kind of job. After the paper mill closed down, my brother started charging tourists to park here. He used to work there, so it's okay," he hastened to explain. "Anyway, I took over the business when Mikey left to join the Navy. He said if I stick with it, maybe I can save enough to get out of here, too."

Bodhi studied the somber boy. By rights, he should have been swinging from a tree, executing dangerous jumps on his bike, or curled up in a bean bag chair with a video game controller or the latest book in his favorite series. But here he was, hustling and grinding in the heat to fund his escape from what Bodhi suspected was the only home he'd ever known.

"Don't you like it here?"

“What’s to like,” he scoffed. “Do you want to know the shortcut or not?”  
“Please.”

He turned and pointed toward a rocky outcropping near the water’s edge. The tip of his tongue poked out between his lips as he gave the directions. “There’s a trail that starts near that park bench. It winds through the marina and then curves away from the water and up the hill to the street. Stay on it, and, boom, you’ll come out right in front of Steffi’s!”

“Steffi owns the Juice Joint?”

“Yep.”

“Thanks. Hey, I didn’t catch your name.”

His brow furrowed while he considered this request, but then he shrugged as if dismissing the prospect of stranger danger. “Theo.”

Bodhi stuck out his hand. “I’m Bodhi. Pleased to meet you, Theo.”

Theo gave Bodhi’s outstretched palm a quizzical look, shrugged again, and pumped Bodhi’s hand energetically.

“Don’t worry about your Jeep, Bodhi. I’ll take good care of it.”

“Thanks, Theo.”

He set off for the path the boy had identified and strode through the park at a quick pace. As a rule, he didn’t hurry. He preferred to move through the world deliberately and with close attention. Today was proving to be the exception to that rule.

Ever since he’d jolted awake with the realization that Joel wasn’t the last person to drive the Jeep, he’d been propelled forward by a strong, almost overwhelming, sense of urgency. He’d driven at a higher speed and with fewer stops than was his custom. Now, he was practically jogging along the path. The frenetic energy coursing through his body was unfamiliar and uncomfortable, but he trusted that it was necessary.

He climbed the short hill and came out onto the street directly in front of the Juice Joint, as Theo had promised he would. He paused to slow his breathing and his racing thoughts. Despite his internal tumult, he wanted to enter the juice bar without adding his disruptive energy to the space.

Once he felt steady and calm, he pushed open the glass door and stepped into the shop’s cool interior.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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She shouldn't be doing this. Intellectually, Brianna knew this was a bad idea. And even if she hadn't, her body was sending up a series of unmistakable red flags. Her mouth was desert-dry. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and her hands shook—or would have if she hadn't been white-knuckling the steering wheel.

Despite her misgivings, she careened through the strip mall situated across from Oyster Point's park. It was a nice one—the shopping center, not the park. The park was little more than an uninspired patch of grass that didn't take advantage of its location on the water. The shopping center, in contrast, was relatively new construction and had chosen its tenants with tourists rather than locals in mind. With the exception of the liquor store, residents rarely frequented the establishments located there. Those places were too expensive and fussy—as she'd overheard someone at the Piggly Wiggly explaining the apparent boycott of the restaurants and the bourbon bar.

She zipped behind the buildings and bumped down the gravel road that led to the old paper mill. She shook her head when she spotted Theo Beauregard at his table. But she dug into her purse before buzzing down her window.

“Theo, does your mom know you're out here?”

He squinted at her. “If you know my mom, you know she don't care.”

“Doesn't,” Brianna corrected him automatically. Then she winced. “I mean, she does care, not don't.”

“Guess you doesn't know my mom, then.” He smiled to let her know the mistake was intentional.

She mustered up a sad smile of her own and admitted, “I don’t. I knew your brother, though.”

His face softened, and he caught himself and pasted on a scowl. “Mikey gave me his business when he enlisted. I’m allowed to be here.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but she wasn’t here to argue with a preteen. “Okay. Well, I work for the paper company, so I’m going to pay the employee rate.”

“There isn’t an employee rate.”

She extended a five-dollar bill through the open window. He opened his mouth to protest. Then he reconsidered and grabbed the money.

“Good call,” she told him. “Save the hustle for the drunk tourists.”

“Do you want to park next to Bodhi’s Jeep?”

“Who’s Bodhi?” She didn’t know everyone in town, but she’d never met a Bodhi.

Theo shrugged. “Some guy who has the same Jeep as Doc. And he *isn’t* cheap like you.”

She followed his finger as he pointed to a Jeep that did look exactly like Doc’s Jeep. In fact, she’d have sworn it *was* Doc’s Jeep.

She frowned and shook her head. “Nice. Anyway, no. I’m going to park behind the mill—in the actual parking lot.”

He shook his head as if it was her loss, and she waggled her fingers goodbye before raising the window and continuing across the gravel patch to the shuttered mill building. Her breezy exchange with the boy did nothing to settle her emotions. She’d been stirred up since late morning, when Chad had come from a meeting with Sharon and ordered Brianna to stop investigating the water issues at Emerald Estuary Estates.

If anything, the sight of Michael’s little brother trying to earn the money that his mother either couldn’t or wouldn’t made Brianna even edgier. A lump took up residence in her throat, and pressure began to build behind her eyes.

*Pull yourself together, Bri. No crying. This is probably a fool’s errand, anyway.*

Not to mention possibly a crime. Was it breaking and entering if she had a key to the building? Even if she wasn’t technically supposed to have it?

After the company had shut down the paper mill, but before Sharon could list the property for sale, Brianna had to certify that Gulf Paper had complied with all its environmental obligations—both the legal and statutory ones—

and the voluntary pledges they'd made. And, of course, they hadn't come through on the voluntary parts, which shouldn't have come as a surprise to anyone at the company.

But when Brianna delivered her report, Sharon freaked out. That time, Chad sided with Brianna. He told Sharon a company was made up of people, and people were only as good as their word. Then he ordered her to scrap the plans to list the mill for sale unless she wanted him to take the funds needed to meet all their sustainability promises from her department's budget.

Sharon definitely did not want that. Not one bit. Her annual compensation was tied to the real estate department being profitable. Remediating the company's failures would put the department in the red, which meant she could kiss her bonuses goodbye for the foreseeable future. She'd been fuming when she stormed out of the meeting, and, in the emotion-charged atmosphere, Brianna had forgotten to return the key.

But, the tables had turned, and Chad supported Sharon's position that there was no need to confirm Glazier's claims that he was now in compliance. Chad had ordered Brianna to let it go. Or else. Or else, what, she didn't know and didn't care to find out. She hoped the documents inside would help her change his mind. And, if not, she'd already promised them to Doc Ashland anyway.

She snugged her car up to the side of the building and parked right beside the loading dock. Then she hurried to let herself in through the back door before her courage failed her, and she chickened out.

The interior of the building was dark, hot, and stuffy. No surprise, there. She flipped the metal box to turn on the lights. Nothing happened. That was a surprise. She'd assumed the company had kept the utilities turned on. Apparently not. A frown creased her mouth. If they weren't maintaining a stable temperature and low humidity, mold would grow in the walls. Then Sharon would really have a hard time unloading the property.

*Not your problem*, she told herself, digging her phone out of her bag and turning on the flashlight feature. The light wasn't overly powerful, but it was better than stumbling around in a pitch-black abandoned factory. As she walked through the cavernous building, the clack of her shoes echoed off the walls and her heart thudded almost as loudly. The beam of light from her phone bounced wildly, and she tried to still her shaking hands.

All she had to do was find the file room, grab the archived environmental reports, and get out of there. The documents should have been scanned and



uploaded to the company's digital database. But they hadn't been. The mill closing had been a massive dumpster fire. Slapped with a cease-and-desist order to stop dumping chemicals into the water and an enormous fine, Chad shut down operations and got out of the paper production business entirely, shifting the company's focus to distribution and, apparently, building overpriced McMansions.

Brianna clicked her tongue at the memory. Gulf Paper had, of course, paid the remediation fine, but that was the end of it. For all Chad's talk about honoring his word, he was content to let the building sit empty indefinitely rather than fulfill all the promises he'd made to the community so that it could be sold. A new enterprise would have provided jobs to replace the ones lost when the mill had closed. Maybe Theo's brother would've stuck around. The boy could be playing soccer after school instead of gouging tourists to make a buck.

She reached the file room and let herself in with the second, smaller key on Sharon's ring. A pair of windows set high in the wall let in enough sunlight to make her flashlight unnecessary. She closed the app, hurried across the room to the last filing cabinet on the right, and yanked open the bottom drawer.

It was empty. She blinked. When she reopened her eyes, it was still empty. Frowning, she slid the drawer closed and pulled open the one above it. Maybe she'd misremembered?

Also empty.

In a frenzy, she began opening and shutting file drawers. The banging as the drawers closed drowned out the sound of the blood pulsing in her ears. Where were the files?

She moved on to the next cabinet. It was stuffed full of old employee records. The next held purchase orders, invoices, and receipts.

By the time she'd worked her way around the room, her hair had escaped from its elegant twist and was hanging around her face, her breath was ragged, and sweat stained the armpits of her cream-colored silk blouse. The files she needed—and *only* those files—were gone.

*Now what?* she asked herself, defeated.

She didn't have an answer.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

The small juice shop was bright and busy. Most of the high-top tables were occupied by groups of twos and threes. Every stool at the long bar along the front window was taken. Upbeat instrumental music filtered into the room from hidden speakers. In a stroke of luck, the queue at the counter was only four people deep. He joined the end of it and waited his turn. First, he studied the chalkboard menu hanging on the wall behind the counter. Then, when he'd settled on a beverage, he studied the young woman behind the counter. He put her somewhere in her early to mid-twenties. She wore her hair in long dark braids piled high on her head. A smattering of blonde braids were woven into the updo. The effect was striking. She wore a bright pink t-shirt with the shop's name emblazoned in lime green lettering across the front. Her brisk and cheerful efficiency made him think she might be Steffi herself. His hunch was confirmed when the pair of teenagers in front of him greeted her by name.

After they'd received and paid for their shockingly pink Malibu Manias and wandered away in search of seats, he stepped up to the cash register.

"Welcome to the Juice Joint. What can I get started for you?" Steffi smiled broadly.

"The Tupelo Tonic looks interesting. What is it, exactly?"

"Oh, good choice," she enthused. "You've heard of tupelo trees?"

"Sure."

"Well, here on the Forgotten Coast, we have a rare species—rarer than black or swamp tupelo. It's the Ogeechee tupelo—the only tree that makes the famous tupelo honey. The tonic includes the tree's fruit, a red teardrop-shaped berry called the Ogeechee lime because it tastes like a lime. I blend

that up with some mango, some fresh oranges, and ice and finish it off with a big swirl of tupelo honey. You'll love it." She flashed him another grin.

"I'm sure I will. Could you hold the honey?"

Her smile morphed into a grimace. "You don't want me to do that. Ogeechee limes are *tart*, much tarter than real limes. Some might even say they're sour."

"Hmm." He glanced back up at the menu board.

"You a vegan?"

He blinked at her. "I am."

"Sort of figured. Nobody passes up tupelo honey, not unless they have ethical concerns about stealing the bees' food source. I can use raw monk fruit sweetener if you want. It won't be as good as the honey, but it'll be good."

"Let's do it."

While she bustled around, dumping chopped fruit and sweetener into a blender full of ice, he leaned on the counter.

"Is this your shop?"

"Sure is." The pride in her voice was unmistakable.

She hit the button to blend the fruit, and they fell silent until the powerful blender stopped whirring.

She poured the concoction into a plastic tumbler and rang it up. After she handed him the cup, she gestured to a Lucite card holder near the register, filled with loyalty cards like the one he'd found in Joel's car. "Are you going to be in town long? Take a rewards card if you want."

He paid for his drink and shook his head. "I don't expect to be here long enough to earn a free juice. But I have a question if you have a minute."

"Hit me."

He reached into his wallet and took out the card he'd picked up from the Jeep's floorboard. "I'm in town looking for a friend who's gone missing. I found this in his car, and I wondered if you have an index of customers or any way to track purchases digitally. Could you match the card to a person?"

"No, it's not like that. We're low-tech. I looked into getting an app developed so folks could use their phones, but I don't have that kind of scratch. I punch the cards with a hole punch, the old-fashioned way. Can I see it, though?" She held out her hand.

He handed over the card without any expectation. He highly doubted she'd be able to divine anything from it—unless Joel was the only customer

to be three drinks away from a free juice. If this was even Joel's card, he cautioned himself.

He'd been almost halfway to Oyster Point when it occurred to him that the person driving Joel's Jeep might have dropped the card. Without a way to match the card to a customer, this trip would almost certainly turn out to be a twenty-three-hour roundtrip wild goose chase.

Steffi smiled. "Well, this is Doc's card."

"Doc?"

"Yeah, Doc Ashland."

STEFFI HANDED the card back to Bodhi. He pocketed it and cocked his head.

Before she could move away to clean out the blender or take the next order, he asked, "Do you happen to remember the last time Doc used the card?"

She pursed her lips and thought. "I imagine it was last month. Would have been the first weekend of August."

"So he didn't come in this month?" A sigh rose in Bodhi's chest in anticipation of her answer.

"Oh, no, he did," she responded immediately. "He was here Friday morning. But he couldn't find his card. I started a new one for him and told him to bring this one back when he found it so I could transfer the punch. Very high-tech process, you know." She laughed.

He frowned. "You're sure he was here last Friday?"

"Sure, I'm sure." Her smile morphed into a frown of her own. "You said he's missing?"

"Yes."

They locked eyes as she absorbed the news. After a long, quiet moment, she nodded.

"Well, that tracks. I heard the clinic was closed this month. People were grumbling about it all weekend."

"Clinic?"

She gave him a confused look. "You know, the free community health clinic."

“Joel works at a clinic here?”

“He doesn’t work at it; he runs it. It’s open the first weekend of every month—Friday morning through Sunday evening. He doesn’t close for the month until every last person who needs to be seen has been seen.”

Bodhi lifted an eyebrow. “So he came in for a drink on Friday morning but didn’t open the clinic?”

“I guess not.” She stared at the wall behind his head, trying to recall. “He comes in early, right after I open. Last week, he got what he always orders—two large green energy smoothies. One for breakfast and one to take with him to drink later so he doesn’t have to stop for lunch. I’ve told him a million times all he has to do is call, and I’ll send the second one over whenever he wants it. You know, so it’s fresh. But he always says no, the clinic gets too busy, and he’ll forget to call.”

“And nothing seemed unusual on Friday?”

She eyed him. “Unusual how?”

“His behavior. Was he distracted? Worried? Did he seem ill?”

“No. Nothing like that. He was joking around with me like always. I reminded him about the oyster roast on the beach. Our little chamber of commerce holds one every Labor Day weekend. And even though the clinic isn’t, you know, officially a member, we always invite Doc to everything. His clinic is such a godsend.”

“Did he come?”

She shook her head, and her braids bounced. “No. But we didn’t really expect him to. He usually sees patients for twelve, maybe fourteen, hours on Friday and Saturday. He’s gotta be exhausted at the end of the day. And I guess he has a long drive back to wherever he lives on Sunday.”

Bodhi had to wonder how many people lived in this little town. She seemed to read his mind.

“Folks come from the surrounding communities, too. We don’t have a lot of doctors around here. And, you know, insurance premiums and co-pays ... but the clinic’s free for everyone. Even if you have insurance or can afford to pay, Doc doesn’t take payment. I’ve seen people who I know have good jobs waiting to get in.” She chewed on the inside of her cheek for a few seconds before asking, “You said he’s missing. What do you mean?”

“Monday night, he didn’t show up for a trivia event he does every week. And he hasn’t been to work all week. Nobody’s seen him. So if you can remember anything, anything at all from Friday morning, it would be an

enormous help.”

“Mmm, wait. He got a phone call just as he was leaving on Friday. He had to put one of his smoothies down to take it, so he was standing right at the counter. I wasn’t trying to listen. I couldn’t help but overhear. It sounded like someone wanted to make a donation to the clinic. Doc said he’d be in the office in a few minutes and they could talk in person. He was excited about it. When he left he was singing some Jimmy Buffet song, loudly and off-key.”

“You have any idea who he was talking to?”

“Sorry, no. You may have noticed Oyster Point isn’t the most affluent place. Well, I guess that’ll change when the houses in the new development sell. But right now, I couldn’t name anyone around here who’d be looking to donate money.”

His mind flashed to the boy in the parking lot trying to earn a buck, and he nodded his understanding.

“Can you give me directions to the clinic?”

“Yeah, but he won’t be there. Like I said, he only comes in the first weekend of the month.”

“I know. And the clinic was definitely closed all weekend?”

“Definitely.”

“Still, it’s where he was headed when he left here.”

She nodded. Then, as if she’d just made up her mind about something, she untied her apron strings with a decisive snap and hung it on a hook on the wall. She turned to the teenager who was wiping down the counter. “Take over for me for a half hour or so. I’ll be back.”

She reached under the counter and retrieved a purse, then came around to the front of the shop. “Come on. I’ll take you there.”

||

*“May I be the doctor and the medicine  
And may I be the nurse  
For all sick beings in the world  
Until everyone is healed.”  
Shantideva, Bodhisattva vow (circa 700 CE)*

*“How can anyone—mathematician, statistician, statesman—ever succeed in  
providing a number to represent intangibles like good health, peace of mind,  
joy, or the anguish of disease, premature death, loss of a parent, spouse,  
child?”*

*Jacques Yves Cousteau, The Human, the Orchid, and the Octopus (p. 86)*

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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The clinic turned out to be a somewhat rundown houseboat docked at the marina he'd passed by on his way to the juice bar. As Bodhi and Steffi made their way down the hillside, she explained that the previous owner of the houseboat had bequeathed it to the town on the condition that it be used 'to improve the lives of the residents of Oyster Point.'

"After Mr. Gellman died, it sat empty while folks argued about what to do with it. I was still in middle school, but I remember the endless debates. Then, one day, Doc wandered into town. A kid from my class—Mikey Beauregard—was messing around on the pier with some other boys. He jumped off the piling into the water and sliced his foot open on something on the bottom of the bay. A sharp rock or a piece of glass, I don't know. He came up howling with blood just pouring out of his foot. Doc ran over and pulled him out of the water. He had a first aid kit and was about to stitch Mikey up right there on the pier when someone had the idea to let him use Mr. Gellman's place to do it."

"And the rest was history?" Bodhi asked.

"Pretty much."

"So, how long ago was this?" He tried to gauge her age. "Nine years ago?"

"Ten."

"Joel's been coming here once a month for a decade?"

"Yep."

"Huh." He thought about that for a moment, then said, "Mikey Beauregard—is he Theo's older brother?"

"Sure is. You met Theo already? Oh no, let me guess. You parked in 'his'



lot.”

“Nailed it.”

“You know there’s metered parking on Ocean Street, right? And you don’t have to go too far to find free spots on the side streets.”

“I figured. But it looked like he could use the money.”

Steffi’s expression tightened. “He could.”

They walked in silence until they reached the slightly shabby houseboat situated in the middle of the first dock. It had probably once been chiffon or cream, but its weathered paint had faded into a light grayish yellow. Bodhi followed Steffi onto the small front porch, and they stopped in front of a blue door.

Nothing from the outside of the tiny floating home identified it as a medical provider’s office. A metal window planter held some thirsty-looking purple and pale pink pansies. The doormat in front of the door was nautically themed—navy blue with white lettering that spelled out “Welcome Aboard,” complete with a ship’s helm in the place of both ‘o’s.

“Is there a nurse or pharmacist or anyone here the rest of the time?” Bodhi wondered.

“No. The clinic’s closed except when Doc’s here.”

There was no reason to believe that Joel was there now, but Bodhi pulled open the torn screen door and rapped on the interior door anyway. After a moment, he twisted the doorknob. Locked.

He glanced at Steffi, who hesitated, but only for a moment, before reaching into the window box and retrieving a single key on a silver ring. She handed it to him and gestured for him to do the honors.

He inserted the key and unlocked the door. He paused with his hand on the knob.

“How many people know about this spare key?”

“Just me, as far as I know. During the winter months, if there’s a cold snap, I come in and turn on the heat so the houseboat has a chance to warm up before Doc arrives.”

“Not the air conditioning in the summer?”

She shook her head. “He sets it at 78 degrees and leaves it there when it’s hot like this.”

He nodded and then opened the door about an inch and called Joel’s name.

“Joel? Dr. Ashland? Can we come in?”

There was no response from within the darkened interior. He pushed the door inward, and the smell of death hit him like a blast. He knew immediately what he'd find inside.

“Wait out here, please.” He used a measured tone but left no doubt that he wanted her to comply.

“But—”

“You don't want to see this. Please.” He turned and gave her a serious look over his shoulder.

Her lips flattened, but she did as he asked.

He waited until she'd backed out onto the porch. Then he inhaled deeply, filling his rib cage with fresh air, retained the breath for a moment, and let it out slowly as he crossed the threshold. He flipped on the overhead light at the switch beside the door and raced through the small house in search of the body he knew he'd find inside.

He didn't have far to go. After walking into what appeared to be the examination room, he found Joel sprawled on the floor at the bottom of a ladder leading down from a loft space. His head was wrenched to the side, and his long legs were askew. One flip-flop was still on what remained of his left foot; the other had flown under the padded exam table near the far wall.

Bodhi squatted beside the body and bowed his head. He silently wished Joel's spirit peace and liberation. Then he studied the bloated, putrefying corpse through the lens of a forensic pathologist. Despite the advanced state of decomposition, it was clear what had caused Joel's death.

From the angle of Joel's head, Bodhi had no doubt his neck had been broken. He strongly suspected the trauma had occurred at the C1 vertebra. This atlanto-occipital dislocation would have separated the base of Joe's skull from his spine, leading to instantaneous death through the colorfully named process of internal decapitation. If Bodhi was right—and he suspected an autopsy would confirm that he was—Joel's death had most likely been terrifying but swift.

He rose and stepped around his dead friend's body to stare up at the loft. He estimated that the floor of the loft was only seven-feet high at most. He stretched up onto his toes and could see over the edge of the railing above. Definitely no more than seven feet.

He wondered what was up there. Possibly Joel's bedroom. He didn't want to compromise the scene by clambering up the ladder and disturbing any DNA or fingerprint evidence that might exist. Because his years of

experience—and a healthy dose of instinct—told him this wasn't the scene of a freak accident. It was theoretically possible that Joel's foot had slipped or he'd missed a ladder rung and fallen in exactly the wrong way to break his neck. But it was far more likely that Joel had most likely been thrown or pushed from the loft. A violent fall would better explain the severity of his injury.

Bodhi took a final look at the grotesque shell that Joel no longer inhabited before rushing back through the tiny home and outside. He shut the door firmly behind him and stood with his back pressed against it, gulping in the fresh, sea-scented air.

“Is he ... was that smell ...?” Steffi had wedged herself in the furthest corner of the porch and was huddled with her knees drawn up and her hands laced around her ankles—as if she were protecting herself from a blast. Or something worse.

He turned toward her quavering voice and nodded. “Joel's dead.”

She squeezed her eyes closed and dropped her head to her knees, retreating into a tight cave of grief. He knew she needed comfort, and he would do his best to provide it. But just now, he had a different priority. He removed his mobile phone from his pocket, noting the heaviness in his chest and the tightness in his throat, and pulled up Felicia's number.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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“F elicia? Did you hear me?”

Bodhi’s voice sounded in her ear, full of concern. She had heard him. Had even processed the words—*Joel is dead. Broken neck. Possibly from a fall, maybe. On a houseboat in Oyster Point.* She heard him, but she couldn’t seem to form words of her own.

She cleared her throat, noting the numbness in her hands and the high buzzing sound inside her mind. She gripped the phone, lightheaded, and managed to croak, “Yes. Have you called the police?”

“You are the police,” he told her gently.

“The local police. You need to report his death to local law enforcement.” Her fuzzy mind began to clear. “You should know that. Are you okay?” Maybe he was in shock. It was possible. He was no stranger to death, but it was different when it was a friend.

“I thought I should talk to you first.”

“I appreciate that,” she said softly. She did, and she was glad to learn the awful news from him rather than a stranger. But he needed to inform the Oyster Point authorities so they could do their jobs.

“I know.” He paused. Then he lowered his voice and spoke with deliberate calm, “There’s a chance Joel’s death wasn’t accidental, Felicia. And I don’t know anything about the Oyster Point police. I was hoping you might—or that you could ask around. Make sure they’re ....”

He didn’t want to say it. She understood—it wasn’t his place.

She said it for him. “Make sure they’re not dirty.”

“Given the circumstances, yes. He’s been dead for several days. A short delay while we do our due diligence isn’t going to make a difference.”

She was about to ask what circumstances those were but realized she wanted to ask those questions in person.

“I’ll make some calls. And then I’ll be on my way.”

“You don’t need to come here.”

“Yes, I do.” Her voice strengthened with conviction as she explained, “He was one of ours.”

“I know. And I know he was your friend. He was my friend, too. I’ll take care of this, Felicia. You can trust me.”

“It’s not that. Of course, I trust you. But you’re an outsider there.”

“You would be, too.”

She huffed out a frustrated sigh. “But I’m a cop. You’re a civilian. I don’t mean any disrespect, Bodhi. But you aren’t even a practicing forensic pathologist. You’re a consultant. You have no authority.”

“And neither would you. Not here.” His voice was steady, reasonable—kind even. “I’m not a threat. You would be—a detective from the Keys sticking her nose into the death of a beloved local doctor. Imagine the pissing contest your department would engage in if the roles were reversed.”

She sighed. He wasn’t wrong. But it didn’t sit right with her to stand by and do nothing. She was about to protest when his words registered.

“Wait. Joel was a beloved local doctor in Oyster Point?”

“He’s been coming here for ten years. He runs a free community clinic the first weekend of every month.”

“A health clinic?” Her head spun. “For people who are alive?”

Bodhi laughed. “He did go to medical school. He could treat the living as well as the dead.”

She shook her head at herself. “Of course. I don’t know why that surprises me so much.”

“It’s a side of him you didn’t know about. A side none of us knew about.”

“I guess that’s true.” She sighed again, more heavily this time. “I’ll stay put. Find out what I can about the Oyster Point PD. Keep working on that travel plaza footage. I guess I need to let my superiors know—and Joel’s, too.”

He was right. As much as she might want to, she couldn’t just barge into Oyster Point and try to take control. A move like that would cause more problems than it solved. She knew that. She knew it, and she hated it.

“I promise if I get in over my head or if I sense the local authorities aren’t on the up and up, I’ll call you right away,” he reassured her in a voice full of

conviction.

She believed him because he was Bodhi, and Bodhi inspired belief.

“Okay. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can about the local police.” She caught her lower lip between her teeth. “And, Bodhi?”

“Yes?”

“Be careful.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

Judith was sitting on her porch, drinking a homemade lemonade doctored with two fingers of vodka and rocking gently in her wicker chair and definitely not waiting for Clara to come by with the mail and the gossip. Not at all.

The police chief's SUV sped past, its light rotating and its siren screaming. She stopped rocking. *Don't let it be Deke*, she prayed. Then she reconsidered. Maybe it would be a blessing if Deke had died in his sleep or had a fatal heart attack. Wouldn't that be easier on him than slowly disintegrating? She imagined it would certainly be easier on Marnie.

"Pshaw," she said aloud to nobody before resuming her rocking, "life in Oyster Point's not easy. Why should death be?"

She sipped her lemonade and flipped through her memories as if her mind were a photo album that recorded the highs and the lows of the decades she'd spent walking this earth. She wanted to enjoy her memories while she still had them. Before time tore them from her the way it had stolen Deke's memories.

She settled on the occasion of Craig's birth at the regional hospital over in Ogeechee Grove, back when it was still open. She recalled the excited phone call from her son, 'Mom! It's a boy!' She relived the anticipation that had filled her during her drive to the hospital. She recalled opening the door to the room to see her daughter-in-law, Jolene, cradling a blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms. Judith remembered how the shade of pink of Jolene's perfectly applied lipstick exactly matched the pink of the blue- and pink-striped blanket. The way Phillip had beamed down at the tiny human he'd fathered. And, of course, the moment when Jolene handed her the baby, and she met

her first—and, as it would turn out, only—grandchild.

Footsteps on the walk interrupted her reverie. She blinked and refocused, expecting to see Clara mounting the stairs to the porch, but it was her grandson. No longer a sweet-smelling bundle of coos, but a man nearing thirty.

She smiled in greeting, one foot still in the past, and raised her glass. “I mixed up a pitcher of lemonade if you’re interested.”

He paused, gripping the handrail, and gave her a look she couldn’t read. “Guess you haven’t heard the news?”

“What news would that be?”

“Doc’s dead. They found his body at the clinic.”

The words sliced through her, and she gasped. “Doc Ashland? They’re sure it’s him?”

“Who else would it be, Gran? That must be why he didn’t open up last weekend. He was in there dead—or dying.” He sank into the chair next to hers with a heavy sigh, like a much older man.

She gripped her glass and thought about that. Was there something someone could’ve done? If he’d been having a heart attack, could they have saved him if someone had broken down the door?

As far as she knew, the crowd hadn’t made any real effort to find out why the clinic wasn’t open. The door was locked, so they shifted their weight from side to side and griped and moaned about the unfairness and inconvenience of it. Their reaction—and she included herself in this—was learned through lived experience. Folks in Oyster Point were accustomed to getting the short end of the stick, and, as a result, they had a habit of giving away what little power and autonomy they did have. It was the way it’d always been in Oyster Point and the way it would almost certainly always be.

“Gran?” Craig clenched a hand on her knee and gave her a worried look. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. Come on.” She placed her glass on the side table and curled her hands around the arms of the rocker to use the chair as leverage to hoist herself out of it.

Craig popped to his feet, his arms outstretched in case she wobbled and he needed to steady her. He was a good boy, Craig. A dreamer, sure. On the lazy side. But fundamentally decent.

“Where are we going?”



“To Louisa’s. Folks will gather there when they hear the news. Someone there’ll know what happened. Run into the house and fetch my purse, would you?”

CRAIG STOOD JUST inside the doorway and surveyed the room. His grandmother’s hunch had been right. The diner was swarming with people. A few heads had swiveled toward the door when the bell overhead had tinkled to announce their arrival, but most folks were deep in conversation.

A group of retirees crowded around the table in the window, nursing warmed-over coffee and trading gossip. Middle-aged office workers and laborers, who’d heard the news on their way home for the day, lined the stools at the long counter, theorizing about Doc’s death. The prayer warriors from the Baptist Church had commandeered a booth and were praying loudly for his soul. Not to be outdone, a cluster of nuns from Saint Rosalia’s out on Emerald Island sat one table over, their heads bowed as they murmured what Craig recognized as *The Prayer for the Dead*.

Gran ignored them all. Instead, she plunged into the mass of people and beelined for the back of the diner. Craig nodded to himself. Of course—she was going straight to the source. She headed toward a trio of uniformed cops at a table near the bathrooms. He was surprised that Oyster Point even had three full-time police officers, but if anyone would know what had happened to Doc Ashland, it would be the first responders.

So he blinked in surprise when she made a hard left and detoured to another group of three sitting at a table tucked into the corner opposite the police. She gestured toward an empty seat, and three heads bobbed in unison. As she pulled out the chair and joined them, he shifted his weight and leaned to the side to get a better look at them. A frown creased his lips—it was just a gaggle of old ladies.

Old, in Craig’s estimation, covered everyone between the ages of forty and one hundred. These particular oldsters looked like the women his grandmother played bunko with or the ones who volunteered at the library’s annual bake sale. Deeply tanned faces in various states of wrinkledness. Poufy hair. Big chunky necklaces. She was wasting her time.

He turned his attention back to the cops and squinted. The tall one with

the bushy mustache looked familiar. It took a few seconds to place him, but then Craig smiled and wove through the aisle as if he were making his way to the restroom. He drew up short in front of the officers' table and feigned surprise.

"Hey, you're Todd Stone, aren't you?"

The tall guy nodded slowly.

"Craig. Craig Lowell."

The cop gave him a vague smile, but no recognition lit his eyes.

"We went to high school together. I sat behind you in English."

Todd threw up his hands and nodded more convincingly this time. "Right, right. Mrs. Oliver's class."

"That's it. How've you been, man?"

"You know. Working. You?"

"Yeah, uh, same. I didn't know you joined for the Oyster Point PD."

Todd shook his head. "I didn't." He gestured to the two cops flanking him. "We're with the FDLE. Stationed out of the Pensacola Operations Center up in Panama City."

Craig frowned. "The FDLE?"

The burly cop to Todd's right spoke up. "Florida Department of Law Enforcement. It's like the state police in most states."

"So, you're highway patrol?"

The big guy's nostrils flared. "No. In the state of Florida, the Highway Patrol only deals with traffic-related incidents. Car crashes. We handle the rest."

Todd explained, "Our division helps when local police and sheriff's offices in small towns like this one have major investigations—a homicide, misconduct by a public official, or drug trafficking. You know, big things that a department in a place like this doesn't have the resources or manpower to handle alone."

"Wait. Was Doc Ashland murdered?"

The three cops exchanged a look.

Craig hurried to fill the silence. "I mean, that's why you're here, right?" He gestured around the room. "That's why everyone is here—it's not for the pie. Word on the street is that Doc's dead." He locked his eyes on Todd. "You grew up here. You hafta remember what it's like—everybody knows everything. Gossip's pretty much our only homegrown industry."

Todd gave him a short nod but kept his lips pressed firmly together under

that mustache of his.

The third cop, a thin, pale guy who hadn't moved or spoken since Craig had come over, piped up, "There's no evidence that Joel Ashland was murdered. We haven't begun our investigation yet. We're here at the request of the Miami Operations Center."

"Miami?"

"Vaughn," the musclebound cop warned.

Vaughn scoffed. "Relax, Arnetti. I grew up in a hayseed town like this one. The dude's right. In a place like this, rumors will spread fast, and they'll get wilder by the hour. It'll only make our job harder sifting through all the BS."

The guy called Arnetti sighed but seemed to concede the point. He eyed Craig, then asked, "Do you know what Doctor Ashland's real job was?"

Craig frowned and searched their faces. "He was a doctor. Wasn't he?"

"You think he worked one weekend a month for free, and that's all he did?" Todd countered.

Craig paused. "I guess I never thought about it."

"He was the county medical examiner down in the Florida Keys. You know what that is? It's the coroner. He autopsied dead bodies and determined the cause of death," Vaughn explained.

"Doc Ashland?" Craig felt his jaw hinge open and shut it in a hurry.

Todd turned to his colleagues. "Well, that answers that question. His position as ME isn't widely known up here."

Arnetti jutted his jaw at Craig. "Saddle up, Paul Revere. Go spread the word."

Craig knew when he'd been dismissed. "Good seeing you, Stone." He gave Todd a short nod and walked over to his grandmother's table.

Gran looked up as he approached. "Craig, there you are. Pull a chair over."

He did as she instructed, and then she introduced him around. "Patty, this is my grandson, Craig. Craig, Patty is a 9-1-1 operator. This is Lucinda; she's Chief Rodman's secretary. And this is Iris. Iris is a clerk at the District Fourteen Medical Examiner and Coroner's Office."

The three women smiled at him.

"That's what Doc did," he blurted.

"What's what Doc did?" Gran countered.

"He was the medical examiner down in the Keys. Did you know that?"

Gran shook her head. “No, I sure didn’t. Those police officers tell you that?” She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder.

“Yeah.”

“Well, it fits,” she said, addressing the three women.

“Sure does,” Lucinda agreed. “That explains why that detective from the Florida Keys called to talk to the chief. Lord, but her panties were in a bunch.”

“That’s probably also why those investigators are here. They work up in Panama City like I do.” Iris gestured toward the FDLE officers.

All eyes turned to Patty, whose forehead was scrunched up like she was trying to solve a riddle. She twitched her lips to the side and looked at Iris. “Is there a Bodhi King in your office?”

“What’s a Bodhi King?” Iris retorted.

Patty clucked her tongue. “The 9-1-1 call came in from a man who identified himself as Bodhi King. The way he reported Doc’s death was ... odd. He used technical words. He was completely calm. Very professional. I asked him if he was a doctor, and he said yes.”

The four women threw around puzzled glances, making it clear that none of them knew a Dr. Bodhi King.

Gran eyed Craig, who shrugged. “Don’t look at me. Never heard of him.”

“What made you ask if he worked in my office?” Iris asked Patty.

“Well, it’s such an unusual name, you know? So I did an Internet search, and there’s a Dr. Bodhi King who’s some kind of famous forensic pathologist.”

Iris snorted. “Huh, well, he doesn’t work in Panama City. I can tell you that much.”

“What on earth is he doing here?” Gran demanded.

Nobody had an answer.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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**A**s the uniformed officer lifted the crime scene tape and ushered Bodhi inside the houseboat, he wondered what, exactly, Felicia had told the assorted law enforcement agencies about him. Her text had been brief and borderline cryptic: *V. busy. Will call you later. Local PD and FDLE instructed to provide support. You're my eyes and ears. Gave county ME your number. She'll reach out.*

In his experience, the usual division of responsibility and hierarchy of a death investigation didn't entail departments with jurisdiction ceding control to an outside consultant. Usually, Bodhi provided the support, not the other way around.

But this was very much not a usual death, he reminded himself. This was Joel. His friend, and Felicia's friend and colleague. So, as unsuited as he was to the role of taking command, he'd do it.

He turned to the young, slightly green-faced Oyster Point police officer who was valiantly trying not to gag. "First death?"

She nodded, leaned out onto the porch, and gulped in a big breath of air. "Yes, sir."

"What exactly does the FDLE do?"

Her eyes widened in surprise that he didn't know, but she answered quickly. "They're like the state police. They help small departments like ours when there's a big case. I mean, we don't have any forensics experts or anything. They provide them. Stuff like that."

"I see. Thanks. You should ask one of them if they have any menthol rub or peppermint essential oil. If they don't have anything, the morgue attendants will."

“Sorry, sir, why?”

“If you rub some on the skin right under your nose, it’ll help with the smell. And, please, officer, call me Bodhi.”

Confusion flashed in her brown eyes. “Oh, no, sir. You’re in charge of the scene. That would be disrespectful.”

“Okay, how about Dr. King, then?” Anything but sir. He half-expected her to salute him.

“Yes, Dr. King. Menthol, you said?”

“Right. In a pinch, sucking on a cough drop or mint is better than nothing.”

“Thanks. Does it always smell this bad?”

He gave her a sad smile before he turned away and plunged into the depths of the house. “Not always. It never smells good, but Dr. Ashland’s in an advanced state of decomposition.”

He skirted the FDLE crime scene investigators huddled around Joel’s corpse and stepped up to the ladder. The photographer raised his head and caught Bodhi’s eye.

“I’m just going up to the loft. Have you already been up there?” Bodhi asked.

“Yes, sir. I’ve taken my pictures. Charlie, have you dusted the loft? Dr. King wants to go up,” he called to a technician who was brushing fingerprint powder on the cabinet handles in the galley kitchen.

“Yup. You’re good to go, sir,” Charlie confirmed.

“Thanks.” Bodhi accepted that getting this crew to stop calling him ‘sir’ was a losing battle, so he let the honorific pass without comment this time.

He snapped on a pair of blue gloves, gripped the sides of the ladder, and hoisted himself up onto the bottom rung to begin the short climb to the loft. When he reached the top and stood, he kept his chin tucked and his head bent to avoid the beams on the sloped roof. He wondered idly how many times Joel had forgotten and rung his bell on the rafters.

He moved around the room in a mini-crouch. It was sparsely furnished with a futon along one wall and a metal desk and a metal chair against the other. There was no dresser or filing cabinet. A charcoal gray duffel bag sat on the floor at the foot of the bed, unzipped and gaping open. He looked inside and inventoried the contents: two sets of blue scrubs, two Hawaiian shirts, two pairs of shorts, two pairs of boxers, and a toiletry kit. Nothing of note.

He rose and walked over to the desk. It held a weathered wallet, a mobile phone charger, which was plugged into the wall behind the desk, and a tower of folders. He picked up the top folder and read the label: Deke Robbins. He flipped it open; it was a patient chart. He skimmed the most recent entry. Doc had seen Mr. Robbins in July and had noted memory loss, confusion, and agitation. The next folder contained the notes of Judith Lowell's persistent cough. Craig Lowell had a severe treatment-resistant trunk rash. Clara Forsyth's asthma had flared up. And so on.

He re-stacked the files neatly and picked up Joel's wallet. A handful of twenties, the new Juice Joint card, two credit cards, a driver's license, and Joel's work ID looked back at him. He closed the bifold wallet and placed it back on its spot on the desk.

He frowned and surveyed the small space again. What was he missing? He returned his attention to the desk. Wallet, charts, charger. And then he knew. It wasn't what *he* was missing, it was what *was* missing. He swept up the pile of charts, jammed them into his backpack, and carefully descended the ladder.

He paused to watch two men zip a black body bag around what was left of Joel. After a silent moment, he caught the fingerprint technician's eye.

"Did anyone find Joel's mobile phone?"

Charlie furrowed his brow and shook his head. "Officer Green's keeping the inventory. Hey, Angie, did the deceased have a cell phone on him?"

The officer guarding the door checked her notebook and snapped her gum. "Negative."

He was pleased to see the color had returned to her face. He turned toward the closer of the two men who were about to hoist Joel's bagged body onto a stretcher. "You went through his pockets, right?"

"Right. No phone. Nothing but a note."

"Huh, thanks. What kind of note?"

He jerked a thumb toward the door. "She has it." Then he looked at his partner. "Ready?"

"Ready."

"On three. One, two, three."

They lifted the bag and deposited it onto the stretcher with a loud, wet thud. Charlie, Angie, and the photographer shuddered in unison. Bodhi and the morgue workers remained impassive. After they'd wheeled the stretcher out of the house and onto the porch, he joined Officer Green at the door. The

two of them stood and watched Joel leave the clinic for the last time.

The police officer's shoulders heaved.

"Did you know Joel?"

She swallowed audibly before answering in a soft voice. "Sure. Everybody knew Doc Ashland. He was ..."

"One of a kind," Bodhi supplied.

Her head snapped up, and she searched his eyes. "You knew him, too?"

"He was a friend."

"I'm sorry."

Bodhi nodded. "So am I. You're looking less peaked."

"Yeah, the morgue attendants didn't have any menthol rub, but they gave me some spearmint gum. It really helped."

"It does." He paused and then switched gears. "Did you include all those folders from the desk in the loft in your inventory?"

"Sort of. I wrote one line item for 'stack of patient files.' I didn't know if I should list them all separately. There are a lot and ... well ..."

He waited.

She sighed. "Chief Rodman said we're treating this as a suspicious death for now, but it's probably just an accident. So I didn't see the point in listing every single file. I mean, Doc fell from the loft, right?"

He didn't want to answer that question directly, so he didn't. "Did your police chief say anything else?"

"Just that you're in charge. Well, you and the FDLE guys. Please don't get the wrong idea, Dr. King. The chief cares that Doc Ashland died—everybody in town cares—but we're not equipped to do any kind of extensive investigation. We're a really small department. The chief, me, and two other full-timers, three part-time officers, and the chief's secretary. That's it."

"I understand. I'm taking the patient files with me."

She wrinkled her forehead. "Why?"

"Lots of reasons. One, there are privacy laws at play. Right now, there's nobody to step in and take over the clinic, and we shouldn't leave them here unsecured."

"Well, I'm guarding it."

"For how long?"

She dropped her gaze to study her shoes. "My shift ends at eight."

He glanced at his watch. "So, two more hours. Is the chief posting an officer overnight?"



“No.”

“You can write out a form stating that I took temporary possession of all the files on the desk. I’ll be happy to sign it.”

She considered that for a moment before shaking her head. “No, I guess it’s fine. The chief said you’re in charge.”

“Okay. One more question. May I see the note that was in Joel’s pocket?”

She fished an evidence bag out of her own pocket and handed it to him. He smoothed the plastic to flatten it and read the words on the scrap of paper. He recognized the handwriting as Joel’s, but the meaning was a bit of a mystery: *50k. Blood \$. Greater good? WWBD?*

The officer watched him digest the note. “Do you need to take that, too?”

“No. But I’d like to take a picture of it. Through the bag, don’t worry,” he added, even though Officer Green didn’t seem to be overly worried about the chain of evidence. But then, why would she be? She wanted to believe Joel’s death was an accident.

“Sure thing.”

He took out his phone, pulled up the camera app, and snapped a few shots of the note. Before stowing the device back in his pocket, he noticed that he had three voicemails. He said goodbye to the police officer and walked down to the dock, where he found a bench and sat down to listen to his messages.

Mirabelle Owens, the county medical examiner, had called to invite him to attend Joel’s autopsy at 8:00 AM sharp tomorrow morning. Chief Rodman had called to express his condolences and assure Bodhi that the Oyster Point Police Department was at his disposal. And Felicia had left a message that said simply, ‘Call me.’

He returned the third call first.

“Hey, how are you doing?” Her voice was full of concern.

“I’m okay. You?”

“Still in shock, I think,” she admitted. “But it’s the kind of shock that propels a person into a whirlwind of activity. I have an update for you.”

“What’ve you got?”

“My friend at the Department of Transportation sent over footage of Joel’s Jeep rolling through Snapper Creek. The car came through shortly before nine PM on Friday evening. The driver was wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses. It’s impossible to tell if they’re male, female, young or old.”

“Ethnicity?”

“Probably White. But no guarantees. It’s not the greatest video quality.

Whoever they are, they're definitely short. But we knew that."

"Nobody in the passenger seat?"

"Nope."

He thought for a minute. "Presumably, the driver had a chase car, right? They had to get back to Oyster Point somehow."

"Maybe. Or they caught a ride share to the airport and left the country. I mean, there's no reason to assume they're in Oyster Point, is there?"

"I suppose not. It just feels ..." he trailed off. He wasn't sure why he was sure the driver had returned to Oyster Point, but he was.

"What?"

"You're right. I don't know. Could you have someone trace the plates on the half dozen or so cars that preceded and followed the Jeep through the travel plaza?"

"Sure. It'll take a while, but we might as well be thorough."

"Thanks. Anything else?"

"I had Raven pull all the medico-legal files from the past eighteen months."

"What are you thinking?"

"If Joel was about to testify in a criminal homicide or manslaughter case—or if he recently did and put someone away—they could have a motive to kill him."

He nodded. He'd been on the receiving end of more than a few death threats in an effort to keep him from testifying; it was more than likely Joel had been, too. "It's a possibility. Did anyone jump out?"

"No. But I'm still going to talk to the prosecutors assigned to the cases. You never know. Do you think someone killed him?"

"I can't say for sure. Dr. Owens invited me to attend the autopsy in the morning. I might know more after that," he hedged.

"There's something you're not telling me."

She was right. He paused to formulate an answer that comported with the Buddhist precept of right speech. He didn't want to say something unfounded or harmful. Finally, he spoke. "The way his neck broke suggests a more violent impact than a stumble—even one from a height of seven feet."

"As if he was thrown or pushed from the loft?"

"Yes. But, again, I can't say that for sure—certainly not yet."

"I hear you. What else?"

"His cell phone is missing. And, of course, his keys are, too. I'm not sure

how a dead man gets rid of his phone and keys and locks himself inside.”

There was a long—interminably long—pause.

When Felicia Williams spoke, her voice was thick with emotion. “Oh my God. Joel.”

He waited a beat for her to process the truth. Then he said, “I’m not sure anyone at the scene has pieced it together yet.”

“You’re not serious?”

“Well, I didn’t talk to the FDLE investigators. Just the CSI team and one uniformed officer from Oyster Point. She was green—I mean, green as in a rookie. Well, also green.”

“First body?”

“Yeah.”

She sighed. “I’ll text you the number of the officer in charge of the FDLE team. You should talk to him directly.”

“Okay. One last thing. Do you happen to know what the letters ‘WWBD’ mean?”

She laughed, a genuine belly laugh. He raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Felicia, are you okay?”

“Yes,” she wheezed, trying to catch her breath. “I do know what it means. It’s a running—well, not a joke, exactly—it’s a question Joel and I asked ourselves and each other all the time.”

“What does it mean?”

“It stands for ‘What would Bodhi do’?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

**A**s soon as Theo told Brianna the news, she headed up the hill to the Juice Joint without giving it conscious thought. It was an instinctive reaction to a crisis or disaster. People were hard-wired to seek out company in the aftermath of tragedy. And much like water seeking its own level, they flowed to people like them. It was a truth of both hydrostatics and social dynamics.

The old-timers would gather at Saint Lou's, the outsiders and newcomers would meet at the Juice Joint, and, if she had to guess, the new-money crew and tourists at the Oak Barrel would toss back their twenty-dollar doubles of bourbon without so much as a word to Doc Ashland's memory. Brianna had decent health insurance, but there was a dearth of healthcare providers in town, so she'd been to the clinic a time or two. Doc Ashland had been a good man.

She pushed open the door to the juice bar and made her way through the sea of people who were milling around, speaking in hushed, shocked tones. She reached the counter and caught Steffi's eye.

"Is it true?"

Steffi nodded and slid a glass across the surface. "I was there when Bodhi found him."

*Bodhi, again. Who is this guy?*

"Oh my goodness, that's awful!"

"It was." Steffi's expression was a study in misery.

"I'm so sorry. I can't even imagine." Brianna raised her glass to her nose and took a sniff. "What is this?"

"A G&TT—it's gin and Tupelo Tonic with lime syrup. It's some

concoction Doc came up with at the town holiday party last year. Bottoms up.” Steffi lifted her own glass and took a long swallow.

“To Doc.” Brianna took a tentative sip. “That’s actually pretty good.”

“You don’t have to sound so surprised.” Steffi feigned outrage, but she was smiling.

Brianna leaned across the counter and dropped her voice to a whisper. “So what *happened*?”

“I guess he took a tumble down the ladder from that loft.”

“Did you see him?”

Steffi shook her head. “No. I used the spare key to unlock the door, and the smell ....” She shuddered and stopped.

“What were you even doing there?”

“A friend of Doc’s came in this afternoon, asking about him—”

“Bodhi King?”

“Right.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s a doctor, like Doc.” Steffi tilted her head and squinted at Brianna. “Did you know Doc was a medical examiner?”

“Is that different from a regular doctor?”

“He’s a regular doctor, but he’s also a coroner.”

Steffi was slipping back and forth between the present and past tense when she talked about Doc. Brianna understood. It was impossible to keep the fact that he was gone, really gone, cemented in her brain. It kept flitting away, and then she’d remember.

She considered what Steffi had just said. “So, Dr. King is also a coroner or a medical examiner or whatever?”

“I looked him up after we found Doc. He’s like famous.”

“Really?”

“I mean, not *famous*. He’s an internationally renowned forensic pathologist who specializes in consulting on impossible cases.”

“But that’s not why he’s here. Or is it?”

“No. Like I said. He knows Doc from a case, and they became friends. People in the medical examiner’s office or the police department or whatever got worried because Doc never came back home to Sugarloaf Key. Can you believe I didn’t even know where he lived?”

“Yeah, I can, actually,” Brianna said as she realized she’d never once asked Doc Ashland anything about himself.

“Sugarloaf Key is far from here.”

“I know.”

They lapsed into silence. The door opened again, and Steffi craned her neck to scope out the newcomer. After a second, she raised her arms above her head and called out, “Bodhi, over here!”

Brianna swiveled around and spotted a tall, lanky man with curly hair that came almost to his shoulders, weaving through the crowd. He wore a backpack slung over his shoulders. He looked like a graduate student in philosophy or medieval poetry or something equally esoteric.

“That’s him?”

“Yep.”

“He doesn’t look like an internationally renowned forensic pathology god.”

“Yeah, well, Doc Ashland looked like an aging surfer.”

“True. Or the lead singer of a bad Jimmy Buffett cover band.”

They stifled their giggles when Bodhi King joined them at the counter.

“Please, laugh. It’s healing,” he assured them.

“We were just remembering Doc’s, uh, distinctive sartorial style,” Steffi explained.

“I believe it’s called overgrown beach bum,” Bodhi said in a serious tone before breaking into a gentle smile of his own.

Brianna smiled, too.

Steffi gestured toward her. “Bodhi, this is Brianna Allen. Brianna is the sustainability something or other at the paper company.”

“Chief Sustainability Officer,” she provided, extending her hand.

“Bodhi King. Pleased to meet you, Brianna. Although I wish the circumstances were different.”

“We all do,” she agreed.

His grip was firm, but not too firm, and his hand was warm in hers. She felt the full focus of his attention as he shook her hand.

“Can I get you a drink in honor of Doc?” Steffi asked.

“It’s not a Doc-a-ri, is it?” Bodhi countered.

“A what?”

“Some concoction the bar cart near his home serves. It’s named after him.”

“Oh. Well, this concoction was created by Doc, but he called it a gin and tupelo tonic.”

“I’d love one. Hold the gin.”

“And the honey, right?”

“Right.”

Steffi smiled and ducked behind her massive blender.

“How did Doc die?” Brianna blurted. “Did he really fall from the loft?”

“The police investigation’s barely gotten underway. So I’m only speaking for myself, and unofficially.”

He paused and she nodded her understanding.

Then he went on, “I believe he died instantly when his spine separated from his skull as the result of severe trauma. I found him at the base of the loft ladder, so it’s reasonable to posit that he fell.” He spoke slowly, choosing his words with evident care.

He studied her face while she absorbed his answer. She felt exposed suddenly, as if she were one of the translucent moon jellies that bobbed around in the Gulf, blue-veined and see-through, floating along on the current. A shiver of unease tickled her spine.

*You’re being ridiculous. He can’t read your mind.*

She shook off the feeling and refocused on the conversation. “How did you know you’d find him here? Did you know about the clinic?”

“I didn’t know he’d be here, and I didn’t know about the clinic. I found a Juice Joint loyalty card on the floor of his Jeep. I didn’t have any other leads, so I drove up here to check it out.”

“In Doc’s Jeep?”

He blinked, and she realized the question sounded like a non sequitur.

“Theo,” she explained. “He mentioned your name and that you have a Jeep like Doc’s. But it’s not *like Doc’s*, it *is* Doc’s Jeep. Right?”

“That’s right.”

She frowned. “How did his Jeep get back to Sugarloaf Key if he was dead on the floor of the houseboat?”

“*That* is an excellent question.” He continued to watch her with quick alert eyes.

She forced herself not to squirm under his gaze and drained her glass. “Well, I should go. I just stopped in to have a drink in Doc’s memory. I have to be at work early in the morning.”

“At the paper company?”

“Right. I work for Gulf Paper Company, but we do a lot more than manufacture paper. In fact, we don’t even make paper anymore. The

company shut down the last mill a few years ago.”

“So, what does your company do?”

“We distribute paper products. But recently, we’ve moved into newer technologies. Paper is single-use, which, of course, isn’t very sustainable. We also have a real estate division that’s developing a parcel of land on the estuary into a gated residential community.”

“A housing development seems like an unusual project for a paper company.”

“It is, and it isn’t. The company owns a large piece of property near Emerald Island. You didn’t hear this from me, but the original plan for the land was to use it as a dumping site to get rid of waste and by-products from the paper manufacturing process.”

“Now *that’s* not very sustainable.”

She acknowledged the truth with a laugh. “No, it’s not. But I’m pleased to say the company never acted on those plans.”

“Because of you?”

“Nope. It’s the other way around, actually.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

Steffi handed him a glass of nonalcoholic tonic. He gave her a grateful smile and sipped on the drink while he waited for Brianna to explain.

“When the company’s plans came to light, the community reaction was about what you might expect.”

“Unfavorable?”

“To put it mildly, yes. Gulf Paper scrapped the plan and created a sustainability department. I was their second hire. And now, I’m a C-suite executive there.”

A question sparked in his eyes. “Do you happen to know anything about algae blooms?”

She coughed. Thank goodness she’d finished her drink. Otherwise, she had no doubt she’d have done a full-blown spit take. “I’m sorry, did you say algae blooms?”

“Yes. The red tides that are common in this area, specifically.”

Her heart thudded so loudly that she was half-convinced he’d hear it. “I mean, everyone who lives on the coast knows about red tides.”

“Sure. Do you have any specialized knowledge? I think Doctor Ashland was working on something related to the red tide, but I don’t know what. Maybe you have a better understanding of the marine ecosystem around



here?”

She pressed her lips together, tented her eyebrows, and shook her head slowly. “Sorry. I don’t know anything about that.” She slid off her stool and grabbed her purse from the countertop. “It’s been nice talking to you, but I really do have to go.”

She waved goodbye to Steffi and bolted from the juice bar.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Fred sat at the long, curved bar and nursed his pour of Pappy Van Winkle. Truth be told, he didn't especially like bourbon, but Pappy was the best—or at least the most expensive—and that, Fred did like.

In the mirror that ran the length of the wall behind the bar, he watched the reflections of the tourists eating and chatting in the dining room. At the same time, he half-listened to the bartenders and servers gossiping about Doc Ashland's death. Word on the street was that Doc had taken a header down the ladder from his loft. He wondered why nobody else seemed to find it odd that FDLE investigators had been sent down from Panama City in response to an apparent accident.

Lack of imagination, he finally decided. Not everyone had the mind of a writer.

He strained to eavesdrop on the hushed conversation between Tony, the fresh-faced bartender, and the hostess.

"...Bodhi King ... forensic expert ... Pittsburgh."

The hostess scurried toward her station as the door at the top of the stairs opened. Fred leaned across the bar and caught the bartender's eye.

"You need another, Mr. Glazier?"

He eyed his mostly full bourbon glass. "Jeez, no. A glass of water would be good."

"Yes, sir."

As Tony filled a glass with ice and water, Fred said, "Did I hear that they brought in a forensics guy from Pennsylvania to investigate Doc's death?"

Tony pursed his lips and juttied his chin toward the hostess station. "Allegedly. She usually knows what's going on in town. Her uncle's a cook

at St. Lou's. He hears everything.”

“Wonder why?” he mused.

“Why what?”

“Why they'd bring in some big shot all the way from Pittsburgh?”

Tony shrugged and turned his attention back to the hostess station. Fred followed his gaze. She was trying to deter a guy in his late twenties or early thirties from entering the restaurant. Fred eyed him. Backward baseball cap, t-shirt with a faded logo emblazoned across the chest, jeans that could stand to be washed, and sneakers. He looked more like a Duke's Brews guy than someone who'd hang out in this place.

“...Just want to get a drink,” the guy protested.

Tony frowned. So did Fred, although he expected they had different reasons. He had an allergic reaction to snootiness.

He raised his voice and called over to the hostess, “What's the problem, honey? My friend's meeting me for a glass of Pappy.”

She grimaced and threw Tony a desperate glance.

“Sorry, Mr. Glazier. We didn't realize he was with you,” Tony said in a hurry. He raised his shoulders and gave the hostess a look that clearly said ‘There's nothing we can do.’

She pasted on a fake smile and led the guy over to the bar. As he took the stool next to Fred's, she said, “I apologize for the misunderstanding, sir. For future reference, the Oak Barrel does have a dress code.”

The guy scoffed, “Don't worry. I won't be back.”

Tony placed a glass of the pricey liquor in front of him.

He turned toward Fred and raised it in a salute before putting it to his lips, “Thanks, Mr. Glazier.”

Fred watched him grimace and shudder as the liquid hit his throat. “My pleasure, kid,” he said through his laughter.

He returned the glasses to the bar, wiped his hand on his dirty jeans, and stuck it out, “Craig Lowell.”

Fred gave it a quick shake. “Lowell? You related to Judy?”

“Yeah, she's my grandmother.” He took a deep breath and continued, “Matter of fact, I was driving her home from the diner when I spotted your Mustang in the lot. I did come in to see you.”

“Oh, yeah? Why's that?”

“I heard you sometimes hire, uh, consultants.”

“You're a consultant?” He eyed Lowell.

Lowell stammered, “Um, not exactly a consultant. An independent contractor. I don’t know. Somebody to do special projects.”

Fred’s gaze was steely. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Buddy of mine. Jayson.”

He chewed on Lowell’s response for a long moment. Then he said, “Sometimes. Why?”

“I’m looking for work. Thought there might be something I could do for you.”

Fred was about to blow the guy off. Then he reconsidered. “You live with Judy?”

“Well, yeah. Temporarily.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Fred bet this guy had been temporarily living with his grandmother for at least a decade. But Judy was connected; she was plugged into the town gossip. Probably even more so than the hostess’s uncle.

“Sir?”

“I do have something you might be able to do.”

“Anything!” Lowell straightened his back, eager and willing to hear his assignment.

“I could use a pair of eyes and ears in town.”

Lowell slumped a little. “What exactly does that mean? You want me to spy on people for you?”

“I’m a businessman, Craig. You probably know I’m building those luxury homes over at Emerald Estuary Estates.”

“Yes, sir. Everybody knows that.”

Fred didn’t bother to hide his pleasure. “Well, son, it’s gonna be hard to sell those homes if Oyster Point gets a reputation as a hotbed of crime.”

“Crime?”

“Surely you heard about Doctor Ashland?”

“Yeah, but nobody’s saying that was murder.”

The way the young man said it—so confident—intrigued Fred. “How do you know that? I heard the FDLE sent investigators. They only get involved in major crimes.”

“Nah, one of the officers is a buddy. He told me they were called in because Doc Ashland worked for law enforcement.”

“Joel Ashland? Wasn’t he just a general practitioner?”

“No, sir. He was the county medical examiner down in the Keys. The FDLE is here out of, like, professional courtesy.”

“You have this on good authority?”

Lowell thought for a moment before answering. “I do.”

Fred slapped his hand against his thigh. “See, this is what I need. Someone to pay attention, monitor the investigation, and ask smart questions.”

“And then report back to you?”

“Exactly.”

Lowell rubbed the stubble on his chin. “I do have some contacts. I suppose I could do that for you.” His eyes narrowed. “What’s this monitoring job pay?”

Fred peeled two fifties off his bill roll and laid them on the bar. “That’ll depend on the quality of the information you bring me, son. Here’s a hundred to get you started.”

Lowell snatched the money up and shoved it into his pocket. “You won’t be disappointed.”

“I better not be. Here’s your first task: find out who the devil Bodhi King is and why he’s really here.”

“Yes, sir. Should I call you or—?”

“No. And this will be our last meeting in public. You’ll brief me at my house.”

Lowell screwed up his face. “Why?”

“I don’t like folks knowing my business.”

“But how will I let you know if I have information? Just show up at your house unannounced?”

Fred huffed. The kid had a point. “No, don’t do that.” He dug a business card out of his card holder. “If you have something you think I should know, call my office. Say you’re my nephew. Give your name as Kyle and leave a number. I’ll call you and tell you when to come over. We don’t discuss business on the phone, understand?”

“Yeah, sure.” He studied the card for a moment before jamming it into his pocket. “I didn’t know you had a nephew.”

“I don’t.” Fred eyed the bourbon remaining in his glass with disdain, then tossed it back. He peeled off two more fifties and slid them under the empty glass.

He swiveled the stool around and slid to his feet. Before he left Craig Lowell sitting there alone, he turned and whispered a warning. “My independent contractors don’t talk about the work they do for me. Is that

clear?”

Lowell’s eyes widened. “Crystal.”

“Good.” He clapped the young man on the shoulder. “Looking forward to working with you. Enjoy that bourbon.”

As he walked away, he caught Lowell forcing the glass back to his lips and smiled. Maybe he could do something with the lump of clay that was Craig Lowell. Mold him into a successor. Someone he could hand the baton off to someday. Boy, that would stick in Judy’s craw. He was chuckling at the thought when he breezed past the hostess and out the door.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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**B**odhi finished his drink and caught Steffi's attention long enough to secure a recommendation for a bed and breakfast that might have a vacancy. She insisted on calling ahead to let the proprietor know who he was.

"It's very kind but not necessary," he tried to assure her.

She gave him a sad, tired smile. "Yeah, it is—the rumor mill's in overdrive. Any time someone dies in this town, the news spreads like wildfire. But it's going to overheat because folks loved Doc and the place is swarming with outsiders—not just any outsiders, a gaggle of law enforcement officers. Mrs. Wolfe is cautious about who she takes as a guest under the best of circumstances. And these are definitely *not* the best of circumstances."

He nodded. "Thanks for all your help today. I'm sorry about Joel. I can tell he meant a lot to you."

"He did. He meant a lot to a lot of people. And I know he was a friend of yours, too."

They exchanged a wordless look of understanding before he shouldered his backpack and edged through the crying, laughing, drinking people and out of the juice bar. He paused on the sidewalk to look up. The sun had set while he was inside, and the twilight sky was fading to dusk.

He considered the shortcut down the hill but thought better of it. If he was right, and Joel's death hadn't been accidental, the five minutes he'd save by taking an isolated path in the dark wouldn't be worth the potential risk. Maybe Mrs. Wolfe had the right idea—a healthy dose of paranoia wasn't the worst personality trait.

As he set off through the small business district, he stifled a yawn, and the full weight of his exhaustion landed on him. He rolled his head in a circle, listening to the small pops and crackles in his neck. It had been an extraordinarily long day that had begun before the sun had even thought about rising.

He crossed the parking lot for the shopping center and headed down the gravel hill. The lights from the official paved lot cast very little light here. He'd have to find a way to convince Theo to go home. The idea of the scrawny preteen sitting alone in the dark sent a wave of unease washing over him.

When he reached the edge of the makeshift lot, he sighed in relief, then laughed. Theo's umbrella, crate, and table were nowhere to be seen, and neither was the boy. In their place was a hastily scrawled sign that read 'Lot Close Due to Mother Freakout.' Whatever her maternal failings might be, Theo's mom had acted on an instinct to protect her son from the unknown dangers that seemed to lurk in this small town.

Bodhi fished the keys to the Jeep from the front pocket of his rucksack and unlocked the door. He didn't notice the piece of paper tucked under the windshield wiper until he'd settled in behind the wheel. He frowned and got out of the car to retrieve the paper. He returned to the driver's seat and unfolded the sheet, expecting to see a bill from Theo—maybe an additional fee for not vacating the lot when he closed it down.

As he read the note, he raised his eyebrows and felt his forehead crease in response. Neat handwritten letters formed with a slight flourish spelled out a cryptic message: *Go to Emerald Estuary Estates. Talk to Ralph.* He stared down at the instructions for a moment, the furrow in his brow deepening. Then he carefully refolded the paper and placed it in his backpack.

He gave himself a moment to puzzle over its meaning before shifting his complete focus to the car and the short trip to Wolfe's B&B. As a Buddhist, he endeavored to move through the tasks of daily living with mindfulness. As a former coroner, he particularly tried never to drive while distracted. He'd autopsied too many bodies whose inhabitants had lost sight of the fact that a moving vehicle was a dangerous piece of machinery that required a driver's full attention. One glimpse at a text, changing the radio at the wrong moment, or even an ill-timed sneeze could end a person's life in an instant. On that cheerful note, he started the engine, turned on the Jeep's high beams, and slowly made his way up the unpaved hill. The note and its meaning could



wait until he'd arrived safely at the bed and breakfast.

MRS. WOLFE RAPPED SOFTLY on the door to the spacious bedroom.

"Come in," Bodhi called, turning away from the large desk where he'd spread out Joel's files.

She bumped open the ajar door with her hip and entered the room carrying a large tray. He leaped to his feet and cleared a spot on the desk.

"That's quite a cuppa," he said with a smile.

He'd been expecting a mug of herbal tea, but Mrs. Wolfe had gone all out. The tray was weighted down with a ceramic teapot, two delicate teacups balanced on matching saucers, a bowl of sugar cubes, a dish of lemon slices, and an array of muffins, scones, and breads.

He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised. The B&B owner had greeted his request for a cup of tea with unbridled glee. Mrs. Wolfe's mother, British by birth, had relocated to the Forgotten Coast in 1946 with her new husband, a native Floridian whom she'd met during the war. The couple had lived their entire married life in Oyster Point, raising their family in the very same historic Queen Anne mansion that Mrs. Wolfe now occupied. Although she'd never visited her mother's homeland, Mrs. Wolfe had inherited her mother's love of tea and readily confessed to Bodhi that the lack of a decent teashop was one of Oyster Point's greatest disappointments.

She ducked her head sheepishly and gestured at the tray with a laugh. "I've been known to go overboard when I have a guest with a taste for tea."

"It looks wonderful. Thank you."

She twisted her hands. "Now, Steffi told me you don't consume animal products. If that's the case, you'll want to avoid the pastries. But the dark chocolate muffins don't have any dairy or eggs at all. That's a variation of my mother's wacky cake recipe."

"Wacky cake?"

"Some folks call it war cake, but that's not a very festive name for a cake, now, is it? The story goes that when rationing was in full force, eggs, milk, and butter were in short supply. And if you were lucky enough to get them, you certainly wouldn't waste them on something as frivolous as a chocolate cake. The secret to a good wacky cake is white vinegar and a nice vegetable

oil. Although I use olive oil. Doc says—said—it’s much healthier.” Her smile faded as she remembered why Bodhi was in town.

“Well, Doc was right about that. I can’t wait to taste one. Can I pour you a cup of tea, as well?” He waved his hand at the pair of teacups.

Her gaze shifted to the pile of papers on the desk. “No, thank you, dear. I thought I might join you, but I see you’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Really, Mrs. Wolfe, I’d love the company.”

“Nonsense,” she trilled. “I’ll fix myself a cup and take it into the library with me. I’m almost finished with my Agatha Christie book. Well, and maybe one of these scones.”

He turned over one of the cups, filled it with the steaming hot tea, and plucked a slice of lemon from the tray. Next, he selected a muffin and placed it on the saucer’s edge. After carefully moving the entire assembly from the tray to the desk, he lifted the tray and smiled at his hostess.

“Tell you what, I’ll carry this into the library for you to enjoy while you devour your Hercule Poirot.”

“Miss Marple.”

“Even better. Lead the way.”

He followed her into the hallway lit by wall sconces and past the elegant curved staircase. She stopped at a set of pocket doors. An ornate pattern had been carved into the border of the solid wood doors. He admired them before she opened the doors to reveal a gracious library. Two walls were filled with floor-to-ceiling built-in bookshelves. Large windows and a cushioned window bench took up the front wall. He imagined generations of children perched on the padded bench, knees pulled up to their chins, balancing a book on their thighs. Mrs. Wolfe led him to a comfortable-looking chair positioned in front of a fireplace with a colorful patterned tile surround and hearth. She gestured toward a glass-topped table beside the chair, and he gently lowered the tray to the table.

“This looks like the perfect cozy reading nook.”

“It is. Since Mr. Wolfe died, I spend most evenings in here with one of my English countryside mysteries. Thank you for carrying in the tray, young man.” She smiled warmly.

“It’s my pleasure,” he assured her. “This room, and the whole home, is gorgeous. The architecture is breathtaking.”

“I’d be delighted to give you the full tour tomorrow if you like.”

“I’d love that. I’m not sure I’ll have much free time, though. I need to

head to Panama City in the morning for an aut—a meeting.”

She eyed him shrewdly from behind her glasses. “Autopsy. You can say it, Dr. King. I’m aware that Doc Ashland has passed, you know.”

He nodded. “Of course. It seemed indelicate to say.” Then he gestured at the book tucked into a basket on the floor beside the chair. “But, I suppose that’s silly. After all, Dame Christie has a fairly robust body count in her books.

Mrs. Wolfe tittered for a second, and then she turned serious. “True, but this is real life. And there’s something you need to keep in mind while you’re here. Don’t be deceived by appearances: *nobody* in Oyster Point is delicate. Fragile things—or people—don’t survive in this environment. We’re a scrappy and self-reliant lot. We have to be.”

With that, she plumped the pillow behind her back, picked up her book, and began to read.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Up before the sun, Bodhi meditated, completed a swift morning yoga flow, and showered. The sky was still a pale purple when he returned to the desk and studied the notes he'd made as he'd worked through Joel's patient charts the night before. With a handful of exceptions, nobody who sought care at the clinic was healthy.

On the one hand, this shouldn't surprise him. The residents of Oyster Point may not be frail, as Mrs. Wolfe had warned, but they were also unlikely to squander one of the thirty-six days a year that Joel was in town on annual checkups and well-child visits. Preventative care was out of reach for the Forgotten Coast. On the other hand, the array of chronic and acute conditions that Joel treated *was* surprising. The ailments seemed to fall primarily within one of four broad categories: respiratory problems, especially asthma; skin conditions; cognitive and memory issues; and a statistically improbable number of lung cancer cases.

Bodhi stared down at the four quadrants he'd drawn in his notebook and the list of patients and conditions he'd written in each square. He was seeing the same pattern Joel had seen. Not a sudden unexplained death cluster, exactly. But a persistent unexplained sickness cluster. What was making this town so very ill?

He turned his attention from the patient notes to Joel's collection of scientific journals and the pages he'd tabbed. Joel had been pursuing a theory, and Bodhi was making the same connection Joel'd been dancing around: it was something in the water. A marine toxin, possibly related to a harmful algae bloom.

Had that theory gotten Joel killed?

Bodhi closed his eyes and considered the possibility that it had. If so, then it was more likely than not that Joel had been right. In Bodhi's (unfortunately) considerable experience with homicide, keeping a secret hidden was a common motive for murder. He supposed his next consideration ought to be whether proceeding down the path that Joel had laid out would put his own life in danger. But that was hardly a concern. He owed it to Joel to bring the truth to light. And more than a debt to the dead, he had an obligation to the living and to Oyster Point.

Decision made, he picked up his phone to leave a message for Dr. Owens. He explained to the medical examiner's voicemail that he would be unable to make it to Panama City to attend the autopsy but that he had full faith and confidence in her judgment and would call her later to discuss her opinion. He gathered the files, journals, and notes and swept them into his backpack in a neat stack. He reached into the front pocket to retrieve his keys and the message that had been left on the windshield. Although he had the words committed to memory, he reread it anyway: *Go to Emerald Estuary Estates. Talk to Ralph.*

"Okay, Brianna," he said aloud. "I'll bite."

He had no doubt that Brianna Allen had written the note. She'd been agitated from the moment he'd met her. At first, he'd chalked her mood up to the shock of Joel's death, but her outsized interest in Joel's Jeep and her reaction when he'd asked her about the red tides had set alarm bells ringing in his mind. She knew something. It was time to find out what, exactly, that was. Step one: find Ralph.

BODHI PARKED JUST outside the construction entrance to the development and walked through the gate. A handful of men milled around the worksite, drinking coffee from metal Thermoses and likely waiting for the supervisor to arrive. He approached a pair of men squatting in the dirt, rolling dice. He squatted alongside them.

"Hi, I'm looking for Ralph."

Without looking up, the man closest to Bodhi pointed toward a pair of office trailers with temporary signs that read 'Glazier General Contractors.'  
"Por ahí."

Bodhi followed his finger to ‘over there.’ “*Muchos gracias.*”

The men returned to their dice game as Bodhi stood. He circled behind the trailers but saw nobody. A path from the trailers snaked past a portable toilet into a section of woods that had not yet been clear-cut. He set off on the path between the trees.

He spotted a short, wiry man wearing a gray uniform that screamed ‘security guard.’ The guard was sitting on a log reading the sports section of a newspaper whose name Bodhi couldn’t make out.

He made it a point to walk noisily toward the log. He doubted the man was armed, but there was no harm in ensuring he didn’t startle the guy. He’d seen his fair share of fatal gunshot wounds that had resulted from surprising gun owners. Despite the ruckus Bodhi was making, the man didn’t turn around.

Bodhi cupped his hands around his mouth and called, “Excuse me, are you Ralph?”

“Yep.”

That was the totality of his response. He didn’t so much as glance over his shoulder.

Bodhi recognized the man’s behavior for what it was—a show of dominance. That was fine. Bodhi was content to let this man underestimate him. He walked around to stand in front of the lot and considered how to approach the man. Presumably, Brianna wouldn’t want him to mention her by name, given the anonymous way she passed along her suggestion.

Instead, he asked, “I’m wondering if Doctor Ashland’s been out to visit recently.”

Ralph’s eyes remained on the sports section. Bodhi waited.

Ralph squinted up into Bodhi’s face, his vision no doubt hampered by the bright sun still making its morning climb up the sky, and studied him for a long moment. “Who wants to know?”

“I do.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m Bodhi King. I’m a friend of Joel’s.”

Ralph eyed Bodhi’s hand for a moment before snorting derisively. Then, he stood and spat, expertly directing the stream of tobacco juice to the six inches of parched ground between Bodhi’s feet. Bodhi resisted the urge to glance down and kept his impassive gaze on the man’s face.

After a beat, Ralph scuffed the toe of his boot into the dirt. “Yeah, Doc’s been out here, and, before you ask—yeah, I ran him off the property a few times.”

“Why?”

“He was trespassing.”

“What was he doing?”

“I just told you. Trespassing.”

“I mean, why was he trespassing? Was he just walking around? Was he digging up soil samples, taking clippings from the plants, snapping pictures? What was he doing on the property?”

“Usually, he came in his boat. He’d row in from the bay and come ashore. Then he’d wade back into the water with a bunch of glass jars. He said he was taking water and algae samples. I said, didn’t matter, it was still trespassing.” Ralph fixed him with a defiant look.

“His boat? You can’t mean the houseboat?”

“No, not the clinic. You know, that little skiff of his.” Ralph chuckled at Bodhi’s expression. “No, you don’t know. Not a real close friend, are ya’?” He aimed another stream of brown liquid at Bodhi’s shoes.

Bodhi took his time responding; when he did, it was with a question. “When was the last time you saw Joel?”

He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. “Last week. Must’ve been Thursday evening. He was back thataway, mucking around in the lagoon. I told him to beat it, and he started waving around a jar full of dead fish, yammering about fish kills and such.”

“What did you do?”

“First thing I did was take the jar from him.”

“With the dead fish? Why?”

“Welp, ‘cause that’s not his property.”

“The fish?”

“Yeah.”

“Fish are nobody’s property. They’re marine life.”

Ralph twisted his mouth to the side and tried to work out a rebuttal to that argument. Eventually, he conceded, “That may be so, but these dead fish were on Emerald Estuary Estates property. So I reckon they belong to Mr. Glazier.”

“Don’t you mean the paper company? That’s who owns this land, right?”

Ralph screwed up his face. “Well, I suppose. But ... I work for Mr. Glazier.”

“Did you give them to him, then?”

Ralph slapped his thigh with his free hand and wheezed. “I could just

imagine what would happen if I plopped some rotting fish on Mr. Glazier's desk. No, after I kicked Doc Ashland off the lot, I threw 'em in the dumpster at the worksite."

"And that's the last time you saw Joel? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Ask him yourself if you don't believe me."

Bodhi gave him a sidelong look, but he didn't seem to be joking. "I can't do that."

"How come?"

"Because Joel's dead."

The security guard shook his head vehemently and scoffed. "He is not."

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, but he is. I found his body yesterday."

The man's watery blue eyes narrowed in his tanned face. "Where?"

"In the clinic."

"That's not possible. Doc didn't open the clinic last weekend. He left town early Friday morning."

The bloated green corpse he'd found leaking fluid all over the floor of the houseboat said otherwise, but Bodhi didn't say that. Instead, he cocked his head and waited.

After a moment, Ralph stammered, "I mean ... that's what I heard."

"Who told you that?"

He worked his jaw like a skeleton in a Halloween cartoon. "Uh, dunno."

"Sure you do."

Ralph snapped out of his shock. "I don't even know who you are. For all I know, you're delusional." He gripped the baton clipped onto his belt, resolving the question of whether he had a handgun.

Bodhi spoke in a slow, measured tone. "As I said, my name is Bodhi King. I'm a doctor. And like Doctor Ashland, I specialize in forensic pathology."

"Go on, get out of here. Doc Ashland was a family doctor."

"Is that the local paper?" He pointed to the folded newspaper draped over the log.

"Yeah, so?"

"I'd wager Joel's death made the front section, and there's probably a paragraph about his work as the medical examiner down in Monroe County, in the Keys."

Ralph pulled his head back like a turtle retreating into its shell. Then his face darkened, and he tightened his hold on the baton. "Go on now, get out of



here. Don't make me call the cops and have you arrested for trespassing.”

Bodhi could've stood his ground. He could have pulled out his phone and called Chief Rodman himself. But he didn't. He suspected he'd gotten the information that Brianna wanted him to know. So, he thanked the man for his time, then turned and walked back through the forest the same way he'd come.

When Bodhi reached the clearing, he looked over his shoulder to see if Ralph had returned to his box scores or perhaps turned to the front page to read the news about Joel's death. Ralph had done neither—instead, he'd set off toward the lagoon where Joel had found the fish kill.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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The floorboard creaked under Craig's feet. He froze and hunched his shoulders, waiting to hear Gran call his name. But she didn't, so after a beat, he crept forward. He felt stupid, sneaking around the house like a teenager trying to come home late at night after curfew without getting caught.

Only he wasn't a teenager, and it wasn't late at night. He was a man who needed a solid eight hours of sleep—preferably between the hours of two and ten AM. It was entirely too freaking early to be out of bed. But if he wanted to go through Gran's purse, he needed to do it before she popped out of bed and started her day at seven sharp.

He didn't *want* to go through Gran's purse. The idea made him queasy, to be honest. But he needed a starting point—something he could work with. He wanted to impress Fred Glazier right from the start. Shoot, he could hardly believe Fred was giving him this opportunity. He couldn't blow it.

So he tiptoed through the dining room and into the kitchen. Her purse was in the usual spot, slung over the back of the chair near the door, where she sat to pull on her shoes before going outside and where she removed them the second she came in. His heart raced as he eased the strap off the chair and slid the zipper open. Her small calendar was right on top. He removed the laminated datebook and flipped through it until he reached September. He scanned her entries: clinic was written on the square for last Friday—yeah, how'd that turn out? Her Tuesday book club at Mrs. Wolfe's bed and breakfast—that was a few days ago. This afternoon, she was scheduled to volunteer at the second Friday food pantry.

He nodded to himself. That would work. All her friends, the women who

worked behind the scenes to keep this craphole town together with gum, rubber bands, and magic, would be there handing out food, barking orders to the teenagers fulfilling their community service requirement for school, and, without a doubt, yammering about Doc's death.

The food ministry got nearly as much traffic as the free clinic got. Used to get, he corrected himself. He could remember when Pastor Hamilton had moved the distribution date from the first to the second Friday because everybody was being forced to choose between their bellies and their health.

He didn't usually go to the pantry with his gran. Too depressing. But she'd be thrilled if he said he wanted to come along. He slid the calendar back into the purse, silently zipped it up, and hung it over the chair without making a sound.

He was puffed up, pleased with himself, and maybe just the slightest bit cocky, when he turned around and found himself nose-to-nose with his enraged grandmother. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and her slippered feet were planted at hip distance. If she'd been a cartoon, steam would have been coming out of her ears. In fact, he wasn't entirely convinced steam *wasn't* coming out of her ears.

She glared at him. "How much did you take?"

He gave her a confused look. "How much what?"

"Money, Craig. How much cash did you take from my pocketbook?"

"You think I *stole* money from your purse?"

"Didn't you?" Her lips thinned.

"What? No!"

She tapped her foot. "Really? Then what exactly were you doing?"

He stared at her. His brain was locked up. He couldn't get past the fact that she actually thought he'd steal from her. Sure, he may have snagged a twenty once or twice. But not for years. Well, at least not for months. But how could she think he was capable of stealing her money? He felt two inches tall. His face burned. See, this was why he *had* to get in good with Fred. He'd be rolling in dough. He could sneak money *into* her wallet, not out of it.

"I'm waiting," she snapped.

He shook his head in an effort to get his brain working again. *Think*. He cleared his throat and scratched his neck. Then, the perfect lie came to him.

"I'm looking for my steroid cream. Didn't you pick it up the last time you were at the pharmacy?"

Her frown slid off her face and concern sparked in her eyes. “Oh, no. I didn’t get there in time. Rhoda closed early to visit her daughter at college. Is it bad again?” She scanned his exposed skin for evidence of the rash that sometimes got worse, sometimes got better, but never went away.

He shrugged. “It’s been worse.”

Anxiety radiated off her like waves, and he felt guilty about that. But it was better to worry her unnecessarily than to let her think he was a thief.

“I’m so sorry,” she fretted, wringing her hands.

“It’s okay. You tried,” he said magnanimously.

“Let me make you breakfast since you’re up so early.” She pattered over to the refrigerator and pulled out the carton of eggs and the container of milk. “French toast or pancakes?”

“French toast sounds great.”

She flapped a hand at him. “You go soak in a colloidal oatmeal bath while I get this on the stove and start some coffee.”

He crossed the room and kissed the crown of her head. “Thanks, Gran.”

She clutched his arm with her birdlike hand. “I shouldn’t have accused you of stealing from me. Will you forgive me?”

“Of course. Hey, isn’t the food pantry open today? Why don’t I go with you and help?”

She beamed and patted his cheek. “That would be wonderful. You’re a good boy, Craig. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

He forced a smile and hurried out of the kitchen. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt like such a heel. He reminded himself to focus on the big picture and tried to shake off the gross feeling that clung to him like plastic wrap.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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“Brianna?”

She raised her head from the report she was editing and eyed Leah, who hovered in the doorway to her office. “What’s up?”

“There’s a man down at reception asking for you. He’s not on your calendar. Should I have them send him away?”

She dropped her pen and lifted both hands. “I don’t know, Leah. Who is he?”

Her assistant flushed. “Sorry. He said his name is Dr. King. Bodhi King.”

Brianna’s stomach tightened, and she clenched her jaw. She should have expected this. Leaving that note had been a mistake. A stupid, stupid mistake. She’d regretted writing it as soon as she’d driven away. In fact, she’d almost gone back and snatched it off the Jeep’s windshield.

But the same thing that had stopped her last night made her hesitate now. Someone had taken those environmental records from the old mill. Someone was trying to hide what was going on. And she had a sinking feeling she knew who that someone was. If she was right, she was going to need help. And Bodhi King could help her.

Leah watched her face, patiently waiting for her to respond.

“Oh. No, tell them to send him up. And hold my calls, please.”

“You’ve got it.”

Leah left, and Brianna used the time it took for Bodhi to reach her floor and for Leah to lead him back to her office to organize her thoughts and steady her nerves. Leah showed him in and pulled the door closed behind her as she left to return to her desk.

“Good morning,” he said as he took the seat across from Brianna’s desk.

“Thanks for seeing me without an appointment.”

“Of course. What can I do for you, Dr. King?” She was pleased to hear that her voice sounded professional, pleasant, and blandly neutral despite the rocking and pitching of her stomach.

He leaned forward and gave her an intense look. “That was going to be my question.”

“What? I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do. I got your message last night, and I spoke to Ralph this morning.”

“I didn’t write ....” She started to deny writing the note but trailed off to look down at her desk. After a moment, she inhaled and raised her head. “What did Ralph say?”

“He told me Dr. Ashland had been out to the worksite multiple times.”

“And?”

“And that Joel was upset about repeated fish kills that may have been localized near the site.”

“Fish and other aquatic life—whelks, oysters, clams, to name just a few of the die-offs,” she clarified in a small voice.

“He also told me he confiscated Joel’s most recent samples.”

She didn’t try to hide her surprise. “When was this?”

“Thursday evening.”

“He must’ve gone over there as soon as he got into town.”

“Likely. What I’m wondering is why?”

She squared her shoulders and placed her hands flat on her desk. “He probably wanted to confront me with them when I met with him on Friday morning.”

He also made no effort to hide his surprise. He leaned back and cocked his head to the side. For some reason, his expression and body language made her think of a bright bird.

“It was you? You called him Friday morning to discuss making a donation to the clinic?”

“Wait, what?” She shook her head. “No. I didn’t call him. We’d already agreed to meet before he opened the clinic for the weekend.”

“Why?”

She gave him a level look and an honest answer. “To talk about what he thought Glazier might be dumping in the water.”

“Did you?”

“Briefly. He was apologetic. He’d said he’d hoped to have evidence—the dead specimens, I’m guessing—but that he didn’t have them.”

“What did you say?”

“I assured him that Gulf Paper takes seriously its obligations to comply with all regulations and to ensure our employees and contractors do as well.” She cringed at the rote, dispassionate company line even as she said it.

“Then what?”

She hesitated, but as her father liked to say, in for a dime, in for a dollar. She’d reached out to this man for a reason; she might as well tell him. “He said he had concerns that the persistent level of some toxin in the water was making people sick. I explained that we’d cleaned up our act. I even told him I’d pull copies of all our old violations and the remediation measures we took. We’re not monsters.”

“And you didn’t offer him a donation? Suggest a little quid pro quo? You know, Joel would stop pushing on the polluted water, and the company would make a generous contribution to the clinic? Maybe something in the neighborhood of fifty thousand dollars?” He watched her face.

She laughed involuntarily, then covered her mouth with her hand. “Sorry, it’s not funny. No, actually, it kind of is. I don’t have the authority to write a check that large. Nobody in the company does.”

“Someone must.”

She considered this for a moment. “Well, sure. The CEO, the CFO—I’m not sure who else. And I wouldn’t be surprised if our financial controls also require board signature. But it’s a moot point. We don’t make donations that big. Nobody in this town does. Have you looked around?”

The comment echoed what Steffi had said when she’d told him about the phone call Joel’d taken. “Someone offered him fifty thousand dollars. They called it a donation, but Dr. Ashland seemed conflicted about it.”

“How can you possibly know that? Did he tell someone before he died?”

“No.” He didn’t elaborate.

His unwavering gaze was making her anxious, but she forced herself not to squirm. She raised her chin and enunciated, “I wasn’t there for long, and he was alive when I left. I swear it.”

He studied her for a moment longer before nodding. “I believe you. Do you have any idea who he met with after you left?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t.”

“Thanks for your time.”

He stood to leave, and she rose to walk him to the door. As she ushered him into the hallway, she said, “You know who you should ask? Judy Lowell. She lives over by the old high school, but you can probably find her at St. Louisa’s Diner at lunchtime. If anyone will know who could have made that kind of donation, it’d be Judy.”

“Judy Lowell,” he repeated as if sealing her name in his memory. “Who is she?”

“Just some woman. But she’s lived here her whole life. She knows everyone ... and everything.”

“Thanks for the lead. I appreciate it.”

She could tell his gratitude was genuine by the warmth in his voice.

“My pleasure.” She began to ease the door closed.

He turned and caught it. “Oh, one last thing. Since you weren’t able to give those files to Dr. Ashland before he died, would you give them to me? I’m going to try to finish his research.”

Her mouth went dry. “I can’t.”

“Can’t? Or won’t?”

“Can’t. When I went to get them—yesterday evening, as a matter of fact—they were gone.”

“Gone,” he repeated.

“Gone,” she confirmed and then closed the door softly.

THE CELL PHONE rang in Bodhi’s pocket as he crossed Gulf Paper’s parking lot to the Jeep. He stopped under a shady tree to take the call.

“This is Bodhi.”

“Hello, Dr. King. This is Mirabelle Owens.” She spoke in a fast, clipped tone, like a woman who valued efficiency and had too much to do.

“Dr. Owens, thanks for the call. Have you finished the autopsy already?”

“There wasn’t much left of him, as you know.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to attend. I do appreciate the invitation.”

“I wouldn’t have extended it to just anybody. But between the calls from the FDLE, the police down in the Keys, and Eliza ... I figured you aren’t just anybody.”



“Eliza Rollins?” Bodhi’s old flame from medical school was the coroner in a small parish in Louisiana. They’d collaborated on cases a few times in the recent past, but there was no reason she’d know anything about Joel’s death—or Bodhi’s involvement.”

“Yes. I called her first, actually. She, Dr. Ashland, and I were all active in a professional group of medical examiners located in the Southeast U.S. I thought she’d want to know about his death. I mentioned your name in the message I left, in passing, really. I had no idea she knew you. Anyway, she called me back and told me not to squander the opportunity to work with you.”

The compliment slipped by him unnoticed. He was focused on the fact that Mirabelle Owens had known Joel in life. Performing an autopsy on a colleague could be a profoundly unsettling experience. “I’m sorry for your loss. Joel was a friend of mine, and it sounds like he was a friend to you and Eliza, too.”

There was a brief pause, then her voice softened. “Thank you. We weren’t especially close, but Joel was easy to like.”

“Yes, he was,” Bodhi agreed.

When she spoke again, her no-nonsense business tone had returned. “In any event, Joel died more or less instantly from trauma to the C1 and C2 vertebrae.”

Her assessment matched his. “I don’t know if you’ve spoken to the investigators yet, but he was found on the floor near the base of a ladder. Assuming he fell from the loft above, the distance would have been seven feet at most. In your view, would a fall from that height result in atlanto-occipital dislocation?”

She made a humming sound in her throat.

“It’s not a trick question,” he assured her. “It just seems like a survivable fall to me.”

“Sure,” she hedged. “People have survived falls from much greater heights. But you know as well as I do that freak accidents happen. I’ve seen an internal decapitation in a child who fell out of bed and landed at the precise wrong angle.”

He closed his eyes and imagined the loss of a young life and its effect on the child’s family. “You’re right, of course.”

“But to answer your question, I’ve not yet spoken to the investigators. Is there any reason aside from the distance of the fall that you think Joel’s death

might not be accidental?”

It was his turn to pause before answering. He had to trust someone. It might as well be this woman.

“Yes. He was supposed to meet with someone the morning he died. His mobile phone is missing, along with his keys. And somehow, the vehicle he’d driven to Oyster Point found its way back to Sugarloaf Key after he died.”

“Well ... shit.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“You think he was pushed?”

“Or thrown.”

“But why? Why would anyone want to kill a medical examiner who spends his free time running a volunteer health clinic?”

There was no reason to hold back now. “Joel was researching something. A chronic illness cluster, I think.”

“A chronic illness cluster,” she repeated slowly. “I’ve heard of death clusters. And cancer clusters, of course. But a chronic illness cluster? Is there such a thing?”

“I don’t know if it’s an established phenomenon, but I think Joel may have discovered one. And I think he may have been killed to keep him from telling anyone.”

She whistled softly. “Do you know what the etiology of this chronic illness cluster might be?”

“I’m still working through Joel’s notes, but it looks like there are four distinct categories of illness with four distinct pathophysiologies. I’m beginning to think they all relate to marine toxins, possibly related to algae blooms.”

She fell silent for what felt like a long time. He listened to her breathing, growing faster and faster, until finally, she asked, “Are you talking about the sort of algae blooms that would result in a red tide?”

“Possibly.”

“We need to talk.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“In person,” she clarified. “I can be in Oyster Point by lunchtime.”

“I need to look for someone at a diner—St. Louisa’s. Do you know it?”

“Everyone knows St. Lou’s. I’ll meet you there. And, Bodhi?”

“Yes.”

“Whatever you do, don’t order the clams. Or the oysters.”

With that cryptic warning, she ended the call. He gave his phone a curious look and returned it to his pocket.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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**A**fter her unannounced visitor left, Brianna tried to return to the reports she needed to review. But, try as she might, her attention kept wandering away from the company's forays into compostable paper. She couldn't stop thinking about what she'd told Bodhi—and what she hadn't told him. At last, she conceded defeat.

She grabbed her purse and her suit jacket and marched down the hall to Chad's corner office before she lost her nerve. His assistant, Ed, looked up from his computer screen as the loud click of her heels against the floor announced her approach.

"Hiya, Brianna."

"Hi, Ed." She paused and placed a hand on the counter that fronted his workstation. "Is he in?"

"Yeah. Did you have a meeting scheduled?" He frowned at the calendar on his screen.

"No. But I really need five minutes. Can you squeeze me in?" She gave Ed her brightest smile.

He clicked a pen against his teeth. After a moment, he said, "Okay. But really, only five minutes, Bri. He and Sharon have a call with the bankers about the Emerald Estates project in fifteen, and I *know* that man hasn't read the briefing package I put together."

She gave him a sympathetic head shake. "Five minutes, I promise. What's going on with the bank?"

Ed scowled. "You didn't hear it from me, but it's way over budget. Way over. He's asked for a loan increase, and now he has to justify it."

"Oh, yikes."

Great. Chad was guaranteed to be in a foul mood, and her topic of conversation would only provoke him further. But if she didn't do it now, she knew she'd never work up the courage to do it. Seize the day and all that.

"Yeah. Go ahead in, and remember—"

"Five minutes. I got it. You can start the clock right now."

She crossed the hallway and rapped on the door.

"What?" Chad yelled from the other side.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Ed raise an eyebrow. She squared her shoulders and entered the lion's den.

Chad looked up at the intrusion. "Brianna, I'm busy."

She held up a hand. "I know. Ed told me you have an important call to prepare for. I only need a few minutes of your time. It's important."

He huffed out a breath and gestured sharply toward his desk chair. She hurriedly took the seat before he could change his mind.

"So, what is it?"

"I just had a visitor."

He waited.

"Bodhi King."

"Who?"

"He's a forensic pathologist. He's looking into Dr. Ashland's death."

"The newspaper said Doc fell from his ladder. I don't know why the town's crawling with law enforcement because a guy did a header. I mean, it's tragic and all that, but—"

"I know you were there."

"What?"

She took a breath and forced out the words. "I went to see Doc last Friday morning."

He drew his eyebrows together. "Why?"

"I imagine for the same reason you did. Our copies of the complaints to the state about the water over at the estuary didn't redact the complainant's name on one of the pages. I knew Doc was the one who went to the Department of Environmental Protection."

"Sharon and I told you we'd handle it with Glazier."

"I know. And the construction violations are a real estate development issue. But as the sustainability officer, it's my job to address public health concerns. After I met with you and Sharon, I called Doc and told him that the next time he came to town, I'd like a few minutes of his time."

“Blast it, Brianna,” Chad growled through his clenched teeth.

She ignored his mounting anger and pushed on. She had to get it all out now. “So I popped into the clinic. He was apologetic about it, but he brushed me off and rushed me out of there.”

“Guess he wasn’t as worried about it as you thought.”

“No, it wasn’t that. Turns out, he was meeting someone to discuss a big donation to the clinic.”

They locked eyes, and Brianna used all her willpower not to look away first.

“Did he tell you who it was?”

She shook her head. “No. But I saw you, Chad. I decided to stop in for a juice before I came to the office. I was on my way up the hill when I saw you crossing the marina. I was surprised to see you there. I watched you knock on the clinic door. I saw Doc let you in.”

Chad’s nostrils flared, and he clenched his hands into fists, then relaxed them. Clench, relax. Clench, relax.

“What does any of this have to do with this Bodhi King person?” he finally asked.

“I told him I saw Doc at the clinic before it opened last Friday morning and that he was alive when I left.”

“Did you tell him you saw me there?”

“No. But you need to.”

“Brianna, you don’t know what you’re getting into the middle of. Stay out of it.”

She tensed at the warning in his voice but went on. “Believe me, Chad, I want no part of whatever you and Sharon are up to. But I’m not going to stand by and—”

“I said, stay out of it,” he ordered. “Don’t talk to him again.”

She stood and smoothed her skirt over her thighs. “Fine. But you should know I told him the files from the paper mill dumping are missing.”

“What?”

“When I left the clinic, I promised Doc I’d get him copies of the paperwork from the investigation into the chemical dumping from the mill. I didn’t get to it right away, but last night, I stopped by the mill to get them from the records room, and they weren’t there.”

“And you told this Dr. King that the records are missing?” he said slowly.

“I did,” she confirmed.

“Get out.”

“Of course. You need to get ready for your call. I just wanted you to know what I know and encourage you to go to Dr. King before he and the investigators get the wrong idea.”

“No, Brianna. Get out. Clear your crap out of your desk, turn in your badge to HR, and get out of my building,” he thundered.

She shook her head as if she might unhear what he’d just said. “You’re firing me? Chad, let’s talk about—”

He pointed toward the door. “Out. And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep your damned mouth shut.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

---

F elicia surveyed her bathroom counter to confirm she'd packed all the toiletries she'd need for a short trip. She spotted the dental floss on the corner of the counter and tossed it into her case. Then she turned out the light and closed the bathroom door.

She shoved the cosmetics bag into her carry-on bag, zipped it closed, and headed out of her bedroom. She took the stairs two at a time. The cab was already waiting out by the curb.

“Key West Airport?” The driver asked as she slid into the back seat and rested her bag at her feet.

“That’s right.”

Even with a layover at Miami International and a ninety-minute drive from the Tallahassee airport, flying to Oyster Point would be twice as fast as the drive poor Bodhi had made. That made the fact that there actually had been a chase vehicle behind Joel’s Jeep surprising. If it had been her, she’d have left the Jeep parked outside Joel’s motorhome, walked down the road to the restaurant, and called for a ride to the airport. The fact that the driver didn’t must mean that he was sufficiently worried about law enforcement pulling flight manifests that a twenty-three-hour round-trip drive was worth it.

But why not just leave the Jeep in Oyster Point?

She leaned her head against the headrest and closed her eyes to think. Returning the Jeep to Joel’s place did three related things. One, it made a casual observer think that Joel was somewhere in the Keys based on his Jeep parked outside his home. Two, it delayed the discovery that he’d been to Oyster Point—in fact, if Bodhi hadn’t spotted that loyalty card, they likely



wouldn't have found Joel's body yet. Or ever. Three, it led the residents of Oyster Point to believe that their volunteer doctor had abandoned them, not that he was decomposing right under their noses.

She frowned. The smell would eventually have led someone to discover Joel's rotting corpse. So, did the driver plan to eventually return to the clinic to dispose of the body? Why wait so long? Even if he didn't get back to town until Sunday morning, he'd had four full days before Bodhi found Joel. Four days was ample time to sneak down to the marina under the cover of darkness, weigh down Joel's body with chains, and roll him right into the water. It's what she'd have done if she were a stone-cold murderer. Or a misguided, panicked person who'd accidentally killed him.

She opened her eyes. Her dark imagination served her well professionally, but it made the inside of her brain an unpleasant place.

Something wasn't adding up. She hoped she'd piece it together once she was in Oyster Point. Even if she didn't, she had to *do* something. She couldn't sit by the phone and wait for updates from Bodhi. And, if she was being honest, she was worried about the forensic pathologist wading into whatever had gotten Joel killed without backup.

Living by a creed to harm no other creature was all well and good for a Buddhist. But it was a seriously inconvenient moral principle when the Buddhist in question routinely stumbled into the middle of criminal investigations. She'd already lost one friend. If anything happened to Bodhi in Oyster Point, she'd never forgive herself.

She pulled out her phone and called the officer who'd been assigned to assist her with the investigation into what had happened to Joel. Despite her personal belief that this was a homicide investigation, officially, the department was calling it an unofficial inquiry into an unexplained death. All of which meant she was on shaky ground.

While she waited for Vick Medina to pick up the call, she cracked her knuckles, first on her left hand, then on her right. The cab driver met her eyes in the rearview mirror and winced. 'Nervous habit,' she mouthed.

"Medina."

"Hi, Vick. It's Williams."

"I thought you went to Oyster Point?"

"I'm on my way there now. I need you to stay on top of the phone company, okay?"

"Yeah, I'm on it."

“We can’t get a subpoena. But it’s critically important to find out who called Joel the morning he died.”

“I get it, Felicia.”

She exhaled through her nose and went on as if he hadn’t spoken. “And his phone is missing, so the only way to get that information is—”

“From his mobile carrier.”

“Right.”

“Actually, that’s not right,” Medina told her.

“Excuse you?”

“We *could* access Dr. Ashland’s customer account online.”

She sat up straighter. “You mean hack into it? Could our computer techs do that?”

“For sure. If you authorize it.”

“Yes, tell them to do it. It’s a good idea, Medina. Thinking outside the box. That’s what we need more of on this case.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to Marco.”

“You know what? Use Ga-Eun instead. She’s the best.”

“Will do.”

“And if you have any other ideas, don’t sit on them, okay? I know I’m tightly wound on this one, but I want to hear what you have to say.”

“I understand. And Felicia?”

“Yeah?”

“We all know Joel was a friend—not just to you, but to a lot of us. We’re going to do right by him.”

“I know, Medina. And, thanks.”

She ended the call with a lump in her throat.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

---

The diner was crowded. Not as crowded as it had been after the news of Doc's death had swept through town, but crowded all the same. Judith surveyed the room. There were more folks here than usual for lunch—even taking into account that Louisa's menu featured both fried oysters and her fresh razor clam and whelk salad as specials today. The seafood salad was Lou's take on the classic shrimp salad, served on a roll po' boy-style, only available when the local harvesters got lucky, and always sold out within an hour.

Marnie swung by the table with her water pitcher to refill Judith's glass.

"Thanks, honey."

Marnie smiled and turned to Craig. "What about you? You still working on that iced tea?"

"Sure am. Unless Lou's had a change of heart and made the refills free."

Marnie's smile wobbled. "Sorry, no free refills, Craig. Sugar's pricey, you know."

Craig made a hmph noise. Normally, Judith would've been embarrassed by his behavior. But today, she was still embarrassed by *her* behavior. Imagine accusing her only grandson of stealing from her. Her cheeks flamed just thinking about it.

"Tell you what, Marnie. Bring him a fresh iced tea with his meal." Craig raised an eyebrow. "Lunch is my treat today, Craig."

He shrugged. "Okay, thanks."

"Yes, ma'am. Are you folks ready to order?" The tip of her pencil hovered over her pad.

"Two seafood salad sandwiches."

“Chips on the side?”

She eyed Craig, who nodded. “Yes, for both of us.”

“You got it. I’ll get this order in before the kitchen runs out. Miss Louisa’s salad sells like hotcakes.”

“Don’t I know it.” Judith caught the younger woman’s sleeve before she could dart away. “How’s your dad doing?”

Marnie’s mouth turned down, and she shook her head sadly. “Not good. He’s ... bad.”

“I’m sorry, Marnie. I heard you visited the memory care village. Do you think that’s what you’ll do?”

Her shoulders heaved. “There’s a long waitlist for a spot. And ... I’m not sure I could swing the cost anyway.”

Judith’s heart swelled as the waitress’s eyes filled. She took in the dark half-circles under Marnie’s eyes and her ragged cuticles and bitten nails. Then she patted Marnie’s hand. “Why don’t I come by and cook dinner for you two tomorrow night? In fact, I can talk to the ladies and set up a schedule. We can help you out with your dad. Cooking, cleaning, shopping.”

“Oh, I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. Deke’s lived here his whole life. We’re not going to forget about him or you. You don’t have to shoulder this alone.”

A sob broke in her throat, and she swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. “That’s real kind of you, Judy. If you really don’t mind, I’d be ... that would be a godsend. I’m stretched pretty thin.”

Before Judith could say another word, Marnie ducked her head and scurried toward the kitchen.

Craig watched her go. “Stinks about her dad.”

Judith bit her tongue. Craig had no idea what a load that young woman was carrying. He’d never sacrificed a blessed thing for a single person. But she’d resolved not to argue with him. Not today. Not when she’d already accused him of being a thief, and not when he’d offered to come to the food distribution.

“Did the oatmeal bath give you any relief?” she asked instead.

He made a puzzled face.

“The rash?” she prompted.

“Oh, right. Uh, yeah. It helped some.”

“Good. When we leave here, we’ll swing by the pharmacy before we go to the food pantry and pick up your ointment.”

They lapsed into silence. Judith checked out the surrounding tables. Everyone was eating one of Lou's seafood specials. She smiled to herself. Good. Louisa never complained or talked about how the business was doing, but Judith knew the diner was operating on a shoestring. If it weren't for Lou's thriftiness and fantastic cooking, the place would've closed ages ago. And then where would the community go? Judith tried to imagine Oyster Point without St. Lou's, but she simply couldn't. The diner was an essential part of the town. No, not just part of the town—it was the beating heart, the very center.

Luckily, Marnie chose that moment to arrive with their sandwiches, so Judith didn't have to contemplate that particular nightmare scenario any longer. She placed their plates on the table along with a new glass of iced tea for Craig.

"Do you need anything else?"

"We're all set, Marnie."

"Enjoy your lunch."

She needn't have bothered. They already were.

Between bites, Craig craned his neck and looked around. "Wonder if any of your gal pals are here."

She paused with a potato chip halfway to her mouth. "What gal pals?"

"You know, Patty, Lucinda, Iris ... your gals."

"I wouldn't say they're my gals, Craig," she said with a laugh before popping the chip into her mouth and crunching down on it. "They're just some of the ladies I know."

"Yeah, okay. But I thought maybe they'd know more about what that Dr. King guy's doing here." He shrugged. "Or they might have an update about what happened to Doc. I dunno."

She narrowed her eyes. "Why so interested?"

"I'm not. Just making conversation." He took a huge bite of his sandwich and chewed.

"Hmm."

Craig wasn't the most sparkling conversationalist, but even for him, the choice of topic was odd. She decided to let it go and enjoy her sandwich.

As Judith was paying the bill, the bell over the door rang. She glanced up to see a tall, thin stranger in need of a haircut come inside and ask Marnie a question. Marnie turned and pointed directly at Judith. She hurriedly dropped her gaze.

The man walked over and stood right by her elbow. “Excuse me, Ms. Lowell?”

“That’s me. But folks around here just call me Judy. And you are?”

“Bodhi King. I’m a friend of Joel Ashland’s.” He stuck out his hand. “I was told you might be able to help me.”

BODHI WATCHED Judy Lowell’s face as she decided whether to talk to him. She was expressive; the range of emotions she displayed would have made her an outstanding actress—and a terrible poker player. She cycled through surprise, distrust, fear, and worry before landing on curiosity and a decision.

She shook his hand quickly, then said, “Come on, Marnie hasn’t cleared my table yet. We can sit and talk for a minute.” She turned to the young man standing next to her and handed him a bank card. “Craig, run over to Rhoda’s and get your prescription while I talk to Dr. King. Swing back and pick me up.”

“But, Gran. I don’t mind waiting.” He caught Bodhi’s eye. “I’m Craig, Judy’s grandson.”

“Nice to meet you, Craig.”

“Now, listen. If you don’t go now, we won’t have time before the food bank. And then Rhoda will be closed when we’re done, and your rash will just get worse. Go now. I’ll be fine here.” She patted his arm.

Craig frowned but pocketed the card and headed for the door. They watched him walk out, and then Judy led Bodhi to a table for two. She lowered herself into her seat with a deep, dry cough.

“Can I get you some water?” He looked around for the server, but Judy waved him off.

“It’ll pass. Always does. So, who told you to come and see me? Steffi at that juice shop?”

He smiled. “No, but the person who sent me your way told me you know everyone and everything. Looks like that’s accurate.”

She shrugged. “I’ve lived here a long time, Dr. King.”

“How long? And, please, Bodhi’s fine.”

“My whole life—eighty-one years. And Bodhi’s *not* fine. You’re a

doctor, young man. Act like it. You sound like Doc Ashland.” She shook her head. “Must’ve spent the first five years trying to get people to call him Joel or at least Doc Joel.”

He sensed a fondness behind the judgment. “I’m sorry about Joel’s death. Of course, I am, personally. He was a friend. But also, I’m sorry for Oyster Point. It seems like the loss of the clinic will be a massive blow to the people here.”

She frowned deeply. “It will be. But I don’t know how we can keep it going without him. No physician in his—or her—right mind would move to a dying town.”

“I can put out some feelers. Maybe another doctor living on the coast would be willing to come in once a month like Joel did.”

He’d ask Mirabelle Owens. Even if the medical examiner wasn’t up for the job, she might know someone.

Judy considered his offer with a skeptical look. “And why would you do that? You don’t know us.”

“No, I don’t. But I do know that everyone who lives here needs access to health care.”

“We don’t need outsiders poking their noses in like we can’t take care of ourselves,” she sniffed.

He decided not to point out that Joel Ashland had, at least initially, been an outsider. Inside, he remembered Mrs. Wolfe’s admonition not to make the mistake of thinking anyone in Oyster Point was fragile. Despite her frail appearance, it was clear that Judith Lowell was anything but.

“Well, we can talk about whether I can help you later. Right now, I’m wondering if you can help me.”

“So you said. I still don’t know what you think I can do for you.” She leaned across the table and stared at him. “Out with it.”

Fair enough. “The morning Joel died, he was supposed to meet with someone. I’m trying to find out who.”

“He was supposed to meet with a lot of people. He opened the clinic doors no later than nine and usually earlier.”

“Not a patient, a donor,” he clarified.

“A donor? What kind of donor? A blood donor? An organ donor?”

“A financial donor. Someone who wanted to make a large monetary donation to the clinic.”

She pursed her lips. “How large?”

“Fifty thousand dollars, I think.”

She scoffed. “Not a chance.”

“He definitely got a call while he was at Steffi’s place getting his morning drink. She said he was excited by the prospect of getting a big donation for the clinic. And I found some notes on his desk. The figure he’d written down was fifty thousand.”

Her eyebrows shot up toward her hairline. “Nobody around here has that kind of money,” she breathed.

“Someone must. Maybe one of the business owners?”

“Most of the businesses here are hanging on by a thread. I suspect if Louisa had that kind of money, she’d put in air conditioning in this place. Steffi would pay off her student loans. Henrietta Wolfe would stop letting out rooms to strangers. None of them would give it away.” She laughed without humor at the thought.

“What about a business in the county but not necessarily in town? I was over at Emerald Estuary Estates this morning. Those homes look expensive. Who’s going to live in them?”

She dismissed the question with a flap of her hand and a violent cough. “Well, if you ask Fred Glazier and Chad Hornbill, Hollywood celebrities and society ladies from West Palm Beach. But those two are delusional.”

“Could either of them afford a donation like that?”

“Now you sound delusional. *Could* they? Yes. Would they? Not a chance in blazes. Fred Glazier grew up as dirt poor as everybody else around here. He clawed his way to the top through a combination of street smarts and a complete lack of empathy. He’d sooner set his money on fire than give it away. Now, his ex-wife, she might’ve done something like that. She had ideas about how people with money should act. But she had her fill of Fred and this town years ago.”

“And this Chad person? Who is he?”

“Chad owns Gulf Paper Company. He’s got ideas about how rich people act, too. That’s because he’s one of them. I mean, he came from money. His great-grandfather started the paper company—the original building was right here in town. But Chad’s not one of us. He makes sure we all know it, too. He commutes all the way from Tallahassee every day because he wouldn’t be caught dead living in Oyster Point. As a matter of fact, that’s probably half the motivation behind his McMansion community. So he can live here without being embarrassed. Every generation of Hornbills has gotten snootier



than the last. If Chad decided to donate that kind of money, he'd give it to the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra or his kids' private school, something splashy. Not a free community clinic in a dumpy little town. Trust me."

He eyed the day's specials listed on the chalkboard on the wall. Fried oysters and a sandwich made from a whelk and clam salad. He recalled Mirabelle's warning and rubbed his chin, thinking.

Judy followed his gaze. "Oh, you won't go wrong with either one. You want me to flag Marnie down so you can order before Lou sells out?"

"No, thank you. I don't eat seafood."

She stared at him for several seconds and then roared with laughter. "You don't eat seafood ... you're in the wrong town, friend." The laughter turned into a red-faced coughing fit.

He leaned forward, concerned. The server—Marnie, presumably—hurried over with a glass of water and pressed it into Judy's hands. She took a careful sip and dabbed her lips with a napkin.

He waited until he was sure she'd recovered, and then he said, "Joel's notes made me wonder if the donation was motivated by something other than altruism."

"Like what?" she rasped.

"Like an effort to buy Joel's silence. About what, I'm not sure."

Her face darkened. "I don't know what Doc could've had on him, but yes, Chad would offer a bribe to protect himself. Without a doubt."

Craig appeared at the table, a white prescription bag in hand. "You ready, Gran?"

"Yes." She hoisted herself to her feet and turned to Bodhi, who also stood up. "If you want to ask around, you could come to the food pantry this afternoon. Most of the town'll be there—either volunteering or picking up groceries. It's over at the Baptist Church two blocks east of here. You can't miss the big white tent in the parking lot."

"I'll be there," he told her.

She pulled a face. "We'll see. Come on, Craig."

"Judith?" Bodhi said to her back.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for your time. I appreciate it."

Judy accepted his thanks by waving one hand over her shoulder.

When she and her grandson reached the exit, he held the door open for an olive-skinned woman who raced inside, a white lab coat flapping and bouncy

brown hair streaming behind her. Bodhi waved his arms to catch her attention. If she wasn't Mirabelle Owens, he'd eat his napkin.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

---

The painters stood against the far wall of the trailer, their backs pressed against the panel wall and their hands folded in front of them. Fred looked from one Jones brother to the other.

“It doesn’t matter,” he told the pair. “Hornbill won’t notice the difference between eggshell white and cream white. Just get whichever one is cheaper.”

“But the contract specifies—” the taller brother began. Fred was pretty sure he was Wayne. Or was the short one Wayne and the tall one Duane? Isn’t this why he had a freaking secretary? Where was she, anyway?

“Bah. White is white. Just buy something—I don’t care what you pick. Go, and take these with you.” He thrust the handful of paint chips at the brothers and gestured for them to leave.

His cell phone rang as they filed out of the tight space and clomped down the metal stairs outside.

“Glazier,” he barked.

“It’s me. Chad.”

Hornbill rarely called him directly. That Sharon chick from his office did most of the day-to-day. For half a second, Fred thought Chad somehow knew he’d gone rogue on the white paint. Then he realized how stupid that thought was and shook his head at himself.

“What can I do you for ya?” he asked cautiously.

“We have a problem.”

Fred waited.

“My chief sustainability officer was just in here reading me the riot act. Correction: my former chief sustainability officer. I fired her ass.”

“That sounds like a you problem, not an us problem,” Fred pointed out.

“I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you.”

“Is this about the dead fish? For crying out loud, Chad, I told Sharon I took care of that.”

“It’s not about the water runoff. Well, not directly. And it’s definitely an *us* problem.”

Fred’s frustration boiled over and washed away what little patience he possessed. “Then spit it out. I have crap to do. I can’t sit here on the phone like a schoolgirl waiting for you to get to the point.”

“I’d be careful how you speak to me,” Chad warned in a voice like ice. Then he launched into his story. “She went to see Ashland on Friday morning to talk about the health issues caused by your dumping.”

“The alleged health issues caused by my purported dumping, you mean.”

“Sure, whatever helps you sleep at night, Fred. Anyway, she was gone when I got there. But she saw me going inside.”

“Still sounds like a you problem,” Fred told him, but his heart wasn’t in it.

“Come on, Fred. You said you’d help me.”

“And I did.”

“I thought you were going to ...”

“We shouldn’t be talking about this, Chad. Not on the phone. The town is crawling with cops and not just the local yokels. The FDLE is lurking around, and there’s some forensic expert from up North here poking—”

“Yeah, Bodhi King. I’m on it.”

“What does that mean—you’re on it?” Fred demanded.

“It means I have a guy on the inside who’s keeping me apprised of what’s happening with the investigation.”

‘*A guy on the inside*’ was a vast exaggeration of Craig Lowell’s access, but Hornbill was rapidly spinning out of control and Fred had to settle him down before he did something stupid.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, your guy should know Brianna’s cooperating with Bodhi King.”

“Cooperating with him? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know all the details. I do know she said if I don’t tell him that I was at the clinic on Friday morning, she would.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What choice do I have?”

Chad's voice rose into a whine, sending a nails-on-chalkboard shiver down Fred's back. "Not that," he said through clenched teeth.

"What if she's not bluffing? Then what do I do?"

Fred sighed deeply. How did this inept little shit end up running a company? Oh, right. Nepotism.

"Then you lie, Chad. If she says she saw you going into the houseboat, you say she must be mistaken. Say you were in Tallahassee having breakfast at home with your wife."

"Mitzy was at a school event. Muffins with Mom or some BS."

"So you were having breakfast at home alone. It'll be your word against Brianna's."

"I ... guess."

"No. Like it or not, we're in this mess together now. And you're not bringing me down with you. You will not tell the authorities you were the last person to see Joel Ashland alive. Is that clear?"

"Jeez. You don't have to yell."

Fred hadn't realized he was yelling. But the phone was slick with sweat in his hand and the vein in his forehead was pulsing, so it was safe to assume Chad wasn't exaggerating.

He forced himself to take a deep breath and lower his voice. "I'm sorry about that. I don't want you to do something rash and ruin everything you've worked for."

They *were* in this together, which meant he'd have to treat Chad with more care. After all, that was the point of mutually assured destruction.

"Okay. I hear you. Will you let me know if your guy hears my name come up?"

"You've got it."

Chad let out a shaky laugh. "Thanks for talking me down. I feel better already."

"Good. Glad to hear it."

"So, how's the model home coming?"

Fred rolled his eyes. He'd had his fill of this conversation and then some. But the least he could do was spend thirty seconds glad-handing Hornbill.

"Almost done. It looks amazing. The Jones brothers are painting today."

"That white peak foam color is really going to set the stage, don't you think?"

"Definitely."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

---

**A** ccording to the rental car's GPS, Felicia was fewer than twenty miles from Oyster Point when she saw it. A muddy blue pickup truck, about thirty feet ahead of her, parked beside a construction gate. She didn't brake or even slow down.

Instead, she swerved right, at speed, and bumped off the road and onto the packed dirt shoulder. Then she slammed on the brakes and the sedan screeched to a stop. The momentum threw her forward, and the shoulder belt caught her and pushed her back. She gripped the wheel and stared hard through the windshield.

What were the odds that it was the same truck?

She scrambled through the accordion folder on the passenger seat until she found the file she wanted. She fumbled with the file folder for a moment before she managed to flip it open to stare at the color photograph clipped to the folder. It was a picture of a muddy blue pickup truck.

Her eyes flicked from the photo to the truck in front of her and then back to the photo. Same make, same model. The same shade of deep blue. And, most tellingly, the same pattern of mud splattered over the sides of the truck, positioned directly over the slogan on both sides, and the same mud-obscured license plate. When she'd seen the image, her gut told her the mud had intentionally, strategically been applied to avoid identification. But her rational brain had kicked up a fuss. It wasn't really possible to know that, at least not from a blurry traffic camera picture.

Now, though, she had no doubt. The mud was too perfectly placed, the coverage too complete to be accidental. This was the truck that had followed Joel's Jeep through the service plaza and the toll booth. And the driver—like

the driver of the Jeep—had worn a baseball cap pulled low over their forehead and large sunglasses to hide their identity and their gender. Could be a guy. Could be a girl.

She killed the engine and exited the car. Adrenaline zipped through her body, and her hands trembled with excitement. This was the kind of lucky break that made the difference between solving a crime and adding it to a tall stack of cold cases. She had to keep her cool. Play this right.

She took out her cell phone as she walked toward the truck and punched in the number for the Oyster Point Police Chief.

“Chief Rodman’s office. Lucinda speaking,” a brisk, yet pleasant, female voice answered on the first ring.

“This is Detective Felicia Williams. Is the chief available?”

“Oh, Detective Williams. Are you in town? Your office said you were on your way.”

“Uh, I’m just outside the town limits, on Emerald Road.” She pulled the GPS map to check if she had the name right. She did. “I need to speak to Chief Rodman if he’s in.”

“I’m so sorry. He’s at the food bank. Can I take a message?”

“He’s at the food bank?” she repeated as if she’d misheard.

“That’s right. In fact, I’m headed over there in a few minutes myself. I could ask him to call you if you don’t want to leave a message.”

What kind of town was this?

“Sure, I’d appreciate that.”

“You’ve got it,” Lucinda assured her.

“Thanks.”

Lucinda read Felicia’s number back to her from her caller ID display; Felicia confirmed it; and Lucinda promised to have the chief call her as soon as possible.

Felicia pulled up the camera app on her phone and circled the truck, snapping photos from every angle. She mustered all her discipline to keep herself from rubbing away the mud to see the name on the side. She stretched onto her toes to peek into the truck bed. Empty.

She cupped her hands around her eyes and peered inside the passenger cab, but between the glare of the sun and the light tint on the truck’s windows, she couldn’t make out anything of interest.

“Hey.”

The gruff word was accompanied by a rough tap on her shoulder.

Startled, she wheeled around, her hand flying to the butt of her holstered weapon out of muscle memory.

A grizzled security guard eyed her hard, took in the gun on her waistband, and stepped back. “Easy, lady. You’re trespassing.”

She didn’t take her eyes off his face. “I don’t think so. This is a public road.”

He tried a different tack. “Okay, look. This truck here belongs to my boss. You look pretty suspicious, like maybe you’re planning to break into it. So why don’t you be on your way, and I’ll forget I ever saw you?”

She continued to study him, taking in the sweat beading on his upper lip and the slight tremor in his voice.

“What’s your name?”

It took a minute, but eventually, he grunted out his name with clear reluctance. “Ralph.”

“Just Ralph? You don’t have a last name, Ralph?”

“Asher,” he grumbled before showing a spark of spirit. “Who are you?”

She flashed him a smile as she removed her badge holder from her suit pocket and flipped it open with a well-practiced one-handed movement. “Detective Felicia Williams.”

“I ... I didn’t know.”

“Clearly.”

She glanced through the construction gate that hung ajar behind Ralph and then turned her attention back to the security guard. “So this is your boss’s truck? Personal vehicle?”

“No. It’s not Mr. Glazier’s personal ride. It’s one of the company trucks.”

“One of them. How many are there?”

He shrugged. “I don’t rightly know. At least four or five.”

“Are they identical? All this shade of blue?”

“Yes, ma’am. Least as far as I know.”

“Are they all this muddy?”

He frowned at the question. “I’m not sure what happened to this one. Or why it’s parked out here. This isn’t the main gate. We almost never use this entrance. But the truck oughta be parked inside with the others. Well, after someone hoses it down.” He reached for a radio clipped to the pocket on his shirt sleeve.

“Don’t.” She held up her palm like a crossing guard, and he moved his hand away from the walkie-talkie.



“Don’t make the call?”

“Right. I’m advising you to leave that truck parked right where it is unless and until law enforcement instructs you to do something different. Don’t move it. Don’t wash it. And do not touch it.”

He nodded wordlessly.

“Good. Now, you said this isn’t the main entrance. Where is that?”

He jabbed his thumb to his right, as if he were trying to hitch a ride. “Back around the bend about a half-mile or so.”

“What is this place? It’s obviously a construction site, but what’s it going to be ultimately?”

“This is the future home of Emerald Estuary Estates, Oyster Point’s premier luxury home gated community.” As Ralph rattled off the sales spiel, he straightened his shoulders and puffed out his chest.

Felicia recalled the handful of ramshackle ranch-style homes and rundown beach cottages with peeling paint she’d passed on the road. “How many luxury home gated communities does this town have?”

“Well ... none, yet.”

“Oh, then I guess this one’ll definitely be the premier one.”

He squinted at her as if he wasn’t sure whether she was joking. “Uh, yeah.”

“So, your boss owns the development?”

“No, ma’am. That’d be Mr. Hornbill. Mr. Glazier is the general contractor on the project. I work for Glazier Builders.”

“Is he here now?”

“Mr. Glazier?”

“Yes.”

He considered his answer to this ‘yes or no’ question for longer than Felicia liked. In her experience, a delayed response to a simple question indicated the speaker was coming up with a lie—or, in the best-case scenario, a half-truth.

She was about to prompt him when he bobbed his head and opened his mouth. “Yes, he’s—”

The growl of an engine drowned out the rest of the sentence as a bright yellow Mustang raced around the bend and blew past them. The driver must have been going at least eighty miles per hour, well over the speed limit.

Ralph snorted softly and cocked his head to the side. “I mean, no, ma’am, he just left.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

---

“Please tell me you didn’t eat that.” These were the first words out of Mirabelle Owens’ mouth, as she pointed to the remaining bite of a sandwich and handful of potato chips on the plate in front of Bodhi.

“I didn’t eat that. I wouldn’t even without your warning—I don’t eat seafood. Judith Lowell and her grandson had lunch at this table, and the dishes haven’t been cleared yet. I believe they both ordered the whelk and clam salad po’ boy.”

“Idiots,” she murmured.

“Pardon?”

She cast a furtive look around the still-bustling diner and lowered her voice to a whisper. “I don’t have definitive proof, but I’m pretty sure the seafood in this town is killing the residents.”

He blinked at her. “So there *is* a sudden unexplained death cluster?”

“No,” she spoke rapidly, the words tumbling out on top of one another. “That’s the frustrating thing. There’s no SUD. The deaths are spread out, not temporally related. And the causes of death seem utterly unrelated. Squamous cell carcinoma of the lungs in a forty-year-old nonsmoker. A fatal asthma attack in a previously healthy teenager. A precipitous cognitive decline in a senior citizen who walks out into traffic and is hit by a car and killed instantly. Just a few examples.”

“And you tied these three deaths back to the seafood?”

She huffed out a loud breath. “No. I couldn’t. As I’m sure you know, there have been no confirmed cases of human mortality linked to neurotoxic shellfish poisoning. Neither consumption nor inhalation of NSP.”

“But?”

“But the deceased all lived in Oyster Point. So I started asking questions. I interviewed their family members to see if there was a common thread. And every last one of them ate a lot of locally harvested shellfish—clams, in particular.”

“Not oysters? I mean, it *is* Oyster Point.”

She shook her head. “No, most of the oysters in this area come from commercial oyster farms.”

“So?”

“So, they’re expensive. And the regulated shellfish harvesting areas are subject to shutdown notices whenever there’s a red tide.”

“The state shuts down the farms?”

“Right. When there’s a *Karenia brevis* bloom, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services monitors the toxin levels. When the brevetoxins exceed a safe level, FDACS orders the regulated shellfish beds to be closed to both commercial and recreational harvesters. But there have been NSP outbreaks during such closures—usually tourists or residents who weren’t aware of the closures. Although, if you’ve ever smelled a red tide, they couldn’t have been oblivious to the toxin. But this *is* the Gulf Coast. The same people who ignore evacuation orders and try to ride out hurricanes certainly also pooh-pooh the no harvesting orders because they grew up eating shellfish during red tides and survived—maybe they had some gastrointestinal distress once or twice, but it was no big deal.” She shook her head.

“And these people you mentioned died during a shutdown?”

“No, they didn’t. I know, I sound unhinged.”

“You don’t,” he assured her. “You’re trying to work loose a knot that nobody else has even noticed is tangled yet. Keep talking.”

She gave him a grateful smile. “Thanks. I *feel* unhinged, like I’m divorced from reality. I just keep thinking, most people die, their death certificate lists natural causes, and there’s no autopsy. I think the reason there haven’t been any confirmed human deaths from NSP isn’t because nobody’s died from it. It’s because we’re not looking for it.”

They shared a moment of silence. Bodhi didn’t know what she was thinking about, but his mind was on the people who’d lived and died along the Forgotten Coast, their deaths unnoticed by anyone but their closest friends and families.

“So, let’s walk through this,” he said after a few beats. “You’ve seen at

least a handful of deaths from Oyster Point that made you suspect brevetoxin may have been involved. And Joel noticed a pattern of ill health in his patients that made him wonder if there was a sub-acute level of brevetoxin or other marine toxin that could cause chronic health problems.”

“On the phone, you mentioned four categories of illness.”

“When I reviewed his patient charts, it seemed that the chronic complaints could be sorted broadly into skin conditions, like recurrent rashes and non-healing wounds; cognitive and memory issues; respiratory problems, mainly asthma, but also repeated pneumonia and bronchitis infections; and a surprising number of lung cancer cases.” He paused and recalled Judy Lowell’s persistent cough. “Maybe add a dry cough to the respiratory problems.”

“A wheezing, raspy cough?”

“That’s right.”

She shook her head. “Aside from the asthma cases, the respiratory issues could all be early symptoms of squamous cell carcinoma. The cancer cluster might be bigger than Joel realized.”

“Has lung cancer been tied to any marine toxin?”

He eyed her, and she continued, “I found a study—only one—that found aerosolized brevetoxin metabolites bonded with DNA to form adducts in rat lung cells. Which, as you know ...”

“Initiates the first stage of carcinogenesis. So, it causes lung cancer.”

“It causes the first step needed for cancer to develop. In rats,” she corrected.

“Still.”

“Still.”

He cleared his throat. “I found a study, too. Extended exposure to aerosolized brevetoxins caused changes in gene expression, including cell death and inflammation.”

“In rats?” she asked hopefully.

“No. Human T cells.”

Mirabelle looked queasy. Bodhi felt how she looked.

Marnie appeared at the table and began to clear the dirty dishes.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize you were still here,” she said to Bodhi, flustered and frenzied.

“It’s fine. We’re just chatting. You’ve been swamped.”

She nodded as she wiped the laminated tabletop with a wet cloth. “We

always get slammed when Lou makes her seafood salad.” She bobbed her head and added, “Or the oysters. Or her clam stew. Pretty much any time there’s a seafood special.”

Mirabelle leaned forward on her elbows. “Where does Miss Louisa get her shellfish?”

“I’m glad to see that *somebody* at this table appreciates seafood.” Marnie gave Bodhi a knowing grin that made it clear Judy had ratted him out. Then she turned to Mirabelle to answer the question. “Not from the seafood market, that’s for sure. There are families in Oyster Point who’ve been clamming and harvesting oysters for generations—literally. The grandkids of folks Louisa’s husband used to buy from decades ago come right up to the kitchen door to sell us their daily haul. Today, some of the Beauregard cousins brought the razor clams. An older Vietnamese gentleman who lives outside of town over near Emerald Estuary caught the whelks. And the oysters got here before I did this morning, so I can’t tell you who caught them. But I can tell you they’re fresh, local, and all sold out.”

Mirabelle’s queasy expression took on a green cast. “Wow,” she managed faintly.

“It’s a real tradition,” Marnie said with evident pride. “And Miss Lou doesn’t mess around with that old wives’ tale about months without an ‘R.’”

“Oh.” Mirabelle threw Bodhi a desperate look.

“Yeah. So can I get you anything? Coffee, tea? A slice of pie? I don’t want to rush you out the door, but we usually close by two on the second Friday of the month so we can go help out at the food bank.”

“We’re all set,” Bodhi assured her. “And we’re on our way. I promise.”

He waited until she hefted the tray on her shoulder and moved on, then he turned to Mirabelle and asked, “What’s the story with months that don’t have an ‘R’?”

“Oh, that’s been around for literally hundreds of years, if not longer. The folk wisdom is you should only eat shellfish in months that have an ‘R’ in their name. So, not between May and August. It actually makes a lot of sense—or it did, before the advent of commercial shellfish farms and modern refrigeration.”

He thought for a moment. “Sure, because the water temperature’s hotter in the summer, leading to more bacterial growth and harmful algae blooms.”

“Right. So, these amateur harvesters are out there in the middle of a record-breaking heat wave wading around in hot water ...” she shuddered.

“It is September,” he noted mildly.

“And it’s over a hundred degrees outside,” she retorted. “I wouldn’t be caught in that water for love or money right now.”

“Is there an active bloom?”

“Not that I’ve heard. But there is confirmed *Vibrio vulnificus* in the water. Step on a shell, get pinched by a crab, or just have an open cut and—boom—congratulations, you have necrotizing fasciitis. If you’re lucky, all you’ll need is an amputation. If you’re unlucky, I’ll see you in my morgue.”

He was about to try to counter her fatalism, but something about her speech sparked a memory. “There could be multiple pathogens in the water.”

“Oh, there definitely are. It’s a toxic stew. What are you thinking?”

“There’s no evidence that NSP causes memory or cognitive problems, but Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning does.”

“Domoic acid.”

“Right. I know ASP occurs mainly in clams found well north of here and even so-called “safe” levels of domoic acid can cause memory problems. Toxic levels well ... that’s a different ball of wax.”

“I remember the fatal outbreak in Canada years ago,” she told him.

“Exactly. Joel seemed to have a working theory that the illnesses he was seeing may have resulted from a combination of marine toxins. All of the studies I’ve seen have looked at acute toxicity. But, if there’s a toxic stew, as you so aptly put it, that’s present all the time at some level, then the people eating in this diner and living in this town are subject to low levels of toxins all the time—with spikes when there’s a red tide, heat wave, or other environmental disruption.”

“So, Joel’s patients are more like the manatees and fish who die from chronic exposure to marine toxins than the snowbirds and tourists who have a passing tickle in their throat when they go on the beach during a red tide,” she said, warming to the hypothesis.

“They could be. And the fact that they’re exposed, even at sub-chronic levels, might explain one anomaly,” he mused. “I’ve seen almost no evidence of gastrointestinal problems in Joel’s patient records. When there is an outbreak, that’s usually one of the most common symptoms.”

“But if a person consumes small amounts of the toxins regularly, they might build up a tolerance. Until they reach a tipping point, and then vomiting would be the least of their problems.”

“It’s a thought.”

“It’s a good one. Terrifying, but good. One question: if this town is sick because they’re awash in marine toxins, that’s a public health tragedy, for sure. But who would kill Joel to keep that quiet? It’s not like the oysters rose up and tossed him off that loft. Or a clump of algae stole his phone and keys.”

He stood up. “You’re right. Come on.”

“Where are we going?” she asked as she pushed back her chair.

“Where all the humans in this town are.”

“The food bank?”

“The food bank.”



*“As the bee collects nectar and flies away without damaging the flower or its color or its scent, so also, let the bhikku dwell and act in the village.”*  
*The Dhammapada, Verse 49*

*“I bow my head before you as I look deeply and recognize that you are present in me and that I am a part of you.”*  
*Thich Nhat Hanh, Ten Love Letters to the Earth*



## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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**A**fter she'd traded her ID badge for a cardboard box, Brianna scooped up her personal belongings and ran from the building before she started to cry right there in the office. She drove mindlessly, numbly, into the center of town and parked the car. On autopilot, she stumbled into the Juice Joint, slumped onto a seat at the nearest table, and buried her head in her arms.

Steffi came over to greet her, took one look at her, and sank into the chair across from her, her wide smile dying on her lips. "Girl, you look like hell. Did someone else die?"

"No, nothing like that," she mumbled into the table before raising her head to meet Steffi's gaze. "I got fired."

"Are you being serious?"

"It would be a pretty awful joke, wouldn't it?"

"True. What happened?"

Brianna scrubbed her hands over her face. "I confronted Chad about ... something."

His warning to keep her mouth shut hadn't been an empty threat. She didn't know what he'd do, but she knew he'd retaliate if he heard she was talking.

"Mmm. Something illegal, no doubt."

She cocked her head. "Why do you say that?"

"Bri, come on. Being the sustainability officer at that company is the equivalent of, I don't know, being the hall monitor in a maximum security prison or something. You had an impossible task. Everybody knows Gulf Paper will do anything to make a buck—or save one."

“They do?”

“Sure. You didn’t grow up here. But when the mill was open, there were weeks when the water was dark brown. People say it sometimes bubbled from whatever crap they were dumping into the bay. It *bubbled*.”

“I’m such a moron,” she moaned.

Steffi stood and clapped her hands together. “Up. Come on. I know what will make you feel better.”

“A gin and tupelo tonic?” she asked hopefully.

“Later. First, the food bank.”

“The food bank?” she repeated blankly.

“Yes, we’re going to help pass out food at the food bank.”

“And this will make me feel better because why?”

“Because it’ll take your focus off your own misery. Trust me.”

“I dunno, Steffi. I don’t feel like talking to anyone. I’d much rather wallow. Or drink. No, wait, drink *and* wallow.”

Steffi thrust out one leg, jammed her hands on her hips, and gave Brianna an unamused look.

“Fine,” Brianna moaned, her voice just this side of a whine, as she hauled herself to her feet with a heavy sigh. “Let’s go.”

“That’s the spirit,” Steffi told her, deliberately ignoring her attitude, as she nudged her toward the door.

She called over her shoulder to the guy playing a word game on his phone behind the counter. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

He raised two fingers to his forehead in a mock salute and then returned to his puzzle.

Steffi beamed at Brianna. “You’ll feel so good after we volunteer. It’ll remind you of all you have to be grateful for. There’s literally zero downside.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

---

Craig dropped jars of peanut butter into the row of brown paper bags that Clara had lined up on the long white table splitting the rec room. The mail carrier leaned over to peer into a bag.

“You checking my work, Miss Clara?”

She sniffed. “You haven’t been here in quite a while. Wanted to make sure you haven’t forgotten how things work.”

*Focus.* He bit his tongue to keep from asking if there’d been many recent advancements in the art of bag filling. He wasn’t here to argue. He was here to gather information. Information that he could trade to Fred Glazier for fresh, crisp Benjamins. Or dirty, crumpled Benjamins. Either way, they spent.

“Yes, ma’am,” he finally muttered so she’d move on and hassle someone else.

It must’ve been his lucky day because just then, Steffi from the juice place walked into the basement kitchen with her friend from the paper company trailing behind her. Clara turned her attention to the newcomers.

“Hi, Clara! Patty sent us in to see if you need help carrying the filled bags out to the tent,” Steffi chirped while her friend glared down at the floor.

“Oh, Steffi. Not yet. Why don’t you and ...?”

“Brianna,” Steffi supplied. “Brianna Allen. You know her. She works over at the paper company.”

“Worked,” Brianna barked.

“Worked,” Steffi corrected herself.

“Right. You live in those townhouses near the lighthouse.”

Brianna raised her head and blinked at the older woman as if she might be a stalker. Craig bit back a laugh.

Steffi explained, “Clara’s the Oyster Point mail carrier, Bri. She knows where everyone lives.”

“Oh.”

Craig didn’t know Brianna Allen well, but he was glad to see she was even more sullen than he was. And that was saying something. Maybe they were soulmates.

“Hey,” he jerked his head in greeting. “You two could add the beans and the crackers to these bags.”

“Great idea,” Clara declared before drifting away to check on the juice and bread station.

The women joined him at the table. They worked in silence for a while as they shuffled back and forth to tuck cans of red beans and boxes of saltines into the bags while he added jars of peanut butter.

After a few minutes, Steffi elbowed her friend in the ribs.

“Ow, what?”

“You could work for me.”

“What?” Brianna’s eyes went wide.

“At the Juice Joint. Just until you find something.”

“Mmm, maybe,” Brianna made a noncommittal noise.

Yep, this chick was definitely his soulmate. Craig could practically read her thoughts. She was probably imagining the hairnet and the stickiness that the job would entail.

He cleared his throat. “Are you looking for a job?”

At the interruption, both women turned toward him in unison, each with one raised eyebrow. They couldn’t possibly be peeved that he’d eavesdropped. They were standing two feet away from him. What was he supposed to do, stick his fingers in his ears?

After an icy moment, Brianna said, “Yeah, I am. Why? Do you know a company with an open executive-level position for a sustainability officer?”

“Uh, no. But I do know a guy who’s looking for consultants.”

“Consultants, huh? What kind of consultants?” Steffi inserted herself into the conversation.

Craig ignored her, keeping his attention locked on her friend. “More like independent contractors, I guess. It’s project-based work.”

“And how much do you earn for these projects?” Brianna wanted to know.

“Depends on how complicated they are. I’m getting a minimum of a

hundred dollars for each ... report. Cash.”

“Cash,” Brianna repeated skeptically.

“Yeah.”

“You know you have to report that, right?”

“Sure,” he bluffed. “Anyway, I could put in a word with Fred for you—if you want.”

“Fred?”

“Glazier.”

Brianna reared her head back. “Uh, thanks, but no thanks.”

Steffi’s eyes widened. “You’re working off the books for Fred Glazier? Does your grandmother know about this?”

As if Steffi’d summoned her by invoking her name, Gran came into the rec room from the kitchen, coughing into her elbow. “Hello, Stefanie. Hello, Brianna. Nice of you girls to come help out.” Then she turned to Craig. “Do I know about what?”

Steffi smirked. “Oh, Craig was just telling us all about his new job.”

Gran frowned. “What new job would that be?”

Craig opened his mouth as he searched for a response that would satisfy her. But he was saved from trying to construct one when Bodhi King and the medical examiner from the diner walked in from the parking lot.

“Hi,” Bodhi said to the room in general. “How can we help?”

Gran chuckled. “Well, I’ll be. I didn’t think you’d come.”

The forensic expert smiled at her. “I know. But here I am. And Dr. Owens wants to help, too.”

The woman doctor stepped forward and offered her hand to Gran. “Mirabelle Owens. I’m the medical examiner in Panama City.”

Gran shook it. “I know. My friend Iris works in your office.”

“Oh, Iris is a gem,” Mirabelle cooed.

Gran cackled. “I don’t know about that.”

“She is,” the doctor insisted. “I adore her.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to tell her that. Anyway, why don’t you two come with me? I’ll put you on my team.”

“That would be perfect,” Bodhi told her. “And while we’re working, perhaps Dr. Owens and I could ask you some questions.”

“I already told you I don’t know who could’ve offered Doc that big donation,” Gran fretted.

Brianna dropped a can of beans to the floor with a loud clatter. Everyone

jumped at the sound, and she crouched red-faced to grab the can, murmuring an apology.

“I know. This is about something else. A community health issue.”

“A community health issue,” Gran mused. “Well, let’s go. We can walk and talk.”

Craig watched them leave. Then he gave Brianna a closer look. Her hands shook, and a bead of sweat rolled down her neck.

“You okay?” Steffi whispered to her.

“Is it hot in here?”

Steffi was about to answer when she reconsidered and swung her head around to glare at Craig. “Do you mind?”

“You know what? I have a call to make. So you two go right ahead and whisper like a pair of gossiping twelve-year-old girls. But if you’re smart, you’ll keep bagging while you do it. Miss Clara doesn’t like slackers.”

He strode out into the parking lot without a backward glance. Then he raced around the corner out of view of the people under the distribution tent and pulled out the card Fred had given him.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

---

The click on the phone let Fred know his secretary had managed to successfully transfer Craig Lowell's call from the office line to Fred's cell phone. It was never a given that she'd pull off any remotely technical task, so he nodded approvingly at the sound.

Then her voice came on the line. "Fred? Are you there?"

"Yep."

"I have your nephew. Craig?"

"I'm here. Hi, Uncle Fred."

Fred snickered softly.

"Great, then I'm going to drop off now. Oh, after you're finished with this call, you should probably call Ralph. He came flying into the trailer looking for you a little bit ago even though he saw you leaving," his harried-sounding secretary announced.

"Ralph can wait until Monday."

"Suit yourself."

He waited until a second click sounded, and she left the call.

"What've you got?" he demanded.

"Uh, hello, Mr. Glazier," Lowell stammered. "Is it okay to talk on the phone or should we meet in person?"

Fred knew that the safest way to meet would be face-to-face. But the truth was, he didn't feel like dealing with Lowell. He was still pissed at Chad, and he needed time to decompress, drink a beer, and watch whatever midday sports ESPN saw fit to air.

"The phone is fine."

"Okay, because you had said that I should—"

“Cut to the chase, son. Time is money.”

“Right. Sorry. So Bodhi King came into St. Lou’s looking for my gran today.”

Fred pushed out his lower lip. “He came to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Easy game. What did he want?”

“Well,” Lowell hedged, “she sent me out to run an errand, so ...”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No, no, wait! Listen, she wouldn’t tell me what they talked about, but I found out anyway.”

“Cripes, kid, you didn’t have to lead with your chin.”

“What?”

“Nevermind. So what did he want.”

“Well, see, I came back from the pharmacy to pick Gran up, and she and Dr. King had finished their conversation. I could have sworn I heard her saying something about Mr. Hornbill from the paper company and maybe hush money, but I wasn’t sure. But then, the lady doctor from Panama City—the medical examiner—came rushing in looking for Dr. King, and we left.”

Fred scratched his neck behind his right ear. “Is that all you’ve got?”

“No, there’s more. We’re at the food bank distribution site now, and—”

“Food bank?”

“Oh, yeah. The second Friday of every month, the food ministry at the Baptist Church passes out groceries to, well, anyone who needs them.”

“And people show up for these handouts?”

“I mean, yeah. Pretty much the whole town comes out. Lots of folks are there to volunteer, but then, too, after all the recipients have gotten their food bags, the volunteers take home what’s left. You know, money’s tight for everyone.”

A wave of disgust rolled over Fred. This right here was the problem with society. He’d have to remember to include a chapter about the benefits of going to bed with an empty stomach in his memoir.

“Whatever, go on.”

“So two things happened. Bodhi King and that lady doctor—”

“Stop saying lady doctor. It sounds like she’s a gynecologist,” he ordered.

“Sorry. So, Bodhi King and the, um, medical examiner showed up at the food bank to see my gran. And Gran said something that made it clear he’d been asking her about who might have made a big donation to Doc Ashland’s



clinic. She told him she already said she didn't know. And he said that wasn't what they wanted to talk to her about. He said it was a community health issue."

"A community health issue," Fred repeated slowly.

"That's what he said."

"Any ideas what that's about?"

"No, sir. But I'll try to find out."

"What's the second thing?"

"Oh, when Gran said the bit about the big donation, Brianna freaked out."

"Brianna Allen? From Gulf Paper Company?"

"Yes, sir."

"What the devil is she doing there? Don't tell me *she's* looking for free groceries."

"No, she's volunteering. Although, I heard she got fired today, so it might be smart for her to take home a bag or two."

Fred ignored Craig's concern about her unemployed state. "How exactly did she freak out?"

"She got really jumpy and dropped a can on the floor. It made a loud noise, so, you know, we all turned to look at her. She was beet-red and shaking and sweating. It was weird."

Fred rocked back in his leather chair and closed his eyes. This was a complication. Chad had screwed up in multiple ways. But firing Brianna instead of keeping her close and controlling her had to be the most boneheaded of his mistakes. He exhaled sharply through his nose. So, now, what to do about it?

He considered his options. He could leave Chad hanging out to dry. He could go to Bodhi King with what he knew, cut a deal, and screw Chad over. Or he could clean up yet another one of Chad's messes and have yet another chit to call in.

He sighed deeply. Part of him—a large part of him—wanted to walk away and let Chad fend for himself. But Emerald Estuary Estates wasn't just the project that would secure Chad's legacy. It was meant to secure Fred's, too. And it couldn't do that if Chad was under a cloud of suspicion—or worse, cooling his heels in a cell. He had to fix this. He vowed it would be the last time he did damage control for Chad, but he did have to do this one last thing.

Decision made, he opened his eyes. "You've done well, Craig."

“So, you’ll pay me for this information?”

Fred shook his head at the blatant eagerness in Lowell’s voice. “Yeah. Two hundred this time.”

“Great. Should I come out to your house and—”

“No. I’ll get the money to you, don’t worry about that. But I have another job for you. A more important, time-sensitive job.”

“Anything,” Lowell said, making no effort to conceal his excitement.

“Keep tabs on Brianna.”

“Keep tabs on her? I mean, I’m happy to do it, sir. Because she’s easy on the eyes, if you catch my drift.”

Fred shook his head. Craig’s drift was so obvious and basic that it was impossible to miss. “Focus.”

“Sorry. So, you want me to, what, follow her? If I have to pick between seeing what Bodhi King wants from Gran and keeping an eye on Brianna, what’s my priority?”

Despite himself, Fred was mildly impressed by the question. It showed that at least some of Craig Lowell’s brain cells were firing, making connections, and drawing inferences.

“Brianna.”

“Okay, so just keep tabs on her?”

“A little more than that. If she tries to talk to Bodhi King, or the medical examiner, or your grandmother privately, you need to stop her.”

“Stop her?”

“Yes.”

There was a long pause while Lowell chewed on this information. Then he asked, “Stop her how?”

“However you have to.”

Another pause. “What does that mean?”

Fred laced his fingers together and cracked his knuckles. “Exactly what it sounds like. Do whatever you have to do to prevent Brianna Allen from having a private conversation with any of those three people.”

“Whatever I have to? So ... hurt her? Or one of them?”

Fred enunciated slowly and clearly so there would be no confusion on Craig Lowell’s part. “Whatever. You. Have. To. Do.”

He ended the call and contemplated turning off his ringer so Ralph, the overzealous security guard, couldn’t get ahold of him. But in the end, he didn’t. Just in case Craig needed him.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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Felicia had long since stared down the security guard. He'd hightailed it back behind the construction gate. And she sat on the hood of the rental car, baking in the mid-afternoon sun and waiting for Chief Rodman to call her back.

If she'd been smart, she'd have retreated to the car's interior, cranked the air conditioning, and cooled her metaphorical and literal heels in relative comfort. But she'd spent the entire day in a series of metal tubes of one sort or another, and she'd rather be hot than cooped up.

She took off her jacket, folded it neatly, and sat it on the hood beside her. Then she wiped the sweat from her neck and twisted her hair into a knot. Well, *maybe* she'd rather be hot. It was getting to be a close call.

Just when she was beginning to think Chief Rodman was blowing her off, her phone trilled. She grabbed it and accepted the call.

"Detective Williams."

Instead of the Oyster Point police chief's gravelly drawl, Vick Medina's voice filled her ear. "It's Medina. You busy?"

"I am the furthest thing from busy that you could possibly imagine," she told him.

"Uh, good—I guess? I don't know. Listen, you were right about Ga-Eun Kim. She's a freaking wizard."

Felicia sat up straighter. "She got into Joel's mobile customer account?"

"Without breaking a sweat."

"And?" she demanded, very much breaking a sweat.

"His phone hasn't been used—or even turned on—since last Friday. The last tower it pinged was in Kendall. Right along the Turnpike."

“Kendall, that’s the Snapper Creek Service Plaza?”

“Right. We’re thinking one of the drivers stopped, pulled the SIM card, and dumped the phone at the rest area.”

She muttered a string of profanities, which Medina interrupted. “Wait, though. There are two calls from Friday morning that ought to interest you.”

“Oh, okay. Go on.”

“First, the incoming call that Joel received while he was at the juice place. It came in shortly after seven o’clock from a Tallahassee phone number registered to a Mitzy Hornbill.”

“What’s a Mitzy?”

“Apparently, a rich lady name. She’s married to the owner of Gulf Paper Company, which is located there in Oyster Point. So I guess you found the mystery donor.”

“Huh. Maybe.”

“Yeah.”

“And the second call?”

“The second call is really interesting. Did the medical examiner determine the time of death?”

“I don’t know, but we’re assuming it was between seven-thirty and eight-thirty in the morning.”

“That’s a small window.”

“It is, but we know he left the Juice Joint just after seven, and Bodhi said that folks typically started lining up to get into the clinic as early as eight. We can’t confirm what time the first person arrived last Friday, but there’s no reason to think it was later than eight-thirty. So if someone killed him in the clinic after that, they’d have had to walk right out the front door, lock it, and breeze by the line of people waiting to get in. That didn’t happen.”

“What about a back door?”

“Sure, if they wanted to jump off the houseboat into the Gulf. But, even then, how’d the door to the clinic get locked from the outside?”

Medina was silent for a moment. “Yeah, I guess the time of death was in that little window. Well, the second call was an outgoing call, and the time of the call was nine twenty-seven AM.”

She shook her head. “Wait. A dead man did not make a phone call.”

“Right, so whoever killed him used his phone because they didn’t want the call to be traced back to them.”

The familiar sensation of her heart ticking up with excitement filled her

chest. “Who’d they call?”

“An outfit called Glazier Builders. The tower for this call is outside of town on—”

“Emerald Road.”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Because I’m sitting in front of a Glazier Builders’ worksite right now and I can see a cell phone tower just over the hill.”

“What are you doing there?”

“Remember the muddy blue pickup truck?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m looking at it. It’s a Glazier Builders’ company truck.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Oh, but I’m not.”

Vick Medina let out a long, low whistle. “Hot damn.”

“Hot damn, indeed.”

“Go get ‘em, Williams.”

“Thanks, Vick. And tell Ga-Eun she’s a wizard.”

“I told her she’s a beast. She prefers goddess.”

“Noted.”

“Do you have backup?” His tone turned serious.

She blew out a long, exasperated breath. “I’m waiting for the police chief to return my call. But he’s taking his sweet time.”

“Call one of the FDLE guys, then. Don’t go in alone.”

The concern in his voice was cute, if unwarranted. “I’ve done this a time or two, Medina. And the site is protected by a crusty security guard armed with a baton and a walkie-talkie. It’s not a criminal stronghold.”

“You don’t know, Felicia.”

“I do know, Vick. But don’t worry. I’m not going in without backup. And the blessing of the local PD. I guess I’m going to have to drive into town and drag him out here myself.”

“Now that, I have no doubt you can do.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. And seriously, thanks for the call and the intel. It’s going to help me nail Joel’s killer.”

“I know. Everybody knows you’re not going to come back empty-handed. Just be sure to come back in one piece.”

“Roger that.”

She ended the call and picked her jacket up from the hood, burning her

palm on the hot metal in the process. She might as well drive into Oyster Point and find this big food drive that Lucinda had mentioned. It was either that or roast to a crisp.

She allowed herself a longing look at the truck before she slid behind the wheel of the rental car and started the engine. “You’d better be right here when I get back,” she told the pickup before she punched the police station’s address into her GPS unit.

In most small towns, the PD was at or near the center. Odds were she’d stumble onto this food distribution site if she aimed for the police station. If not, someone there could tell her how to find the chief. Satisfied with her plan, she bumped the sedan off the shoulder and back onto the highway, sparing another glance at the muddy truck in her rearview mirror before she rounded the bend.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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**A**s Craig shoved his phone into his shorts pocket and trudged back into the church basement, his mouth was dry and his heart pounded so loudly he was convinced someone would hear it. Fred couldn't possibly expect him to—what?—tackle his gran or something if it looked like Brianna was going to talk to her. Sure, he *said* to do whatever it takes. But that was an exaggeration, right? Hyperbole, that was the word. It was hyperbole.

His reassurances did little, if anything, to calm his nerves, but the thought of the two hundred dollars he'd just earned had a strong soothing effect. So he decided he'd focus on the money.

Just be cool.

He tried to look casual, whatever that looked like, when he returned to the bagging station.

Steffi glanced up from her phone. “Hey, we finished filling these bags, and your grandmother left Clara in charge of the kitchen and disappeared with Dr. King and Dr. Owens. So, what do we do now?”

He scrunched up his forehead. “What do you mean they disappeared?”

Brianna jabbed a thumb toward the hall that led to the row of Sunday school classrooms. “They were in the kitchen sorting vegetables, but it was chaotic. People kept going in and out, so your grandmother said she was taking a short break, and they went into the nursery.”

“Oh, uh, we should take these bags out to the tent, I guess.” He forced himself not to turn his head to peer into the glass window set in the nursery door.

“Wait,” Brianna said as he hefted a bag under each arm.

“What?”

“You obviously don’t want your grandmother to know you’re working for Fred Glazier.”

“So?”

“So, you must know what you’re doing is wrong.” Her tone was neutral, but he bristled as if she’d accused him of something heinous.

“And what’s so wrong about trying to earn money?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” Steffi jumped in. “But ... come on, Craig. Everyone knows Glazier’s a creep.”

“He’s not the kind of person you want to get mixed up with,” Brianna added.

Craig scoffed. “Right. Who would want to get mixed up with a millionaire who has a successful business, a big house, and a fancy car?”

They shook their heads as if he was beyond help.

Steffi shrugged and picked up a sack of groceries. “Whatever. There’s no point in trying to reason with you.”

Brianna grabbed a bag, too, and the three of them started to cross the rec room.

He fell back beside Brianna and said in a low voice, “It’s pretty bold of you to judge me. Seems like you weren’t working for the most standup guy either.”

Her eyes widened. “What do you mean?” Her voice shook.

“Doesn’t take a genius to realize you know something about who offered Doc money. There are only, like, two people in town who could afford to make a big donation. We both know my boss would never do it, so that leaves yours.” He paused. “Well, your former boss, to be more accurate. Is that why Hornbill fired you? Were you nosing around in his business?”

Steffi walked out the door, oblivious to their whispered argument. He was about to follow her when Brianna shifted her bag to her hip and clutched his wrist with her hand.

“Wait.”

He stopped walking and looked at her. Her eyes were enormous in her pale face.

“You really don’t want to go around saying stuff like that, Craig. For one thing, you have no idea what you’re talking about. For another, it’s dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” He repeated the word in a tone that suggested she was



being dramatic, but his heart resumed its loud, fast drumbeat.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.” She held his gaze for an uncomfortably long time before releasing his arm. “You’re going to get someone hurt. Me, most likely.”

He swallowed around the lump in his throat and hurried out into the parking lot. What the heck was going on around here?

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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**A**s she listened, Judy worked her fingers between the holes in the crocheted afghan throw's squares. Bodhi watched the nervous tic with some interest. It was apparent she didn't realize she was doing it because he highly doubted she was the sort of person who'd deliberately stretch a baby blanket out of shape. He paused to consider what sort of person *would* intentionally deform a blanket.

Mirabelle threw him a curious look. He blinked and returned his attention to the conversation at hand.

"Based on Dr. Ashland's notes, the patient charts, and what Dr. Owens and I understand about the way marine toxins affect mammals, including humans, we think Doc was working on a theory that many, if not most, of the illnesses he saw in the clinic were at least partially caused by pathogens in the water, which accumulated in the shellfish."

Judy was shaking her head from side to side. "No. That can't be. I mean, sure, we eat a lot of shellfish here. For crying out loud, this is Oyster Point. But we don't get the real bad red tides—not the way they do a little further down the coast. Our fish are clean."

Mirabelle covered Judy's hand with her own, stilling the movement. When she spoke, her voice was measured and encouraging. "It's only a theory. But it's one that Dr. King and I think explains a lot of the sickness you see here."

The older woman frowned. "But I thought contaminated shellfish causes vomit, diarrhea, stomach cramps? That's not sweeping through the town."

"It's true that stomach and digestive issues are common symptoms when there's an outbreak of neurotoxic shellfish poisoning. And, you're right, an

outbreak like that often—but not always—occurs during an algae bloom.”

“So, why did Doc think it was causing all this other stuff?” She waved her free hand around. “Why do you think it is?”

Bodhi leaned forward in the rocking chair and chose his words with care. He wanted to make the theory easy to understand without alarming her. “There are other symptoms of acute NSP. Things like tingling lips, loss of coordination, muscle pain, and dizziness, to name just some of them. But, few studies have looked at what happens when someone has been chronically exposed to the neurotoxins that cause NSP, even at low levels. It’s reasonable to think that there could be a long-term impact on a person’s health if they’ve been consuming these toxins for a long time.”

She nodded shakily. “Okay, I see what you’re saying. But, it sounds unbelievable—we’ve been slowly poisoning ourselves?”

“Possibly,” Mirabelle cautioned. “We’re not sure.”

“And it’s also possible that brevetoxin—the pathogen found in the algae when there’s a red tide—isn’t the only marine toxin you’ve all been ingesting. There are others,” Bodhi explained.

“So if this theory of yours is right, what kind of illnesses are we talking about?”

“Possibly things like Craig’s persistent rash and your cough. Another toxin—often found in razor clams in colder climates—has been shown to cause memory deficiencies and confusion.”

“So Deke might not have dementia? He might have eaten too much bad fish?” Judy looked from Bodhi to Mirabelle.

Mirabelle met his eyes.

“Marnie’s father—the waitress from the diner. Joel’s notes indicate he’s showing symptoms of early dementia,” Bodhi supplied.

“It’s a possibility,” Mirabelle told her. “There are other conditions that could be related, too.”

“Like what?” Judy demanded.

Mirabelle and Bodhi exchanged a look. They’d agreed beforehand not to bring up the prospect of cancer—or flesh-eating bacteria. Not yet. They needed to bring the community around to the idea that they might have health problems related to their diet without causing a panic.

“Asthma, chronic bronchitis, recurrent pneumonia,” Bodhi said.

“Seizure disorders, clumsiness—it’s a long list,” Mirabelle added.

“Is the whole Forgotten Coast as sick as we are?”

“We don’t know. We don’t think so. We think the chronic health problems are concentrated here for two reasons. One, Oyster Point, in particular, relies on recreational and amateur shellfish harvesters.”

“So? Fish is fish. Why should we pay a markup at the fish market when God put the food right here for us? Our food would be cleaner if we paid more for it?” The heat in her voice indicated that Bodhi needed to proceed with caution.

“Well, yes ... and no. There’s nothing inherently wrong with eating shellfish that you’ve caught yourself or that a friend caught. But, commercial oyster farms are subject to oversight and regulations that nonprofessionals aren’t. So those oysters at the market have been stored under sterile conditions, and, when there’s a red tide, the oysters are tested to see whether they contain harmful concentrations of pathogens. That doesn’t happen with oysters that Louisa buys in her parking lot or clams that a neighbor collected for a clam bake.”

Judy frowned but nodded her understanding.

“You said there are two reasons we could be getting sick from our fish. One is that it’s locally harvested. What’s the second one?”

BRIANNA HAD SLIPPED BACK into the church unnoticed while Clara and Louisa, who’d closed the diner and come over to help, corralled Craig and Steffi to direct traffic at the end of the lot. Now she stood, rooted to the floor, in the hallway outside the nursery, trying to work up the nerve to knock on the door, go inside, and tell Bodhi King what she knew.

As she raised her fist to rap on the door, Judy Lowell’s quavering voice rose and floated out into the hall. “You said there are two reasons we could be getting sick from our fish. One is that it’s locally harvested. What’s the second one?”

She let out a huge whoosh of breath and pushed open the door.

“The second reason is that Gulf Paper Company has dumped chemicals in the bay and the estuary, which caused eutrophication.”

Three heads swiveled toward her in unison, and three sets of eyes bored into her as they reacted to the interruption and digested her announcement.

After a moment, Bodhi spoke. “What exactly is eutrophication?”

“It’s the disruption of the aquatic ecosystem through an overabundance of nutrients.”

“Say it again,” Judy told her. “In English, this time.”

She managed a nervous laugh. “So, plankton—algae and cyanobacteria—feed on nutrients that occur naturally in the water. When the water’s warmer, like in the summer, they grow faster. And when there are a lot of nutrients, especially phosphorus and nitrogen, they grow faster still. As they spread, they eventually turn into a toxic bloom. This process is eutrophication.”

Judy gave her a grave nod. “Thank you.”

“And you’re saying the paper company has dumped nitrates and phosphates into the water?” Dr. Owens asked.

“Yes.”

“How do you know this?”

“She’s the Chief Sustainability Officer at Gulf Paper,” Bodhi offered.

“Former,” Brianna clarified. “I’m the former CSO. Chad fired me this morning.”

“Because you were going to expose this?” Judy asked.

She clasped her shaking hands together and pressed them into her abdomen. “No, not because of this. Because I told him I saw him going into the clinic early Friday morning.”

After she dropped this bombshell, there was a stretch of frozen silence. Finally, the medical examiner from Panama City broke the silence. “What time was this?”

“Around seven-thirty.”

Judy peered at Brianna’s face. “Do you think he’s capable of killing Doc?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? Brianna stared at the mural of baby jungle animals that decorated the large wall opposite her. She could remember when Mrs. Wolfe had painted it for the church. Brianna had been in elementary school then. On her way to her classroom every Sunday, she would stretch onto her toes to peek in the window to see what new creature or plant had appeared on the wall.

“Brianna?” Bodhi prompted her, interrupting the memory.

She turned her attention back to the question. “I don’t know. I can believe Chad went there to offer Doc a donation—and it may have been a donation with strings attached. I could see him doing that. Could I see him killing Doc? I want to say no. But given the history ...” she threw her hands up and

trailed off.

“What history?” Bodhi asked.

“A few years back, the company was getting a lot of grief for dumping wastewater from the paper mill into the bay.”

“What kind of wastewater?” Dr. Owens asked.

“Okay, let me try to explain this. Do any of you know what BOD load is?”

They shook their heads no. She’d figured as much.

“BOD stands for biochemical oxygen demand. It’s a formula environmental scientists use to figure out how much of the oxygen in water is consumed by organic waste that’s introduced into the water. The higher the BOD, the more polluted the water is.” It was an extreme simplification, but it covered the basics.

“And the stuff coming from the paper mill raised the BOD?” Bodhi guessed.

“Right. It was one of the first things I worked on when I joined the company. Chad was livid because he’d cleaned up the bleaching process to lessen the amount of chlorine he was dumping into the water. And that *was* good. Unfortunately, though, the paper mill got rid of the chlorine by adding nutrients to the purification process. Who wants to guess which nutrients were added?”

Dr. Owens groaned softly. “Please don’t say phosphorus and nitrogen.”

“Bingo. They were treating the sludge with phosphorus and nitrogen. The so-called ‘purified’ waste, removed of chlorine, was released into the water.”

“And that caused eutrophication,” Bodhi said.

“Right.” She turned to Judy. “You might remember this. The state came in and fined the paper mill. Chad felt persecuted because he believed he’d done the right thing by cleaning up the chlorine, so he paid the fine and cleaned up the water, but after that, he just shuttered the mill. Almost out of spite.”

“Oh, I remember,” Judy said sourly. “Dozens of folks lost their jobs, and the water still stank for months.”

“Right. The company did ultimately comply with its legal obligations. But we’d also made a voluntary pledge to change many of the plant procedures to be more sustainable—at my suggestion—and Chad blew it off. It was not a shining example of being a good corporate citizen. Fast forward to the present. Someone—Doc Ashland, actually—complained to the state

about the polluted water over at Emerald Estuary Estates and said there was evidence of mass fish die-offs.”

“Wait, do you know for a fact that it was Dr. Ashland?” Bodhi probed.

“Yes, and so does Chad. The DEP complaint form has a provision to make an anonymous complaint, but Dr. Ashland didn’t check that box. Whether that was an oversight on his part or he wanted us to know, I can’t say. But we did know. The state sent investigators out to the construction site, and Glazier Builders was cited for a host of violations.”

“Glazier, not Gulf Paper?”

“Correct. And that was pretty much Chad’s position. This mess was Fred’s Glazier’s problem, not ours.”

“I sense a but,” Dr. Owens told her.

“But it didn’t sit right with me to say we weren’t responsible. Especially because the bloom in the estuary was almost certainly the result of eutrophication caused by fertilizer run-off. Now, Glazier may be the general contractor on the project, but Chad set the budget. And the landscaping was one place where he tried to save costs. I heard him and Sharon—the chief real estate officer—discussing it more than once. The cheapest fertilizer contains lots of nitrates and phosphates.”

“So, he didn’t learn a blessed thing,” Judy said.

“I don’t know if either Fred or Chad knew what was in that fertilizer. But once I found out, I made an appointment to see Doc. I wanted to show him that Chad stopped using the nutrients at the paper mill when the state told him to. I wanted to make him understand that Chad wasn’t a bad guy.” She sighed heavily. “I told him I’d show him the paperwork from the mill violations. He was distracted and said we could meet again next month. So, I left. I spotted Chad going into the clinic a minute later. I thought it was weird, but ...”

“Did anything else happen?” Judy asked suddenly. “I mean, between the time you saw Chad and when he fired you this morning?”

“Well, Doc died.”

“Besides that.”

“Yeah, actually. I stopped by the paper mill to pull the copies of the old violations, and they were gone. They should’ve been in the file room, but they weren’t. I told Chad that, too, this morning.”

“Destroying those documents shows evidence of guilt, right?” Dr. Owens murmured to Bodhi.

He nodded. “Probably.”

He turned back to Brianna, who was girding herself to ask a question she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer to. Finally, she squared her shoulders and took the plunge. “So, these health effects I heard you talking about—if the level of marine toxins kept surging above safe levels because of the nutrients in the water, then Gulf Paper is responsible for the illnesses, at least partially. I mean, right?”

Before anyone could answer, the door flew open, and Craig Lowell stormed into the room.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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Judith jumped up from her chair as her grandson burst into the room. “Craig, what’s the matter?”

His face was a thundercloud as he glared at each of them in turn before settling on Brianna.

“What are you doing in here? You were supposed to be helping Steffi and me in the parking lot?”

Brianna gave him a wide-eyed look but didn’t respond.

Bodhi attempted to step in. “We’re in the middle of something, Craig. Could you find someone else to help direct traffic?”

Craig fisted his hands and yelled. “No, I can’t!”

Judith snapped, “That’s enough of that. What’s gotten into you?”

Craig frowned and clenched his fists tighter. Then he filled his lungs with air and spoke in a more moderate tone. “I’m sorry for interrupting, Gran. But I need Brianna to come with me. Now.”

Judith frowned, but it was Brianna who spoke next.

“Is *that* what you’re doing for Fred Glazier? Spying on me?”

Craig clamped his lips shut. Judith cocked her head as if she must’ve misheard.

“Are you working for Fred?” she asked her grandson.

“It’s not like that,” he mumbled to his feet.

“Tell me, then. What is it like?”

He was silent for a full minute. “Fred’s concerned that the investigation into Doc’s death is going to mess up the project over at Emerald Estuary Estates. Those houses are expensive, and rich people aren’t going to move into a town with a bad reputation.”

“And?” Judith felt her mouth puckering like she’d sucked on a lemon, but she couldn’t seem to smooth it out.

“And he asked me to be his eyes and ears. You know, keep him in the loop.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Is that why you were asking questions about my ‘gal pals’? Is that why you were so eager to come and help today? Did you go through my purse looking for information for Fred?”

As she peppered her grandson with questions, she watched him wilt, bit by bit.

Until finally, deflated and defeated, he hung his head and said, “Yes. Yes to all of it.”

Her chest tightened, and she clutched the front of her blouse.

“Judy, are you okay?” Bodhi King asked in a voice full of concern.

She maintained her focus on Craig while she tried to catch her breath. Then she gasped, “I think so. It’s not possible for a person’s heart to actually break, right? Because that’s what this feels like. It’s squeezing in my chest.”

Craig kept his eyes glued to the floor.

Bodhi gently took her by the elbow and guided her back into her chair. “Actually, Judy, there’s a condition known as broken heart syndrome—also called stress cardiomyopathy. It’s usually temporary, brought on by acute emotional stress.”

“So her heart is really *broken*?” Brianna blurted.

Dr. Owens shook her head. “Not permanently, not the way it sounds. When a person’s under extreme emotional stress, the body compensates by pumping out a lot of extra adrenaline. In broken heart syndrome, this massive surge of adrenaline is believed to weaken the heart muscle, possibly by decreasing the flow of blood to the heart. We’ll have to keep an eye on Judy, especially because her cough is already affecting her breathing, but as Dr. King said, broken heart syndrome is reversible and transient.”

“What kind of emotional stress?” Craig asked woodenly.

“It could be surprise, fear, anger, grief—” Bodhi began.

“Betrayal,” Judith managed. “It’s betrayal.”

Craig shuddered, and a sob broke in his throat. “I’m so sorry, Gran,” he moaned.

She couldn’t find the words to respond. He fell to his knees and grabbed her hand. She stroked his hair with her free hand.

“How much did you tell Fred?” Bodhi asked.

“I told him you and Dr. Owens wanted to talk to my gran about a community health issue and that Brianna’s here and she freaked out when Gran said she didn’t know who could have offered Doc money to keep quiet.”

“So, pretty much everything,” Dr. Owens observed.

“Pretty much,” Craig agreed miserably.

“And what was his response?”

Craig took so long to answer Bodhi’s question that Judith began to think he wasn’t going to. Then, he cleared his throat and said, “He told me to do whatever it takes to keep Brianna from talking to the three of you.”

“Whatever it takes,” Judith repeated slowly, staring at her grandson’s bent head. “That sounds like a man who doesn’t feel constrained by social mores.”

“Yes, it does,” Bodhi agreed.

Just then, the door swung open and hit the wall with a bang. Judith raised her eyes in time to see Steffi and a woman she didn’t recognize as they rushed into the room.

## CHAPTER FORTY

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Felicia skidded to a stop just inside the nursery door and surveyed the room. An older woman sat in a chair with a young man huddled at her feet. A young woman stood a few feet away, watching them with a bemused expression. Bodhi and a woman in a white doctor's coat, who had to be the medical examiner, hovered nearby, wearing twin expressions of concern.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"So much, Felicia. Just so much," Bodhi told her in a voice heavy with weariness.

She arched a brow and gestured to the young woman bouncing on her heels next to her. "I ran into Steffi under the tent, and she brought me here."

Steffi piped up, "I was feeling left out. Everyone else got to burst in here."

The young woman near the wall laughed. "That sounds about right, Steffi." Then she stepped forward and extended her hand to Felicia. "I'm Brianna Allen."

"Detective Williams," Felicia responded.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm being rude." Bodhi snapped out of it—whatever *it* was—and made introductions. "Brianna was, until recently, the chief sustainability officer at Gulf Paper."

"Gulf Paper. That's Chad Hornbill's company?"

Brianna tilted her head to the side and eyed Felicia. "That's right."

"Hmm."

Bodhi went on, gesturing toward the medical examiner. "This is Dr. Mirabelle Owens."

“I’m the ME for this district. We spoke on the phone.”

“Your white coat gave you away,” Felicia told her.

The doctor laughed. “Good detecting, detective.”

“And this is Judith Lowell,” Bodhi said, placing a hand on the back of the older woman’s chair.

“Is she okay?” Felicia stage whispered. Judith didn’t look well. Her face was ashen, and her breathing was labored.

“I will be,” Judith said in a creaky voice. “The doctors tell me my broken heart is temporary.”

“You have a ... broken heart?”

“She found out some upsetting news about Craig,” Brianna volunteered, pointing at the young man crouched at Judith’s feet.

“Craig is Judy’s grandson,” Bodhi explained. “He’s been monitoring our investigation and feeding information to Fred Glazier.”

He looked like he was winding up to tell her who Glazier was, so she held up a hand to stop him. “Fred Glazier, as in Glazier Builders?”

“That’s right.” He blinked at her. “What are you doing here?” he asked belatedly, as if he’d just realized she was seven hundred-odd miles away from home.

“Here in town or here at this church?”

“Either. Both.”

“I got tired of cooling my heels back in Sugarloaf Key. So when we got images of the chase car, I figured I’d come here and do some legwork.”

“There was a second car,” Bodhi mused.

“Yes, you were right. Although, to be technical about it, it was a truck. A blue pickup truck.”

The young man—Craig—raised his head. “Fred’s work trucks are blue.”

Felicia nodded. “They sure are. And there’s one parked outside a job site on Emerald Road covered with mud in all the same spots as the one on the traffic camera. In particular, the company name on the truck is obscured by mud, as is the license plate.”

“Oh, that’s convenient,” Bodhi observed.

“Isn’t it?”

“I babysat the truck for a while, waiting for Chief Rodman to return my call, but once Fred Glazier left the work site in his personal vehicle, I figured I’d come here and find the chief in person.”

“He should be helping load bags into people’s trunks. He’s decided that’s

his job, and nobody else can do it. I've always wondered if it's an excuse to peek inside cars without a warrant. But then I watch a lot of police procedurals," Steffi volunteered.

Felicia chuckled. "I found him. He's on his way to the construction site, and the FDLE investigators will meet him there."

"Fred's not there. I called him, and his assistant transferred me to his cell phone," Craig said in a discouraged tone.

"I know. He drove right past me while I was talking to the security guard."

"Oh, you met Ralph, did you?" Bodhi asked.

"Yes, I've had the dubious pleasure."

He chuckled. Then asked, "If Fred followed Joel's car back to Sugarloaf Key, do we know who drove the Jeep?"

"I have a theory. How tall is Chad Hornbill?"

"Not tall," Judith said. "About my height."

Felicia wasn't about to ask a woman suffering from a literal broken heart to stand up, so she scanned the room, hoping someone else could fill in the details.

"About five six," Steffi estimated.

"If that," Brianna added. "He has lifts in his dress shoes."

Felicia met Bodhi's gaze over Judith's head and nodded. Chad was the right height to have racked the Jeep's driver's seat way forward.

"That tracks," Bodhi told her. "Brianna saw Chad going into the clinic on Friday morning. Early."

"He was the guy who offered the donation?"

"We think so."

"I know so. Joel got a call around seven o'clock from a number registered to Mitzy Hornbill, Chad's wife. Mitzy herself was at an event at her child's school. I had someone confirm that."

"That had to be the call Doc got about the donation," Steffi said excitedly. "That's what time he was in my shop."

Felicia continued, "And shortly before nine-thirty, a call went out from Joel's phone."

Bodhi shook his head. "Joel would have been dead by then. He couldn't have called anyone."

"I know. But someone used his phone to call Fred Glazier. The call connected through a cell phone tower right by the construction site. So,

hypothetically, Chad talks to Joel. It doesn't go well, and Chad pushes him from the loft. Maybe it's an accident, maybe it's not. Either way. Joel's dead. Chad panics, grabs Joel's keys and phone, and runs out of the houseboat. He's not thinking clearly, so he gets in the Jeep and starts to drive. When he gets close to the construction site, he uses Joel's phone to call Glazier so the call can't be traced back to him." Felicia laid out the story she'd pieced together.

Bodhi bobbed his head and picked up the thread. "He tells Glazier that he's in trouble and needs help. Glazier agrees to follow Chad to the Keys and drive him back after they leave the Jeep—"

"And they dump Joel's phone en route," she added.

He rubbed his forehead. "They went through no small amount of effort to conceal what happened. How did they overlook the small matter of the decomposing corpse in the clinic?"

Brianna snapped her fingers. "I'll bet they didn't. They were waiting. The workers are supposed to pour the foundation for the clubhouse at the development on Monday. I heard Chad and Sharon talking about it a few days ago. Fred probably intended to go back and get Doc's body, then dump it in the footing or whatever it's called before they brought in the cement truck."

Felicia grimaced. Bodhi and Mirabelle Owens did the same.

"What's that look for?" Brianna asked.

Steffi gagged. "Oh, I know. The smell ... I can't even describe it, Bri. It was so bad. After four or five days closed up in the clinic, it would be stomach-turning." She shuddered.

"But that doesn't mean that wasn't the plan," Felicia hurried to say. "Unless these two are serial killers, they wouldn't necessarily have banked on the stench." She eyed Judith. "They aren't serial killers, are they? Have a lot of people disappeared from this town?"

"No. Apparently, the only thing killing us is our food."

Felicia cocked her head.

"I'll explain later," Bodhi told her. "So, what's the plan? Wait and see if the local PD finds forensic evidence in the truck?"

"I don't know what else we can do. It's not a great plan, though. What could they possibly find? If it went down the way we think it did, Fred probably didn't even set foot in the clinic. There won't be any transfer evidence in his truck."

“There could be. If he drove Chad back here and Chad had any of Joel’s DNA on him.”

She turned her lips down in a mouth shrug. “That’s a big if. And Oyster Point can’t process any forensic evidence. It’ll have to go to Panama City with the FDLE team.”

“So Fred and Chad just get away with it?” The words exploded from the small, frail-looking woman in the chair.

“Judy, try to stay calm,” Mirabelle urged her.

Her grandson lifted his chin, eyes blazing. “I have an idea.”



## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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**B**odhi and Felicia huddled in the hallway to talk through Craig's proposal in relative privacy.

"It's reckless," Bodhi told her.

"It's his idea."

"That doesn't make it a good one. And isn't it entrapment?"

She squinted at him. "I know you know what entrapment is, and letting Craig talk to Fred while he's wearing a wire is not it."

He laughed. "Okay, fine, it's not entrapment. I just ... it seems dangerous. I know Craig volunteered for the job. But it's not Craig I'm worried about."

"Judith?"

"I don't know how much more her heart can take, Felicia."

She held his gaze. "It could be our best chance to catch Joel's killer—maybe our only chance."

He didn't flinch. "And it could kill that woman."

They probably would've continued to argue in circles for a good while longer, but Brianna eased the door open and joined them in the hall.

"Can I interrupt you?"

"Sure," Bodhi said, grateful for the opportunity to step back from the disagreement.

She closed the door behind her with a soft click. "If Craig does this thing—if he gets Fred to admit that he helped Chad cover up Doc's death, that's only half a loaf, right? Fred's word against Chad's, I mean."

Bodhi deferred to Felicia. While neither of them was a prosecutor, she had more breadth and depth of knowledge about putting together a case that would end in a conviction.

“It would be a he said-he said if Chad didn’t plead out. But the testimony of a co-conspirator can carry quite a bit of weight in a criminal case.”

“Yeah, here’s the thing. You two don’t know Fred. Or Chad. Fred’s, well, I’ll put it this way—he’s rough around the edges. Aside from fanboys like Craig, who worship him because he drives a fast car, he’s not especially well-liked. He’s crass and coarse. He’s a jerk.”

“Mmm. What’s Chad like?”

Brianna sighed. “Charming. Or at least, he can be when he wants to be. He’s well-spoken and polished in a way that Fred definitely is not. Don’t get me wrong. He’s also a jerk. Selfish and smarmy. But he’s slick. I don’t think you can pin this on him just through Fred. If Fred would even sell him out that way.”

“So what are you thinking, Brianna? I can tell you have an idea,” Bodhi said.

“I’ll do the same thing Craig wants to do. I’ll wear a wire and go talk to Chad.”

Felicia said, “That could work.”

“Absolutely not,” Bodhi said at the same time.

Their words overlapped, and Brianna flicked her eyes from Felicia’s face to Bodhi’s with a nervous laugh.

“Why don’t I leave you two to talk it over?”

Before she could slink back into the room, Bodhi stopped her. “You understand that what you’re proposing could be dangerous, right?”

She leveled him with a gaze. “I know. I want to redeem myself. I worked for Chad for years, knowing that I was a sellout. I wasn’t living in harmony with my beliefs and principles, and it felt gross. When he fired me, I was upset—for a few hours. But, honestly, it feels amazing. It’s like I put down a backpack full of boulders. I want to do this, and you shouldn’t stop me. Or Craig. He probably feels the same way—only more so. I mean, I sold out the earth. He sold out his grandmother. You should let him try to make things right.”

She pulled her shoulders back, turned on her heel, and strode back into the nursery. He watched her walk away and recalled Mrs. Wolfe’s admonition from the previous night: She’d warned him not to make the mistake of thinking anyone in Oyster Point was fragile. He understood more fully now the strength required to thrive—or at least survive—in a hardscrabble town that the rest of the world had forgotten.

He took a centering breath and met Felicia's waiting eyes. "Okay," he acquiesced. "You win."

"I don't want to win, Bodhi. I want to see justice done."

He wasn't convinced justice was within reach of the struggling people of Oyster Point, but they could at least do right by Joel.

"I hear you." He tilted his head toward the door. "Let's do it."

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

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“Are you ready?”

Brianna jutted out her chin. “Yes.”

Not convinced by her bravado, Felicia asked, “Are you sure?”

The determined set of Brianna’s shoulders softened. “I think so. Ready as I’ll ever be, at least.”

Felicia smiled. “Good. Courage is one thing. Sheer fearlessness is something else—usually psychosis.”

That coaxed a smile out of the terrified young woman.

Despite the hard line she’d taken with Bodhi, Felicia wasn’t unsympathetic. She lowered her voice and said, “It’s not too late to back out. Everyone will understand.”

Brianna twisted her neck to look at the group assembled in the church rec room. Felicia wasn’t sure how word of what should have been a discreet law enforcement operation had spread so widely or so fast, but she had a feeling the mail carrier had somehow been involved.

Regardless, as she miked up Brianna and Craig, a small crowd had gathered, and now she estimated there had to be thirty people sitting around the tables drinking coffee, tea, and juice. A woman with an inexplicable British accent flitted around, passing out scones and clotted cream. Oyster Point was an odd place. But it was odd in a good way, and she could see what had drawn Joel here.

Thinking of Joel reminded her to stay on task. She eyed Brianna, waiting for her to confirm whether she wanted to go forward.

Brianna set her jaw. “I’m not backing out. But you’re sure he won’t notice the recording device?”

“He’s not a mafia don. He doesn’t have any reason to be looking for it. Chad doesn’t ordinarily feel inside your bra, does he?”

“Eww, no.” Brianna mimed dry heaving.

“Then you’ll be fine,” Felicia assured her.

“Okay.”

“Are you ready to go?”

Brianna’s smile wobbled. “Let me just say goodbye to Steffi.”

“Sure thing. And Brianna?”

“Yeah.”

“I know you don’t know me, but I promise I’ll keep you safe.”

Brianna nodded and walked over to her friend to say her goodbyes.

Felicia knew Brianna would have rather had Bodhi with her, but what Brianna didn’t realize was that as between Chad and Fred, Chad was the more significant threat. Or that, unlike Bodhi, Felicia hadn’t taken a vow of *ahimsa* or non-harm. His refusal to harm another living being, even if doing so meant protecting himself or an innocent person, had been a major sticking point in their first case together. She hoped it wouldn’t cause an issue now. As for her, she was perfectly willing to put a bullet between Chad Hornbill’s eyes if he presented the slightest threat to Brianna—or anyone else.

She rested her hand on the butt of her gun and went to find Bodhi. He was leaning against the wall outside the nursery with his eyes closed. She stood beside him and leaned, too.

“You busy?”

He kept his eyes shut. “Craig and Judy are saying goodbye in the nursery. I’m finding my *drishti*.”

“I didn’t realize you’d lost it.”

He opened his eyes and laughed.

She nudged him with her shoulder. “So, seriously, what’s a *drishti*?”

“It depends on the context. In yoga, the *drishti* is a focal point. If you’re doing a balancing posture, you pick a specific visual spot to focus on. It helps you stay steady.”

“But you’re not doing yoga.”

“No, I’m not. In a meditation practice, the *drishti* is an anchor for your attention. You can close your eyes like I did and sharpen your focus inward. Or you can soften your gaze and focus on something external.”

“So you were meditating?”

“I was grounding myself before we go see Fred.”

“There’s been a change of plans. Officer Green is out responding to a call.”

“Okay.”

“You going to be okay by yourself?”

He turned and painted her with a questioning look. “Yes, why wouldn’t I be?”

She smacked her lips together while she worked out how to phrase her response. “Do you still do that *ahimsa* thing?”

“You mean right action—one of the eight practices of the Eightfold Noble Path? That *ahimsa* thing?”

“Is that the one where you can’t kill a spider or cold-cock someone who’s threatening you with a weapon?”

“That’s the one,” he confirmed with a wry smile.

“Bodhi, this is serious.”

He smoothed his smile into a serious expression. “I know, Felicia. That’s why you wanted to send the greenest officer on the Oyster Point police force along to babysit us.”

She raised her hands in a ‘don’t blame me’ gesture. “It was a skeleton crew to begin with, and now with three separate actions going down at once, we’re stretched pretty thin.”

“I’m just giving you a hard time. We’ll be fine.”

“Which of the eight noble paths is giving your friends crap?”

“Oh, that’s the ninth one. I made it especially for you.”

He nudged her back with his shoulder, and she smiled, but her smile faded immediately. “I’m worried about sending you out there unarmed.”

“I’m armed with a spirit of non-attachment.”

“Now you’re just being weird,” she told him.

Before he could respond, the nursery room door opened. Craig and Judith Lowell walked out. His eyes were red and wet. Hers were dry. She must’ve had an excellent *drishti* because she stared straight ahead as she walked over to a table where a gaggle of formidable older women sat. As she reached them, the nosy postal worker wrapped her in a hug.

Felicia shifted her attention to Craig. “Ready?”

He didn’t have a fraction of Brianna’s bravado. He looked straight at Felicia and said, “Hell, no. But let’s get this over with.”

She clapped Craig on the shoulder. “You heard the man, Bodhi. Time to get this show on the road.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

---

Craig's hands shook as he sat in his car in front of Fred's electronic gate and pulled up Fred's telephone number.

From the passenger seat, Dr. King offered a suggestion. "Breathe."

He rolled his eyes.

"Try it."

"I am breathing."

"Take a deliberate, full breath in. And then slowly expel it completely."

He rolled his eyes again but did as the guy suggested. "Happy?"

"You will be if you keep doing it."

"You think anything about this will make me happy?"

Dr. King twisted around in the seat to look directly at him. "I think you'll be pleased that you stood up for your grandmother and your community and did the right thing. That may not bring the sort of giddiness that we usually associate with happiness, but I suspect it will provide you with a deep contentment."

He almost scoffed. Then he remembered the last thing Gran had said to him before they left the nursery: Listen to Dr. King. He may seem strange, but there's a method to his madness. She was right. The guy was a weirdo. But there was something oddly comforting about him, weirdness and all.

So, instead of making a smart-aleck remark, he nodded. "It will."

"Right. So, make the call."

Craig took another one of those big breaths, exhaled, and then hit the speed dial for Fred's office. Fred's assistant patched him through to his 'uncle' at home.

"Craig?" Fred's voice boomed through the car speakers. Craig hoped the

tiny recorder clipped inside the waistband of his shorts was picking it up.

“Yeah. I mean, yes, sir.”

“Do you have something for me?”

“Maybe.”

“Spit it out, kid.”

Craig threw Bodhi a look. Bodhi patted the air with his hands in a ‘you’ve got this’ gesture.

“Well,” he said, cringing at the way his voice cracked. “I think this is more of a face-to-face type conversation. I thought I’d come over. Actually, I’m parked in front of your gate right now.”

“You’re supposed to be watching Brianna,” Fred griped.

“She left the church.”

“And she didn’t talk to anyone before she rolled?”

“Nobody important. Can I come in?”

There was a long pause. Craig’s pulse fluttered rapidly. What was the plan if Fred said no? But after a minute, the electronic gates swung open.

“Park near the gazebo. Come to the side door.”

After Fred gave his instructions, he hung up. Craig turned to Bodhi, who gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up and motioned for him to pull through the gate.

“What if he sees you?” Craig worried as the car wound up the driveway and circled around to the oversized cedar gazebo.

“He won’t. Look at the way the driveway curves away from the house. Park on the far side of the pavilion. It’ll be fine.”

He was probably right. The outdoor structure was massive, and the parking pad to the right of it most likely wasn’t visible from the house.

Craig swallowed and followed the bend in the drive. When he reached the gazebo, he executed a tight turn and parked with the sedan pointed back toward the road.

He glanced at Bodhi. “Just in case we need to make a quick getaway.”

“Smart, but we won’t. You’re just going to go in there and talk to him. Once you tell him what Detective Williams told you to say, get out, and the police will take it from there.” Bodhi smiled encouragingly.

“Right.” Craig killed the engine and left the keys dangling in the ignition. Just in case.

He exited the car and trudged past the pavilion with his head bent and his hands jammed deep into his pockets. He turned back and took a final look at



the car. Despite his outward confidence, Bodhi was slumped low in the passenger seat. Just in case.

AS CRAIG RAPPED on the side door to Fred Glazier's mansion, Bodhi eased the earpiece into his ear canal and twisted it until it was both secure and comfortable. He wished he had a way to communicate with Craig, but Felicia had nixed the idea. As she'd explained it, there was virtually no chance that either Fred or Chad would notice the minuscule recording devices she'd outfitted Craig and Brianna with. But giving them earpieces was too risky.

So Bodhi wished Craig well silently and settled in to listen.

Craig knocked a second time, waited for a beat, then tried the doorknob. It twisted in his hand. He pushed open the door and stepped into the house and out of view.

"Uh, Fred?" Craig's raised voice was echoey in Bodhi's ear.

"I'm in the den," Fred shouted back, his response faintly reaching the recorder concealed in Craig's waistband.

"Like I know where the den is," Craig muttered under his breath.

Bodhi frowned. If Craig was talking to himself, that was fine—he guessed. But he hoped Craig didn't plan to narrate the meeting for the recording device. Surely Fred would notice that.

"Hey, this place is great," Craig enthused a moment later.

Fred boomed, "I know." He gave a self-satisfied laugh. "Take a seat. You want a beer?"

No, Bodhi thought.

"Sure," Craig said.

The sound of two caps twisting off and hitting a table and the clink of bottles knocking together followed. Then Bodhi heard the gulp of Craig's first swallow of beer.

"Okay, kid, what's so important?" Fred asked without preamble.

"Well—," Craig began, only to be interrupted by an ear-splitting belch.

"Go on."

"Well, I thought you should know that Gran told me the doctors said Doc Ashland was definitely killed."

"What?"

“Uh, yeah. I guess the way his neck was broken or whatever, it couldn’t have happened that way from a fall.”

“That sonofa—how sure are they?”

“According to my gran, they’re pretty sure.”

“Damn. Rough way to go for Ashland.”

Bodhi tried to ascertain from Fred’s tone whether the sentiment was genuine, but he didn’t know the man, so he couldn’t tell.

“Yeah. But I guess there’s been a break in the case.”

“What kind of break?”

“Uh, they found DNA or something in Doc’s Jeep. I don’t know the details.”

“Whose DNA? Ashland’s?”

“I don’t think so. They’d expect that. Someone else’s.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah. There’s a detective here from Sugarloaf Key now. She said they’ll probably be making an arrest within the day.”

“Jeez. That’s fast.”

“Yeah. They said something about an accomplice, too. Some guy in a blue pickup truck. I heard that detective woman tell the medical examiner that they’d be looking to offer him a deal if he testifies against the killer.”

“Is that it?”

“Pretty much. So, uh, how much is that worth to ya?”

“Always keeping your eye on the prize, huh? I respect that.” There was a rustling sound as Fred peeled bills off a roll. “Here’s the two from before and another three.”

“Five hundred? Man, thanks, Mr. Glazier. So should I keep poking around or ...”

“No, I think we’re done. Like I told you, I wanted to know if the investigation was going to screw up Hornbill’s plan to unload those houses out on Emerald Road. And now I know.” He sighed.

“Yeah. Tough break. Listen, if you ever need anything else, call me.”

“I will, Craig. You can count on it. There’s something I need to take care of now. So, let yourself out, okay?”

“Sure, sure.” There was a short pause. Then Craig said, “I almost forgot. Chief Rodman and the detective chick were talking about a muddy blue truck somebody left outside town.”

“Did you hear whereabouts?” Fred’s words were urgent, rushed. The

sound of a drawer opening and slamming shut resounded.

“Sorry, no.”

“No worries. See you around.”

A moment later, Craig emerged from the house. He paused under the side portico, and took a breath so deep that Bodhi saw his shoulders move. Then he started to run toward the car, babbling in Bodhi’s ear as he sprinted. “He got a gun from his coffee table after I told him about the muddy truck. I don’t think he’s going to get the truck.”

Craig thumbed off the recording device while Bodhi ripped the earpiece out of his ear and fumbled with his phone. He jabbed Felicia’s contact information. As soon as she answered, he began to speak.

“Fred went for it. But he’s not going to move the truck. I think he’s going to kill Chad. He’s armed.”

As Bodhi relayed this information, Craig wrenched open the car door and flung himself behind the seat. He started the engine and stared at Bodhi, awaiting instructions.

“Go back to the church,” Felicia rattled off orders to Bodhi through the speaker. “Let Chief Rodman’s secretary know. Her name is Lucinda. Craig’ll help you find her.”

“What about you?”

“We’re already at the old mill. We’re going to stick to the plan.”

“Felicia, be—”

“—I’m always careful, Bodhi. Go.”

Felicia ended the call as Glazier’s garage door rose, and the yellow sports car exploded out of the garage and rocketed down the driveway. Bodhi placed his phone in the center console and turned to Craig, who turned the key and started the ignition.

“Where to?”

“You heard the detective.”

“I did. But that’s not what I asked you. Where to?”

Bodhi studied Craig’s profile for a split second. Then he said, “The old paper mill.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

---

Felicia eyed Brianna in the seat next to her. “Did you hear that?”  
“I heard it.” Her mouth was a grim line.

“Are you still up for this?”

She nodded.

“There’s no shame in changing your mind.”

“Yeah, there is. I said I’m good.”

“Okay, then. We might as well get this started before Glazier tracks Chad down.”

“What happens if Fred does show up?” A flash of worry clouded Brianna’s clear eyes.

Felicia removed her gun from her holster, loaded a magazine, and racked it. “This.”

“Oh.” Brianna smiled shakily. “Got it.”

“I’ll take care of Fred. Are you solid on the plan with Chad?”

She nodded.

“In that case, you should get in there before he comes out looking for you.”

They’d taken their time driving over to the abandoned paper mill after Brianna had set the meeting. It was better for them if Chad arrived first. But they shouldn’t keep him waiting too long.

Brianna put her hand on the door handle and paused. “Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need luck,” Felicia told her. “You have grit. But good luck anyway.”

Brianna inhaled deeply, exhaled, and rolled her shoulders. “Here goes nothing.”

She exited the car and strode across the empty parking lot to the back of the building. As she neared the door, she turned back to the car. “You can hear me, right?” Her voice sounded in Felicia’s ear.

Felicia gave her a quick wave.

*Now, turn around and get in there.* There were no windows in the file room where Brianna and Chad were supposed to meet, but the longer Brianna dragged this out, the more likely he was to get impatient and come looking for her.

Brianna yanked the door open and slipped inside, out of view. As Felicia listened to Brianna’s shoes clack against the floor, she sent up a quick prayer of gratitude that she’d had the foresight to get rid of that scrawny kid who apparently ran a parking scam in the lot. She’d pressed a twenty into his hand and told him to beat it for a few hours. She’d never seen a kid pedal a bike that fast before.

She slid down low in the seat and waited. It was all on Brianna now.

A door opened, then closed, and Brianna said, “Thanks for agreeing to meet me, Chad.”

The screech of metal chair legs scraping against a floor sounded in Felicia’s ear, and she winced. “I’m busy, Brianna. What’s so important?”

“I had some free time today. You know, since I’m newly unemployed.”

“For crying out loud, did you really drag me down here to moan about being fired?” He spat the words at her.

“Nope, I asked you to meet me so I could warn you.”

“Warn me? Warn me about *what*?” Chad said, impatience and irritation lacing the words.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I went to the food bank this afternoon to help pass out groceries.”

“Gold star for Brianna.”

*This guy was a complete jackwagon.* Felicia shook her head.

Brianna seemed unfazed. “While I was there, I overheard something interesting.”

“Doubt it.”

“Apparently, the police have classified Doc’s death as a murder.”

“A murder?” he repeated. “You’re sure?”

“That’s what I heard. But there’s more. They think they know who did it.”

There was a very long silence. Brianna’s heart pounded loudly through

the recording device nestled in her bra.

At last, Chad cleared his throat. "I'm not interested in idle gossip."

"They're saying Fred Glazier did it."

"What?"

"I guess it makes sense. I mean, he has a motive. Doc was kicking up a fuss about the dead fish in the lagoon, and Fred was worried it would screw up the development project. So, I want to apologize. I'm sorry that I, you know, suggested *you* were the last person to see Doc alive. Fred must have shown up after you left and offered to pay him to keep quiet. I guess Doc must've refused."

Brianna sounded sincere. But would Chad buy it?

"I guess so. Fred. I can't believe it," he said slowly. "Actually, I can. I wish I didn't."

Felicia nodded approvingly. *You've hooked him. Now reel him in.*

"Yeah, they said he must have had an accomplice, though. Something about Doc's Jeep and one of Fred's trucks being spotted on the Florida Turnpike. I didn't catch all the details."

"Did you hear anything else?"

"Just that they're planning to offer a deal to Fred if he'll give them the goods on you."

"On me?" he squeaked.

"Yeah. I guess Doc managed to tie all those nitrates and phosphates you and Fred dumped into the estuary to a bunch of health issues. You already have a record of dumping, so they're going to go after you for it if they can get Fred to fill in the blanks. Just thought you should know."

"Why are you telling me this?" he demanded, suddenly suspicious.

Felicia tensed. If this plan was going to go south, it would happen now. But Brianna was as cool as could be.

"Look, I'm going to need to put Gulf Paper on my resume. It'd be better for me if the CEO wasn't in prison for poisoning an entire town's food supply."

"What am I gonna do?" he moaned.

"You have to go to the police. Tell them what you know about Fred."

"I can't do that."

"Sure you can."

"No, Brianna. I can't."

"Why not?"

“Because Fred didn’t kill Doc. I did. And he knows it.”

Felicia scrambled out of the car and raced for the door, gun drawn. They’d never considered Chad would cop to Joel’s death. Why would he? Their plan had been to sow dissent between the co-conspirators, driving a wedge between them, before they brought them in for questioning. But Fred and Chad had both overreacted. Fred was on his way to kill Chad, and Chad had just confessed to Brianna.

Of the two reactions, Chad’s was somehow even stupider than Fred’s. And once he realized what he’d done, Brianna would be in danger.

*Keep him talking*, Felicia urged her silently as she flung the door open and barreled through the dark building. At least she’d had the foresight to get Brianna to make a sketch of the floor plan. Now, she just had to remember the route to the file room.

“What? No, that’s not ... Chad, why?”

Was she hearing Brianna’s shaking voice in stereo? If so, she must be close.

“It was an accident. I swear. I did try to get him to accept a donation. We were up in his stupid loft office. I offered him cash, and he pushed my hand away. He called it blood money. Then he stood up and ordered me out of the clinic. I was pissed, so I made contact with his chest as I passed by him. You know, threw a shoulder into him. I didn’t even think I hit him that hard, but he was standing right by the edge of the loft, and he went flying.”

Felicia reached the door to the file room and paused, listening.

“And you left him to die?” Brianna breathed.

“No! He was dead the second he hit the floor. You have to believe me. I ran down the ladder and felt for a pulse, but ... nothing.”

“So what did you do?”

“I panicked. I took his phone from his pocket because I knew there’d be a record of my call from earlier. And I don’t know why, but I grabbed his keys, too. Then I locked up the clinic and ran. But the thing is, I called Fred for help. He knows he didn’t kill Doc, and he knows I did.”

Felicia pushed the door open and stood in the doorway with her feet planted and her weapon pointed at Chad’s chest.

“Now we all know. Charles Hornbill, you’re under arrest.” She paused before reciting his rights and jerked her head at Brianna. “You did great. Go wait in the car.”

Brianna took off running.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

---

**B**odhi instructed Craig to park the sedan sideways across the narrow path at the top of the gravel hill behind the shopping center, blocking the only way down to the paper mill and its paved lot.

Craig did as he asked and shifted the car into 'Park.' "Good?"

"Good," Bodhi told him.

"Now what?"

"Now unclip the recording device and put it in the center console." Chad removed the recorder and sat it in the console. "Thanks."

Bodhi checked the rearview mirror and spotted Brianna running through the parking lot at the bottom of the hill. He inhaled sharply.

"What?" Craig asked, wide-eyed.

"Look in the mirror."

"What's she doing?"

Bodhi shook his head. "I don't know. This plan is falling apart. You should go down there and see if she's okay."

"What about you?"

"I'll be fine."

"You don't have a weapon or anything. Fred's armed," Craig's voice broke in alarm.

"And we called Lucinda and let her know," Bodhi reminded him. "She put out a BOLO. He shouldn't be hard to find. How many school bus yellow Mustangs can there be in this town?"

"Yeah, but ..."

"Go on. For all we know, somebody already found him and brought him in."



Craig gave him a doubtful look as he got out of the car. Then he ran down the hill toward Brianna. Bodhi called Felicia, who answered immediately.

“Can’t talk right now, Bodhi. I’ve got my hands full. Are you at the church?”

“Uh. No. Is Brianna okay? We just saw her running through the lot behind the mill. I sent Craig down to check on her.”

“Brianna’s fine. What are you doing here? I told you to go to the church.”

“Like you said, you’re busy. Talk to you later.” He ended the call before she could scold him further and trained his eyes on the commercial parking lot from which Fred would have to approach if he was headed this way.

But instead of an obnoxiously bright sports car, a small parade was making its way toward him. He rubbed his eyes, but the scene remained unchanged. At the front of the group of people, he spotted Judith, Clara, Louisa, Lucinda, and Mrs. Wolfe. Behind them came Marnie, Patty the 911 operator, Mirabelle, Steffi, and—unless his eyes deceived him—Ralph the security guard.

He exited the car and circled around to lean against it.

“Out for a walk?” he asked as they approached.

“Think of it as a neighborhood watch committee,” Judy cracked.

He smiled but glanced over her head at Mirabelle. “Are you sure she should be out here?”

“She wasn’t going to let us come without her,” the medical examiner said, fishing a stethoscope from her coat pocket. “Her heartbeat seems stronger.”

“What is this?”

Mrs. Wolfe stepped forward. “I told you last night that to survive in Oyster Point, we had to learn to take care of ourselves, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“We also take care of each other,” Judy told him. “And we’re not about to let Fred Glazier kill Chad.”

“Chad killed Doc,” Brianna announced breathlessly as she and Craig reached the crest of the hill behind Bodhi. “He admitted it. Detective Williams is taking him into custody right now.”

A murmur ran through the assembled townspeople, and then Steffi spoke up. “Then Chad needs to be tried in court for what he did. We still can’t let Fred hurt him. That’s not how it works, at least not here.”

Craig hurried past Bodhi to stand next to his grandmother. Brianna joined

Steffi in the second line. After a beat, Bodhi pushed off the car and fell into line beside Mirabelle. They were standing in two lines—a ragtag bakers’ dozen with their arms interlocked at the elbows—when the Mustang careened through the lot.

Fred maintained his speed and laid on the horn.

Nobody flinched; nobody moved aside.

He slammed on the brakes, and the muscle car shrieked as it lurched to a stop inches from the cadre of people in its path. Fred jumped out of the car and slammed the door shut, red-faced and shouting for them to get out of his way.

They looked back at him impassively.

Bodhi didn’t know how long the standoff lasted. In the moment, time seemed to slow down. *Tachypsychia*, he thought automatically, *the distorted perception of the passage of time that sometimes accompanies stressful situations*.

He’d no sooner formed the thought when time sped up.

Felicia’s rental car blasted up the hill from the mill and squealed to a stop. She raced from the car, her weapon drawn, and ordered Fred to his knees. Bodhi risked a backward glimpse to see a man who could only be Chad Hornbill, handcuffed and glaring from the back seat. When he turned back to the scene in front of him. Ralph had stepped up beside Felicia, gripping his baton.

An instant later, Angela Green’s squad car sped into the parking lot, followed by the chief’s car and a van full of FDLE officers. Law enforcement officers streamed through the lot, shouting orders. Felicia took control of the scene, coordinating the action.

Bodhi slipped away from the group of townspeople and found a large flat rock on the periphery of the lot. He lowered himself to a cross-legged seat and watched the buzz of activity. After a bit, the lines of townspeople dispersed and drifted away in groups of twos and threes. Mirabelle Owens made her way over to him and perched on a nearby boulder.

“Strange little town, isn’t it?”

He gave the question some consideration. “I suppose.”

They fell silent. After a moment, he asked a question of his own. “Why did you join them?”

“What?”

“You don’t live here. You don’t work here. What possessed you to link

arms with them and face down a danger that, on its most basic level, has nothing to do with you?”

She was quiet for so long that he thought she might not know why she'd done it.

But then she lifted her chin and said, “This part of the state is called the Forgotten Coast partly in jest, partly in a counterintuitive tourism campaign, but mostly because it *has* been forgotten. Oyster Point, like the other little towns around here, has been left to fend for itself. I just wanted them to know that they aren't alone.”

He nodded but said nothing.

She continued, “Of course, the truth is you and I and Detective Williams and the guys from the FDLE, we'll all leave here and go back to our lives, and I guess they will be forgotten again.” Her shoulders slumped. “So I guess it was an empty gesture, in the end.”

“Maybe it doesn't have to be.”

## IV

*May all beings be safe,  
May they be healthy,  
May they be happy,  
May they be at ease.*

*A simple loving-kindness (metta) meditation*

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

---

*Six weeks later*

*The Joel J. Ashland Community Clinic and Public Health Research Center  
(formerly Wolfe's Bed & Breakfast)  
Oyster Point, Florida's Forgotten Coast*

**B**odhi was scraping the rash on the inside of Craig's right elbow to get a culture when Mirabelle breezed through the examination room with a basket of fresh scones.

"I see Mrs. Wolfe's been busy," he noted.

"Yes, she and Clara have just about finished setting up the free store."

Mrs. Wolfe had donated her home to serve as a permanent clinic and research facility. She stayed on to serve as the facility manager, in part because, as she'd confessed to Bodhi, she couldn't give up her library. It had been her idea to expand the monthly food bank into a grocery store where the community could "shop" for staples and other donated items that fit their menus, preferences, and needs.

The guest rooms had been converted to exam rooms, with a handful of bedrooms set aside to host the rotating cast of physicians and medical students rounded up by Mirabelle, Eliza Rollins, and their colleagues from the southeast medical examiners' group to devote one week each month to treat patients. Thanks to their efforts, the clinic was staffed twelve hours a day, six days a week, every week, for appointments with after-hours and

Sunday hours available for emergencies.

Craig cleared his throat. "I heard Fred pled guilty and agreed to testify against Chad."

Bodhi nodded. "That's good. The town needs closure."

"I think Detective Williams needs closure more than we do."

He raised his head sharply. "Felicia's been here?"

"Twice," Craig confirmed.

"She's coming again today," Clara called in from the pantry.

Bodhi frowned. "For the criminal case?"

"No, I don't think so," Craig told him.

"Hmm. We'll get this culture sent out today. I'll send you a note through the patient portal when the results are back."

"Sounds good." Craig prepared to hop off the table to the ground.

"How's work?"

"Sticky, as predicted. But at least Steffi doesn't make me wear a hairnet."

Bodhi laughed. "And how's your grandmother's cough?"

"You can ask her yourself. She'll be here later."

"She has an appointment?" He didn't recall seeing her name on the schedule.

"No, she volunteers on Brianna's team—doing those field investigations for community health that Doc Owens says she needs. Gran walks around town with a clipboard, asking people questions."

"It keeps her out of trouble," Clara shouted.

"How can she hear us from in that pantry?" Bodhi wondered.

Craig whispered, "I think she's part bat."

Bodhi chuckled, then said, "So I've gotten the skinny on everybody except Louisa."

He knew the changes in town were likely hitting Lou the hardest. She'd shut the diner down for a spell, but the last he'd heard, it was open again with a new, limited menu.

"Well, I think she misses the shellfish more than anyone, but she and Marnie have been working on a memory-supporting menu. I don't know what that is, but Deke says the food tastes good, so ..." Craig shrugged and slid to his feet. "My shift's about to start. See you around, Doc?"

"Yep. My week's tour ends on Wednesday. I'll be sure to say goodbye before I fly home."

Craig left, and Bodhi wheeled his stool over to the computer that Brianna

had somehow forced her former place of employment to donate. He began to key in Craig's patient notes.

"Knock knock."

He swiveled around to see Felicia standing in the doorway with a young man.

"I heard you were coming to town."

"Just got in. You remember Mike, right?"

Bodhi cocked his head and studied the teenager hanging back a step behind Felicia. "Mango Mike?"

The kid laughed. "That's me. Although I'm not here in my capacity as a booze cart owner."

"Mike's getting a degree in marine environmental technology," Felicia said.

"Sure, I remember."

"I was cleaning out Joel's camper, boxing up his things to send to his cousin in Duluth, and I got thirsty, as one does."

"Let me guess. You visited Mike's cart for a Doc-a-ri?"

"Guilty as charged. Mike and I started talking, and he mentioned this independent project he's working on." She poked the guy in the ribs. "Go ahead, tell him."

"It's still a prototype, but I'm working on a system to use a specific blend of seagrasses to filter excess nutrients out of fresh, salt, and brackish water and to re-oxygenate the water to counteract the effects of eutrophication."

"And you think it could work?"

"It works under lab conditions. But I haven't been able to get approval to plant any in the wild. We work in protected areas, so they hesitate to let us experiment. But Detective Williams thinks there's an estuary here when I can plant some and see what happens."

"Emerald Estates?" Bodhi asked her.

"Construction's shut down. I heard Gulf Paper is looking for an as-is buyer. I don't know who's gonna buy a half-built neighborhood of overpriced homes, but Brianna set up a meeting with the real estate department. Apparently, someone there owes her a favor. And Brianna hinted heavily that donating the lagoon to the project would go a long way toward rehabilitating the company's image in the aftermath of Chad and Fred's arrests. Anyway, Mike and I are going to pitch the idea today."

"Good luck. I hope they agree. It sounds like a worthwhile project."

“They’ll agree,” Felicia told him. “I have a secret weapon.”

Bodhi raised an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

“We’re bringing Louisa with us. If Mike’s seagrass works, once the shellfish are safe to eat again, she can put all the old favorites back on the diner menu.”

“The way to a corporation’s pocketbook is through its stomach,” Bodhi observed.

“Sometimes it is. I know you’re busy. Let’s catch up later.”

“Sure. One quick question before you go, though,” he said.

She jutted her chin toward the pantry. “Go introduce yourself to Clara and Mrs. Wolfe,” she told Mike. “I’ll be along in a minute.”

“See you around, Dr. King.” Mike gave a half-wave before heading out to the pantry.

Felicia leaned against the doorframe. “What’s up?”

“Are you okay? I mean, really okay?”

“I’m great. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because a police detective from the Keys is almost eight hundred miles from home setting up meetings about a marine environmental technology pilot programs?”

She gave him a look. “I thought I knew Joel, but I didn’t. This is—”

“We talked about this. He was a private person; it wasn’t anything you —”

“Un-uh, don’t interrupt.”

He clamped his mouth shut and gestured for her to continue.

“I didn’t know him as well as I thought I did. But it’s clear that these people in this place mattered to him. So, the least I can do for him is to make sure they’re not forgotten. Plus, I have almost three months of accumulated personal time that I need to use.”

He nodded. “Is it my turn now?”

“The floor is yours.”

“I think it’s an admirable and fitting way to honor Joel’s memory.”

She grinned. “Glad to hear it. Because I’m too old to drink any more Doc-a-ris. Let me tell you, they pack a punch.”

“To be fair, a roaring hangover is *also* a fitting way to honor Joel’s memory.”



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The idea for this book came during a family trip to Florida's Forgotten Coast. We spent some time in a little town called Port St. Joe, on which the fictional town of Oyster Point is *very* loosely modeled. While there, we ate loads of truly delicious seafood and experienced zero red tides.

We also spent some time at a state park, where we stumbled across an isolated stretch of beach with tupelo trees and driftwood. It was remote and gorgeous, so, of course, my first thought was, "This would be a great place to find a corpse." For some reason, our old friend, Joel Ashland, the medical examiner from *Dark Path*, was the corpse I envisioned. That's not how Joel's body was ultimately found in the book, but the seed was planted.

Like Bodhi, Joel, and Mirabelle Owens, I read a lot of medical, scientific, and technical journals researching this book, including *Harmful Algae* (yep, it's an actual journal); *Environment International*; *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*; *Toxicon* (it is just me, or does this one sound like a convention for fans of toxins?); *Global Food Security*; *Food Science*; *Toxins*; *Environmental Health Perspectives*; and *Human and Experimental Toxicology*.

Two fun facts: One, my second job out of college was working as a production editor on these sorts of journals, so I enjoy reading studies like these. Two, as a child, I trick-or-treated as Rachel Carson for Halloween one year (my neighbors were mildly confused). So, I really dove into the subject matter of this book.

That said, I'm not a scientist by any stretch, so I am certain some of the details are off. And some I changed deliberately in service of the story. But this much is true: the water is getting hotter, scientists aren't sure what this will mean for harmful algae blooms, and the effect of chronic exposure to

marine toxins in humans remains an open question. I enjoyed playing with these questions through Bodhi's eyes, and I hope you enjoyed reading *Forgotten Path*.

If I've put you off eating shellfish or going in the water, I sincerely apologize!

Finally, themes of community have been on my mind these past few years. Oyster Point is, in many ways, the mirror image of the last tiny isolated town that Bodhi visited (Scandia Bluff in *Chosen Path*). The outside world has largely abandoned both of these fictional towns, and their residents have been forced to rely on themselves to survive.

On that note, I'll end with a thought from my favorite neighbor, Fred Rogers: "*We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say 'It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes.*"

Melissa  
September 2023

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