



A BOOKS
BY THE BAY
MYSTERY



Written in Stone



ELLERY ADAMS



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

Praise for the Books by the Bay Mysteries

The Last Word

“As in the two previous novels in the series, set in Oyster Bay on North Carolina’s southeastern coast, Adams concocts a fine plot; this one finds its roots in World War II. But the real appeal is her sundry and congenial characters, beginning with Olivia herself. Adams’s heroine has erected a steel curtain around her emotions, but *The Last Word* finds her emerging from her shell with confidence, a confidence matched by Adams in this unusual and appealing series.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“I could actually feel the wind on my face, taste the salt of the ocean on my lips, and hear the waves crash upon the beach. *The Last Word* made me laugh, made me think, made me smile, and made me cry. *The Last Word*—in one word—AMAZING!”

—*The Best Review*

“The plot is complex, the narrative drive is strong, and the book is populated with interesting and intelligent people . . . Oyster Bay is the kind of place I’d love to get lost for an afternoon or two.”

—*The Season for Romance*

A Deadly Cliché

“A very well-written mystery with interesting and surprising characters and a great setting. Readers will feel as if they are in Oyster Bay.”

—*The Mystery Reader*

“Adams spins a good yarn, but the main attraction of the series is Olivia and her pals, each a person the reader wants to meet again and again.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“[A] terrific mystery that is multi-layered, well-thought-out, and well presented.”

—*Fresh Fiction*

“This series is one I hope to follow for a long time, full of fast-paced mysteries, budding romances, and good friends. An excellent combination!”

—*The Romance Readers Connection*

“[Ellery Adams] has already proven she has a gift for charm. Her characters are charismatic and alluring, and downright funny. Not to mention, the plot is an absolute masterpiece as far as offering the reader a true puzzle that they are thrilled to solve! . . . *A Deadly Cliché* is a solidly great, fun read!”

—*Once Upon A Romance*

A Killer Plot

“Ellery Adams’s debut novel, *A Killer Plot*, is not only a great read, but a visceral experience. Olivia Limoges’s investigation into a friend’s murder will have you hearing the waves crash on the North Carolina shore. You might even feel the ocean winds stinging your cheeks. Visit Oyster Bay and you’ll long to return again and again.”

—Lorna Barrett, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Booktown Mysteries

“Adams’s plot is indeed killer, her writing would make her the star of any support group, and her characters—especially Olivia and her standard poodle, Captain Haviland—are a diverse, intelligent bunch. *A Killer Plot* is a perfect excuse to go coastal.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“A fantastic start to a new series . . . With new friendships, possible romance(s), and promises of great things to come, *A Killer Plot* is one book you don’t want to be caught dead missing.”

—*The Best Reviews*

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A KILLER PLOT

A DEADLY CLICHÉ

THE LAST WORD

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THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) • Penguin Group (Australia), 2 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.) • Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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WRITTEN IN STONE

A Berkley Prime Crime Book / published by arrangement with the author

PUBLISHING HISTORY

Berkley Prime Crime mass-market edition / November 2012

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Cover illustration by Kimberly Schamber.

Cover design by Rita Frangie.

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For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group,

a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

ISBN: 978-1-101-61205-7

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

To these Mavens of Mystery:

Kaye Wilkinson Barley

Lesa Holstine

Doris Ann Norris

Molly Weston

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Chapter 1

[H]e would have passed a pleasant life of it, in despite of the Devil and all his works, if his path had not been crossed by a being that causes more perplexity to mortal man than ghosts, goblins, and the whole race of witches put together, and that was—a woman.

—WASHINGTON IRVING

“There’s a witch in Oyster Bay,” Dixie, the roller-skating dwarf and diner proprietor, announced. She set a breakfast strata made of eggs, tomato, basil, and mozzarella on the table and slid a plate of bacon onto the floor.

Immediately, the black nose belonging to the standard poodle sleeping on the booth’s vinyl cushion began to quiver. Flashing Dixie a brief smile of gratitude, Captain Haviland lowered his paw to the checkered tiles and began to eat his breakfast with the delicacy and restraint of an English aristocrat.

Olivia Limoges, oak-barrel heiress, restaurateur, and aspiring author, reached for the pepper shaker and gave her eggs a quick dusting. “A witch? Does she lure small children into her house with candy bars and then lock them inside cages until they’re plump enough to eat?”

Dixie put a hand on her hip and scowled, her false eyelashes leaving thin stripes of electric blue mascara on the skin above her lids. “I’m not pullin’ your leg. Folks have talked about her for years. The stories have gotten wilder and wilder because only a handful of people have actually been brave or stupid enough to pay her a visit.”

Watching as Dixie topped off her coffee, Olivia cocked her head to the side and asked, “Where does this supposed witch live?”

“In the swamp,” Dixie said distastefully. “Word is you can only reach her house by boat and she’s not shy about greetin’ unwelcome visitors with a few shotgun blasts.”

Olivia, who owned a rifle and was an excellent shot thanks to regular visits to the shooting range, approved. “Perhaps she values her privacy. People always talk about those who don’t abide by societal norms. I know plenty of locals who believe there’s something wrong with me because Haviland is my constant companion. They disapprove of my refusal to attend every street fair, regatta, shop opening, and ribbon-cutting ceremony. When I don’t buy a dozen boxes of stale Girl Scout cookies or chemically laced Boy Scout popcorn every time I leave the Stop ’n’ Shop, the troop parents fold their arms and shake their heads at me.” She paused to glance out the large picture window at the end of her booth. “Things were getting better, Dixie. I felt anchored here again, like a boat fastened to its moorings. For so long I was drifting and that finally stopped. But then Harris found that painting under his stairs and everything shifted again. I feel like my tether is frayed . . .”

Dixie heard the pain in her friend’s voice. “None of that was your fault, ’Livia.”

Olivia’s dark blue eyes glinted. “Wasn’t it? I’m not so sure about that.” She gestured around the packed diner. “And people are right to doubt me again. How could they see me as anything but an

outsider after I led the police to the door of a person they all loved? I was Gretel, leaving them a trail of bread crumbs.”

“You’re givin’ yourself a bit too much credit, don’t you think?” Dixie turned, placed the coffee carafe on the counter, and faced Olivia again. “Chief Rawlings arrived at the same conclusion before you did. You told me yourself he gave you a head start so you could warn Wheeler that all hell was about to break loose. For a cop, the chief sure is kindhearted. Don’t you go messin’ with his feelin’s.”

A flush of pink spread across Olivia’s cheeks. She hurriedly cut into her strata with the edge of her fork and filled her mouth with a bite of warm eggs, fresh tomatoes, and melted cheese.

“I see what you’re doin’,” Dixie said, shaking her pointer finger. “Stuffin’ your face so you don’t have to tell me what’s goin’ on between you and Sawyer Rawlings. The whole town knows you’re an item so don’t bother denyin’ it. One of the chief’s neighbors saw you doin’ the walk of shame. *She* said Haviland spent the night too. Must be serious.”

Olivia bristled. “There wasn’t the slightest trace of shame on my part but I’m not foolish enough to discuss intimate details with the biggest gossip in all of Oyster Bay. Meaning you.” The barb was softened by a smile, which was quickly hidden behind the rim of Olivia’s coffee cup. “Get back to the witch. That’s a far more interesting topic.”

“No, it is not, but I’ll play along. Hold on.” Dixie skated over to the *Cats* booth and slapped a check on the table. She spent a moment chitchatting with an elderly couple clad in matching lighthouse T-shirts and was undoubtedly explaining for the millionth time why she’d decorated the diner using Andrew Lloyd Weber paraphernalia.

Next, she pivoted and moved on to the *Phantom of the Opera* table. A jowly man in his late fifties dug around in the pocket of his madras shorts in search of his wallet. Ignoring Dixie’s question as to whether he enjoyed his food, he tossed bills on top of the check with dismissive little flicks of his wrist. His breakfast partner, a skeletal blonde in her early thirties clad in a miniskirt and a white tank top stretched taut over a pair of cartoonishly large implants, jabbed at the porcelain phantom mask with a long, curving fingernail.

From where she sat enjoying her meal, Olivia watched Dixie straighten to her full height. After donning her skates and teasing her hair a vertical inch into the air, she was barely five feet tall, but what Dixie lacked in stature she made up for in fearlessness.

“Y’all have a nice day,” she said tightly, her farewell clearly meant as a command.

The top-heavy blonde grabbed her take-out coffee cup and shimmied across the vinyl seat, granting the diners in the opposite booths a clear view of her leopard-print panties.

“Hurry up, babe.” The man in madras shorts began to walk away without waiting for his companion. He popped a toothpick in his mouth with one hand and jiggled a set of keys with the other. Using his elbow to push open the door, he let it go without bothering to see if his lady friend was directly behind him. She wasn’t. The door slammed in her face and she jumped back with a little shriek. Jutting her lower lip into a collagen-enhanced pout, she followed her man out of the diner.

“High-caliber clientele,” Olivia teased Dixie after she’d cleared the couple’s table.

Dixie wasn’t happy. “Cheap bastard. Doctors are the worst tippers.”

“How do you know he’s a physician?”

“The caduceus on his key ring.” Dixie pointed out the window. “And the vanity plate on his I-am-not-well-hung-mobile.”

Olivia had been too absorbed rereading the latest chapter of her novel to notice the atomic orange Corvette parked outside Grumpy’s Diner. She peered at the showy convertible as the man settled into his seat and revved the engine. The vanity plate read, “NIPTUCK.”

“Having seen the missus, perhaps the plate should say, ‘I Inflate You,’” Olivia said. “You could use the number eight and the letter *u* to save space.”

“Lady Watermelons is *not* the missus,” Dixie corrected. “I saw a picture of the missus and the doc’s three kids when he opened his wallet. Such a cliché. Why do they come here anyway? Why not go to Vegas or Cancun?”

Olivia shrugged. “He wants to show off his car. See?”

The object of their derision was donning sunglasses as the Corvette’s soft top folded back. The doctor glanced around, making sure he’d captured the interest of a few passersby before turning on the radio. The plate glass window above Olivia’s booth began to vibrate as the Corvette’s speakers pounded out a thundering bass.

Dixie shook her head in disgust. “Pathetic.” And then her eyes narrowed angrily. “She’d better not do what I think she’s going to do.”

Olivia looked at the blonde, who’d pulled back her arm and was preparing to throw her take-out cup into a trashcan on the sidewalk. At the same moment she hurled the cup, the doc put the sports car in drive and launched out of the parking spot. The cup missed the rim of the receptacle by several feet and bounced off a lamppost, splashing coffee onto a parked car, the newspaper box, and the bare legs of a teenage girl. The girl shouted, her face registering pain and surprise.

Dixie swore through gritted teeth as the orange Corvette raced out of view.

“Maybe the witch can put a curse on those two cretins,” Olivia suggested, sharing Dixie’s indignation over the couple’s behavior. It was bad enough that they’d both blatantly littered, but to drive on after splattering a young woman’s legs with hot coffee bordered on criminal conduct.

Collecting Haviland’s empty plate, Dixie put a hand on the black curls of his head and sighed. “I wish all humans had your manners, Captain. But the spell thing isn’t a bad idea either. We just need to hop a boat, cross the harbor, head up the creek borderin’ the Croatan National Forest, and hike a trail for a mile or so.”

“She’s hardly Oyster Bay’s witch, then,” Olivia said.

“Closest thing we’ve got,” Dixie retorted. “Anyway, what kind of mystique would she have if she lived in a beachfront condo? A shack in the swamp is way better for business.”

This statement piqued Olivia’s interest. “What kind of business?”

Delighted to have her friend on the hook, Dixie was just about to answer when Grumpy rang the order bell in the kitchen. The breakfast rush was nearly over, but the family of four in the *Evita* booth was casting expectant glances at Dixie. When she skated over with a tray laden with stacks of buttermilk pancakes, sizzling sausage patties, cinnamon-laced French toast, and an omelet the size of a beret, their eyes grew round with appreciation.

“That should hold ’em for five minutes,” she said, coming to an abrupt stop at Olivia’s booth, her silver tutu billowing as she applied the brakes. “Back to the witch. Her name is Munin and one of my cousins went to see her over the weekend.” Dixie pulled a stray thread from her left tube sock and lowered her voice. “He and his woman want a baby real bad but it’s just not happenin’. They’ve both been checked out and there’s nothin’ wrong, medically speakin’. Been goin’ on five years since they started tryin’. Munin is kind of their last hope.”

Olivia dabbed her lips with a paper napkin. “And can they expect a healthy set of triplets nine months from now?”

“I reckon not,” Dixie replied. “See, Munin doesn’t take cash or checks. You have to bring her somethin’ that’s real precious to you to get her help. If the witch doesn’t think what you brought is special enough, she won’t lift a finger for you.”

“What does she do with the objects?”

Dixie shrugged. “Who knows?”

Impatient to return to her manuscript, Olivia offered to tell Laurel about Munin. “The big shot of the *Oyster Bay Gazette* staff might not cover the story herself, but maybe one of the Features writers would be interested.”

With a scowl, Dixie picked up Olivia’s empty plate. “I’m not tellin’ you about the witch so that you can turn her into a Disneyland attraction. I’m only tellin’ you about her because she sent a message back with my cousin.”

“For you?”

“No.” Dixie piled Olivia’s silverware and crumpled napkin on top of the dirty plate. “For you.”

Bomb dropped, Dixie skated off to the kitchen with her tray. She then tarried at the two remaining tables, filling water cups, delivering a fresh syrup jug, fetching extra napkins, and exchanging small talk.

Haviland stood up, yawned, and stretched, indicating he’d had enough of the diner for one day.

“Just a few more minutes, Captain,” Olivia promised her dog. “Let me strangle the resident dwarf and then we’ll be on our way.”

As though sensing her friend’s ire, Dixie lazily coasted back to the window booth. “Ah, so now you’re chompin’ at the bit to hear about our witch. Well, I won’t keep you in suspense another second.” She grinned wryly. “Munin asked my cousin if he knew you. He said everybody knows who you are, but only a couple of folks know you well. The jackass mentioned my name and told Munin that you and I were friends. So the message came to me.”

Olivia felt a constriction in her gut. She sensed that once Dixie relayed the message, her life would be altered yet again. Perhaps not greatly, but she didn’t welcome any more change.

In the last year alone, she’d opened a second restaurant, reunited with a father she’d believed dead only to watch him die, discovered the existence of a half brother, and fallen for Oyster Bay’s chief of police. Olivia Limoges was a woman who liked to be in control of her own future, and as of late, she’d been unable to exert much influence over her fate.

She turned toward the window, observing locals and tourists going about their business, unburdened by the press of circumstance. “What does the witch want from me?”

Dixie’s grin faded, replaced by a look of solemn concern. Because she was adept at concealing her feelings, it was easy to forget that Olivia had been put through the wringer over the past few months. Dixie spoke to her friend very gently. “Munin wants you to come to her. Says she’s got somethin’ of your mama’s to show you. Apparently, she’s been waitin’ for the right time to send for you and now the time’s come.”

Olivia was unprepared for this. “That’s ridiculous. Why would my mother, a librarian and do-gooder, have given something to a woman known as the local witch? And I use that term loosely.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” Dixie warned. “If your mama handed over somethin’ she treasured, then she was lookin’ for help outside the normal realm. She obviously had a problem that couldn’t be fixed by the folks she knew. The question is, did she get what she needed from Munin?”

The tightening sensation in Olivia’s chest increased. It was difficult for her to picture her beautiful mother, the kind and gentle librarian, traipsing through a barely discernible track in the swamp in search of answers.

“I am *not* going to respond to this woman’s summons,” Olivia said. “It’s probably a scam, though more creative than most, I admit.”

The family of four ambled out the door, waving at Dixie before leaving. Her mouth formed a

smile, but her ale brown eyes were troubled. “Munin said you wouldn’t agree at first. That was part of the message. I was supposed to wait for you to refuse and then tell you the rest. I wonder how she knew . . .”

Her impatience morphing into full-blown annoyance, Olivia growled, “Oh, please! What’s the magic word, then? What’s going to convince me to hire a boat and douse myself in mosquito repellant so I can waste an entire day finding some crazy hag?”

Dixie gestured at the hollow in Olivia’s throat. Resting there was a golden starfish pendant attached to a delicate gold chain. Olivia’s mother had given it to her only child shortly before her tragic death. Since reclaiming the necklace from the dollhouse in her childhood room, Olivia wore it every day. She touched it during moments of uncertainty or distress. It was her talisman.

Knowing that she was pointing at a sacred object, Dixie swallowed hard and then continued. “Munin said she has your mama’s starfish and if you want to know why, you’ll have to come. And soon.”

Olivia reached her hand out for Haviland and he obediently moved closer. Her fingers sank into his soft curls and her tilting world steadied itself. “This is a hell of a way to start my day,” she grumbled overpaid Dixie for breakfast, and strode out into the sunshine, one hand gripping her laptop case, the other curled protectively around the gold starfish on her neck.

* * *

After settling Haviland into the passenger seat of her Range Rover, Olivia headed for home. It was late in the day for a walk on the beach, and the August sun seared the pavement, coaxing shimmering waves of heat into the stagnant air, but she wanted to make contact with the water, to wade ankle deep for a few moments.

The downtown streets were clogged with vacationers in rental cars. Low-end convertibles and minivans eased through the business district, drivers scouted out eateries and boutiques or searched for a prized parking space.

Though she was accustomed to summertime traffic and knew that the crowded town meant that both of her restaurants would be filled to capacity for the remainder of the season, Olivia felt a sudden pang of longing for winter.

Oyster Bay possessed a quiet beauty during the somnolent stretch from November to March. It never turned biting cold, but grew gray and blustery enough to chase the tourists away. The sparkling sea became flat and lusterless. Sluggish waves rolled onto chilly sand beyond the decks of vast, empty beach houses. Without the calls of Canada geese and the shrieks of gulls, there was a hush along the shore. A few sandpipers still waded into the shallows, trilling softly, and terns picked their way over perfectly formed scallop shells that would have been instantly placed in a child’s plastic bucket had they drifted above the water line during a balmy season.

Olivia saw plenty of kids now. Holding hands with their parents, they skipped down the sidewalk, sun kissed and content. Some carried dripping ice cream cones big enough to spoil their lunches while others held rainbow pinwheels that spun obediently in the salt-laden breeze.

At one time, the vision of a multitude of children wouldn’t have moved Olivia in the slightest, but now she smiled and her thoughts turned from the witch to her niece and nephew, Caitlyn and Anders.

“We should get them some new books,” she said to Haviland.

The poodle, who’d been poking his head out the window in hopes of receiving a welcome rush of air, turned his cocoa brown eyes to Olivia and issued a derisive snort.

“I know we just bought a small pile, but one can never have too many books.” She sighed as the Suburban in front of them idled through the entire the green light. “But we won’t go to Through the Wardrobe today. Flynn’s got that ridiculous puppet show scheduled this morning.” A wicked gleam flashed in her eyes. “I should encourage Laurel to bring the twins to see it. I bet they’d attack the puppeteer. They’re still completely enthralled with pirates, you know.”

Haviland, who undoubtedly connected the word “twins” with two pairs of sticky hands that pulled his fur and grabbed his tail in a most undignified manner, uttered a low growl before sticking his head back out the window.

Olivia was just about to tease her dog some more when the light turned from red to green again. Before the Suburban could lumber forward, an orange Corvette rocketed down the left turn lane, passed the SUV in the middle of the intersection, and began to ride the bumper of a Mini Cooper.

“Bastard,” Olivia grumbled, instantly recognizing the car and its driver.

The Suburban turned right at the next corner and Olivia was stuck behind the plastic surgeon. His music continued to drown out all other sounds, and Haviland whined in discomfort. Dr. NipTuck and his mistress drew both curious and disapproving stares from the pedestrians. Feigning disinterest, they slapped their palms against the car’s tan leather in time to the bass-heavy music. The blonde lit a cigarette while the self-satisfied physician took sips from a mega-sized fountain drink and crept ever closer to the Mini’s tiny bumper.

Traffic inched down the street and the more Olivia observed the Corvette’s occupants, the more irritated she became. When the Mini stopped instead of racing through the next yellow light, the doctor laid on his horn and made impatient gestures with his free hand. Blondie tapped cigarette ash onto the road and Olivia could see the flash of her complacent smile in the sports car’s side mirror.

The anger that had come to life after Dixie had delivered the witch’s message regained its hold over Olivia. As she watched the occupants of the orange Corvette, she fumed over the realization that some enigmatic old woman living in a virtually inhabitable swamp had successfully manipulated her. She could not stop thinking about Munin and her mother. What was their connection? And how had the witch known about the necklace?

Olivia had worn her starfish necklace every day of her girlhood until she’d abruptly hidden it inside her dollhouse.

“Why did I ever take it off?” she demanded aloud, furious that her sharp memory could not provide an answer. Although she distinctly recalled pulling away the tiny fireplace in the dollhouse’s living room and stuffing her treasure into the small cavity she’d carved within, she couldn’t remember what event had influenced her to hide it in the first place.

The noise from the Corvette prevented her from concentrating and she glared at the back of the tourists’ heads, wishing she could bore holes into their skulls with a single, venomous look.

This fantasy turned to very real outrage when the doctor blatantly tossed his extra-large plastic take-out cup onto the road. It bounced against the asphalt, and the lid became dislodged. Ice cubes ricocheted in all directions and the bright red straw rolled to a stop in the middle of the double yellow line.

“Bastard!” Olivia repeated, her lips tightening. No one littered like that in her town. Fuming, she considered her options. She could report the infraction to the police, but doubted they’d respond. Because the revenue generated from tourism kept many Oyster Bay families afloat during the off-season, the authorities were reluctant to inconvenience visitors over minor infractions.

Haviland, who also had his gaze fixed on the orange car, bared his teeth.

“You’re right, Captain. It’s up to us. At the next light, I will calmly get out and tell that jerkoff to

pick up his trash. If he argues, you can flash him your most fearsome snarl.”

Olivia’s plans for a peaceful resolution were quickly ditched, however, the moment Blondie finished her cigarette.

The next few seconds moved in slow motion. Blondie pushed a final plume of smoke into the air and then pulled back her arm. Olivia saw the movement and was reminded of a television close-up of a quarterback preparing to throw a winning pass. Unlike a highly focused athlete, Blondie hadn’t aimed for a spot in the distance where she wanted her missile to fall. In fact, as she released the cigarette butt, still glowing orange at one end, she turned to speak to the doctor.

Olivia watched in horror as the lit stub careened toward the sidewalk. The object in its path was a stroller whose occupant was a chubby-cheeked toddler dressed in a pink sundress. Her fist was closed around a mermaid doll and her bare legs swung out before her as though she were running in place.

Before Olivia could call out a warning, the cigarette struck the child’s right arm, just above the wrist, before dropping to the sidewalk. The child opened her eyes wide in shock and then her face crumpled, her mouth forming a huge O as she howled in pain.

All Olivia could see was Anders as a newborn, fighting for survival in a hospital NICU. The sight of her tiny nephew hooked to tubes and wires as if he were a human marionette replaced the little girl’s round, healthy body. Over the music, Olivia heard only a child’s cries and was transported back to that time of fear and dread, to those long hours when she didn’t know whether her brother’s son would survive.

Reliving those moments of helplessness, Olivia’s grip on the steering wheel turned white-knuckled. While the little girl’s parents knelt by her side to examine the angry red mark on her arm, Olivia pushed her foot against her accelerator pedal until it hit the floor.

The Range Rover leapt forward. Three thousand pounds of metal plowed into the fiberglass body of the orange Corvette and a sickening *crack* resounded above the hip-hop music.

Olivia applied the brakes and cast a quick glance at Haviland. His custom-made canine seat belt had done its job, and though he was unsettled, he was also unhurt.

Putting the Range Rover into park, Olivia leaned forward to gain a clear view of the damage. The back of the Corvette looked like a crumpled soda can. The taillights were splintered and a large chunk of fiberglass had been violently detached from the frame. It sat like an amputated limb behind the left rear tire.

The plastic surgeon’s license plate was mangled beyond recognition and the car’s speakers abruptly stopped broadcasting any sound.

Olivia examined the wreckage and smiled. “Thanks for visiting Oyster Bay. We hope you enjoyed your stay.”

Chapter 2

The smaller the mind the greater the conceit.

—AESOP

Olivia maneuvered the Range Rover to the side, put on her hazard lights, and phoned the police. She reported the location of the accident and assured the operator that no one had been injured. “You may have to treat a bruised ego,” she added too quietly for the dispatcher to hear.

Her declaration that no one was hurt was factual, for Dr. NipTuck immediately hopped out of his wrecked car, bellowing in rage as he examined the damage to his Corvette. He gesticulated and cursed with such vigor that Olivia knew he was sound of body, if not of mind. The fake tan on Blondie’s face had paled a bit and she stood on the sidewalk, making mewling noises reminiscent of a hungry kitten, but she was fine too.

Pouring some water into Haviland’s travel dish, Olivia transferred the poodle to the spacious rear of the Rover and put all the windows down so her dog would be comfortable. Only then did she examine the front end of her vehicle, noting that a few scratches to her metallic blue paint were the extent of the damage. Her steel bumper, which was covered by a protective rubber guard, had taken the brunt of the low-speed impact and was now striped with the Corvette’s electric orange paint.

Olivia was just reflecting that the black and orange pattern resembled a tiger’s pelt when Dr. NipTuck marched over and began to vent his rage. Red-faced and spluttering, he called her a host of offensive names.

“I’m terribly sorry,” she responded with absolute calm. “I saw the light turn green and I just gunned my engine. I’ve already called the police and they’re on their way. Let me gather my insurance information.” Olivia hesitated and pointed at Blondie. “Is your wife okay?”

“What? Who?” The man’s jowls inflated until he resembled a spooked puffer fish. “Forget about *her*. Look at what you did to my *car*!”

Blondie’s mewling grew a little louder as proof of her lack of importance hit home.

Ignoring another stream of insults, Olivia collected her vehicle registration and insurance card from the Range Rover’s center console and then called State Farm to report the accident. She sat on the curb and talked to her agent, who was local and promised to be at the scene in ten minutes.

A crowd had gathered on the sidewalk but Olivia shouldered past the gawkers and made her way to the stroller bearing the crying toddler.

“Is she all right?” she asked the child’s mother.

The woman nodded and pointed to the small red mark on her daughter’s arm. “It’s just a surface burn. My husband ran to the pharmacy down the street to get a topical ointment. He should be back any second now.”

The little girl took a final sniff and fell silent, looking up at Olivia with distrust.

“Would you allow me to buy her a frozen yogurt?” Indicating the shop across the street, Olivia

said, "Their Peach Perfection is delicious. It's completely natural and they serve pint-sized cups for kids your daughter's age. They also have sorbet and regular ice cream if she'd prefer another flavor."

The mother hesitated, casting a brief glance at the periwinkle awnings and front door of The Big Chill. "That's not necessary, but thank you for the offer."

"Actually, this is one of those times when ice cream is totally necessary." Olivia smiled and turned back to the little girl. "I think you deserve a treat."

The child knew a bribe when she heard one and nodded in eager agreement. Olivia jogged across the street and ordered the kid's cup and two shakes for the parents. By the time she reemerged from the shop, the police had arrived.

The doctor spotted her carrying a tray of frozen treats and became apoplectic with indignation. He lunged toward Olivia and the closest cop instinctively threw out an arm to stop him. The doctor instantly shouted for the bystanders to witness what was a clear case of police brutality. He told the flummoxed officer that he would definitely be filing a lawsuit against the department, Olivia, and the entire dump of a town.

To the officer's obvious relief, a second cop car pulled into the loading zone farther down the street, its rotating light bar blazing. Olivia watched as Sawyer Rawlings eased out of the passenger seat, taking a few seconds to survey the scene.

The police chief cut an imposing figure in his uniform. On his days off, he paired Hawaiian-print shirts covered with sharks, pineapples, or palm trees with tattered khaki shorts and a pair of paint-splattered sandals. But he was a different man when he was dressed in his police blues. His posture was rigid, his clean-shaven jaw set, and his eyes were masked behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses. Radiating authority, he walked briskly toward the irate physician, and Olivia felt a quickening of her blood. This man, this middle-aged cop with the salt-and-pepper hair, wide shoulders, slight paunch, and a fondness for chocolate milk, moved her in ways she could not comprehend.

Rawlings walked over to the doctor and held out his hand in introduction. Olivia couldn't hear him speak, but she knew he'd address the civilian in a pleasant, courteous voice. The chief's soft-spoken, almost humble manner didn't diminish his authority, however. In fact, it often increased it.

Olivia never tired of watching Rawlings take command of a situation. He did so now by giving the doctor his full attention, listening to the angry physician as if no one else existed. Rawlings didn't take a single note and remained completely calm while the other man gesticulated, spat, and cursed.

After a few moments, the chief approached Olivia, his face unreadable. She nearly looked away, suddenly discomfited by her rash behavior.

"If you wanted to see me, you could have just called," Rawlings growled.

"But this is more unpredictable," she quipped. "Keeps things spicy. I was just following one of *Cosmo's* recommendations."

Rawlings pulled off his sunglasses and jerked a thumb at the trashed Corvette. "Somehow, I doubt I was on your mind when you stomped on the gas pedal."

Shrugging, Olivia said, "He deserved it. I'd do it again given the chance."

With a slight shake of the head, Rawlings peered over Olivia's shoulder and she was warmed by the realization that he was checking on Haviland.

She nearly smiled at him, but then had a strong feeling that half the town's population was studying them. The junior police officers had ceased writing reports or shooing bystanders away from the intersection and were staring at their chief with unconcealed interest.

Olivia didn't like it. She was an extremely private person and had kept her burgeoning relationship with Rawlings under wraps. The only places they'd shared meals or drinks in public had been at one

her restaurants. She'd convinced the chief to spend most nights at her place instead of his house in town, and was rarely seen with him during the day.

"We're like a vampire couple," he'd observed one evening as they drank cocktails on her deck and watched the surf curl onto the shore beneath a sickle moon.

"Not really. Vampires are always young and beautiful," she'd countered.

Rawlings had taken her hand. "You're the most beautiful creature I've ever seen."

Olivia had left her chair and settled onto his lap, her long legs curling around his waist. She'd kissed him and he'd run his strong fingers through her hair, which was the same white gold as the moonlight. Eventually, he'd led her inside and up the stairs to the bedroom.

Now, in the bright summer sunshine, Olivia didn't know how to behave around the chief, especially since her lack of judgment had brought him here. She'd exposed them both to public scrutiny and she began to regret her decision to punish the obnoxious tourists.

Glancing around again, Olivia noticed that the stares of the locals were mostly well meaning. These were not the calculating looks of the paparazzi who'd trailed after her throughout her twenties and early thirties, snapping countless photos of Olivia with her latest beau. She'd dated models, actors, a minor royal, and several Fortune 500 executives, but no one ever lasted beyond a month or two. No one had ever taken her breath away. Not until she'd met Sawyer Rawlings.

"Excuse me, sir." The toddler's mother tapped Rawlings on the arm. "I think I know how this accident happened. You see, my daughter's arm was burned when the woman in the Corvette threw her cigarette toward the sidewalk." She was deliberately sticking to the facts. "Catherine, my little girl, is okay. It's just a tiny surface burn, but when it happened she screamed really loud. She's not even two and the pain took her by surprise," she added apologetically. "Anyway, I think this lady saw the cigarette butt hit my daughter and got distracted." She smiled at Olivia. "Sorry, but I didn't catch your name before."

"I'm Olivia Limoges. And this is Chief Rawlings."

Rawlings was studying the woman with concern. "Are you certain your daughter is all right, Mrs. . . . ?"

"Cimino. Lori Cimino. Yes, Cat's fine. But I wanted you to know that I don't think this would have happened if that woman hadn't tossed her cigarette butt into the street."

"Thank you, Mrs. Cimino. Would you be willing to fill out a report on the incident? I believe this individual needs to be taught a lesson about littering."

The woman nodded, a slight smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Olivia understood exactly how she felt and examined her nails before Rawlings could see how satisfied she was over how things were turning out. But he was shrewder than she thought.

After asking Mrs. Cimino to wait in the shade until he interviewed the Corvette's passenger, Rawlings pointed a stern finger at Olivia. "I cannot condone your behavior, Olivia. I suspect you saw the child get injured and, acting impetuously and without consideration for anyone's safety, used your vehicle as a battering ram." His eyes flicked over the front of her Range Rover and he seemed amazed by the lack of damage, but his look of disapproval quickly reappeared. "I'm going to have to write you a citation."

"Fair enough," Olivia said and lowered her voice to a soft, husky whisper. "Is that all you'll do to punish me?"

If Rawlings was taken aback by the question, he didn't show it. "Next time I come over, I'm bringing my shackles." He winked, slid his sunglasses back on, and headed over to speak with the doctor and his mistress.

Olivia returned to the sidewalk and exchanged small talk with the Cimino family. They were just discussing the best way to enjoy a filet of flounder when the doctor marched around the front of his car and slapped the blonde across the face. The sound reverberated and the crowd held a collective breath, stunned.

The blonde covered her cheek with her palm and began to sob. Rawlings rushed to her side with the alacrity of a much younger man. He had the physician on the ground and his wrists cuffed before the other cops moved a muscle. Kneeling on the asphalt, Rawlings murmured to the doctor until the man became docile and still. Passing him off to one of his officers, the chief approached the blonde and offered her his hand. She grasped it, sagging against his wide chest.

Olivia's previous aversion toward the woman vanished, and she pitied the doctor's mistress. She'd changed her body, her face, her hair, and her style of dress to please her companion. He'd rewarded her with a weekend trip to a seaside hotel, a string of belittling remarks, and at least one slap in the face.

"Poor thing," Lori Cimino echoed Olivia's thoughts. "Jerks like that are everywhere. I almost ended up with a guy like that. You get trapped into thinking you can't do better, that you aren't worth of respect. Or happiness. It takes a strong woman to just walk away, to believe that you can make it on your own." She glanced at her husband, who was holding their daughter in his arms and planting loud smacking wet kisses on her neck and shoulders while she giggled in delight. "By the time I met Tony I knew who I was and what I wanted, but some women never get to that point."

Olivia considered Lori's words. She too had known women who'd deliberately invited destructive men into their lives and then spent their days bemoaning their situation. It had once been impossible for her to comprehend why these women didn't leave the louts, but she now knew that people were often anchored to negative relationships by fear.

Her fingertips reached for the starfish pendant. Was it fear that kept her from responding to the witch's summons? Olivia shook off the notion. She was scared of nothing.

Picking Rawlings out of a group of policemen, she knew that this was no longer the truth. What she felt for him truly scared her.

* * *

Back at her low country-style house overlooking the ocean, Olivia showered and changed into a navy sheath dress and a long Paloma Picasso silver chain necklace. The starfish pendant was tucked underneath the neckline of the dress, but as Olivia stood in front of the bathroom mirror applying bronze-tinted eye shadow and a ruddy beige shade of lipstick, she pulled out the gold starfish and stared at her reflection.

"Mother," she whispered and closed her eyes. She sensed that the images she'd stored of Camille Limoges were romanticized, and she didn't dwell on the rose-colored memories too often, but there were moments when a montage of pictures would play across the movie screen of her mind and she intentionally got lost in them.

Right now she was remembering having been caught by a late autumn thunderstorm when she was six years old. In the aimless, dreamy manner of a lonely child, she'd walked far down the beach, all the way around the Point where she could no longer see the roof of the lighthouse. A squall had swept in from the Atlantic, soaking her within seconds. Her pigtail braids had funneled water down her thin chest and skinny legs and her sneakers had squelched as they sank into the boglike sand.

When she'd finally returned home, her mother had run her a hot bath, plied her with hot chocolate

brimming with plump marshmallows, and then wrapped her in a towel warmed by the living room fire. She'd then brushed Olivia's hair until it gleamed a pale gold while she sang "*Ballade à la Lune*" in French.

Standing in her bathroom, decades later, Olivia could smell the lavender of her mother's favorite hand cream. She could almost believe that her mother was there, an invisible force, still promising love and protection. Love and protection. These were things, thanks to her mother's sudden death and her father's disappearance a few years later, that Olivia knew little about.

"I'll go," Olivia spoke to her reflection, knowing how much she favored Camille Limoges, though her mother hadn't lived long enough to earn laugh lines around the eyes or a pair of parentheses around the mouth. Camille had been like Edna St. Vincent Millay's candle. She hadn't lasted the night, but she'd been a beautiful light to many while she'd lived.

Loading Haviland into the Range Rover, Olivia headed off to The Boot Top Bistro. In the quiet, air-conditioned cabin, she sang the first verse of her mother's lullaby.

*C'était dans la nuit brune
Sur le clocher jauni,
Sur le clocher la lune
Comme un point sur un i.
Ho la hi hi, ho la hi ho
Ho la hi hi, ho la hi ho.*

Haviland made a keening sound in the back of his throat and Olivia switched to English for the second verse, which sent him into a full-fledged howl.

*Moon, whose dark spirit
Strolls at the end of a thread,
At the end of a thread, in the dark
Your face and your profile?
Ho la hee hee, ho la hee ho
Ho la hee hee, ho la hee ho.*

Unable to compete with her poodle's singing, Olivia fell silent, allowing the last two verses to float through her head in her mother's voice, which was far more melodious than Olivia's.

Memories of Camille Limoges were swept aside the moment Olivia walked into the kitchen of her five-star restaurant. Michel, her head chef, rushed to meet her, grasping a cleaver in one hand and piece of raw chicken in the other.

"Whoa!" Olivia made a sign of surrender. "If you want a raise, you could just ask."

Michel glanced at the cleaver as though wondering how he came to be holding it, tossed it and the chicken in the nearest sink, and said, "You'll never believe who called!"

Knowing Michel's flair for the dramatic, Olivia replied, "Must be someone special to have you in such a state."

It wasn't Michel's appearance that indicated something significant had happened. The kitchen, which Michel ruled over with an iron hand, was a mess. The worktables were covered with fruit and raw vegetables, flour was strewn across the butcher block, there was a tower of dirty mixing bowls and frying pans in the deep sink, and the sous-chefs were unusually edgy. They shot nervous glances at Michel and plaintive ones at Olivia. Her chef wanted something and he wanted it badly. If she didn't

give in, he'd pout, rage at his underlings, or unwittingly add too much salt to the entrées.

"Someone special?" Michel scoffed. "How about an executive producer of the Foodie Network? He wants us to act as the celebrity judges at the Coastal Carolina Food Festival."

Olivia made it clear that she wasn't impressed.

"That's just the beginning!" Michel added breathlessly. "If we agree, they're going to tape an entire segment here at The Boot Top. Do you know what kind of name recognition that will bring us? He was so excited that he was speaking in a high whisper.

"It would be good for business," Olivia agreed, and her head chef performed a little jig of triumph. Olivia watched him in amusement. "But they're asking us at the last minute. Is there more to this story?"

"There *is*. They want us to step in because the original celebrity judge had a massive heart attack and isn't well enough to travel. I've shed many tears for him since I heard the news." The last phrase was delivered with biting sarcasm.

"Ah, the ailing judge must be the rich and famous Pierce Dumas, your nemesis," Olivia guessed.

Michel's face darkened. He and Dumas had attended culinary school in Paris together. They'd been in competition for top chef positions in the finest American restaurants until Michel had fallen for a married woman. Despite the cost to his career, he'd moved to Raleigh to be near her, and while he was mooning after someone who had no intention of leaving her husband, Dumas went on to garner national acclaim for his epicurean skills. He worked in Manhattan, Vegas, and Los Angeles and constantly appeared in culinary magazines and on food-related television shows.

Dumas had fame, wealth, and a gorgeous A-list actress wife. Michel, on the other hand, had been unceremoniously dumped by his married girlfriend and, battling a serious depression, decided to relocate. During his interview for the chef's position at The Boot Top, he'd prepared several dishes for Olivia and she knew right away that Michel was the man for the job. Within months of hiring him, she came to realize that he had two destructive obsessions: married women and a deep-seated envy of Pierce Dumas.

"You haven't mentioned Dumas in over a year," Olivia reminded Michel. "You're happy where you are. Look at the result of his high-stress lifestyle. A heart attack at his age?"

Michel smiled with delight.

"You live in paradise and have complete control of this kitchen. You're the master of your realm, the money is good, and you're healthy. You're not famous, but fame is a curse, believe me."

"Well, I'd like my fifteen minutes and I'm going to get it. My mind is stuffed with menu ideas that will dazzle the producer." Michel rubbed his hands together with glee. "And I've heard Shelley Giusti will be at the festival. We met in a pastry chef class a million years ago. I was in love with her, of course, but she married some health nut as soon as we graduated. Even back then, she was a true sorceress with desserts."

"Was she your first crush?" Olivia asked. Michel was constantly falling in and out of love.

"First *love*. And if she looks anything like her photo on the jacket flap of her new cookbook, *Decadence*, then she has aged *very* well. I wonder if she'll remember all the good times we shared. We used to meet for drinks after class and talk about everything and anything. I remember how she'd throw her head back when she laughed . . ." Michel trailed off, a dreamy look entering his eyes.

Olivia was all too familiar with the signs that he was about to embark on a new infatuation. "Does this mean that you're not going to pursue Laurel anymore? I thought she was the butter to your grits, the salsa to your tortilla chips, the vanilla ice cream to your apple strudel?"

"Stop it! Enough with the food clichés," Michel pleaded. "Part of me will always care for Laurel."

She is an angel among women and her husband isn't worthy of her, but she doesn't see me as a potential lover. She never will."

Putting a hand on Michel's shoulder, Olivia spoke with rare tenderness. "I don't know why you chase people who aren't free to love you, but you deserve someone to call your own. You're a fine man, Michel. You could make the right woman very happy."

Moved by her words, Michel simply nodded.

Olivia took the piece of paper from his hand and flattened it on the nearest countertop. "I'll speak to this producer. I want certain things in writing before a film crew invades my restaurant."

Michel knew that his employer was wary of the media, regardless of what form it took.

"I know you're doing this for me," he murmured quietly. "Not for the business. It doesn't need the Foodie Network. I do."

His eyes grew moist and for a moment it looked like he might throw his arms around Olivia, but he recognized that she wouldn't welcome a grandiose display of emotion.

He wiped his eyes with the cuff of his chef's jacket and cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said simply. And then, unable to resist a bit of theatricality, added, "Everything you said to me about love is true. I'm getting older. It's time for me to have a grown-up relationship. It's time for me to be happy. And it's time for you to be happy too."

Olivia looked up sharply.

"Oh, yes," Michel continued softly. "You've had enough loneliness to last two lifetimes. Let the past go."

Her fingertips moved to where the starfish pendant was concealed beneath the fabric of her dress. Michel knew the history of the necklace. He knew that Olivia's mother had died during a hurricane and that the loss still haunted her.

Michel grabbed her gently by the wrist, preventing her from making contact with the starfish. "You don't need that anymore. You have a new family. Me, your writer friends, Dixie, Rawlings."

Olivia gave Michel a small, grateful smile, squeezed his hand once, and then let it go. After calling Haviland, who'd been waiting for her signal by the back door, she disappeared into the sanctuary of her tiny office.

Soon she heard Michel begin to hum a tune in a robust and merry tenor. The sous-chefs had obviously relaxed and the rhythms of the kitchen resumed. Olivia could once again hear The Boot Top's unique melody: the hiss of steam, the blades of knives kissing the wood cutting board, the entwining of Spanish, French, and North Carolina accents.

Olivia sighed in contentment. This was the music of her here and now. And it was beautiful.

Chapter 3

A town is saved, not more by the righteous men in it than by the woods and swamps that surround it.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

The little Boston Whaler bounced across the harbor, leaving a narrow trail of white foam in its wake. Flecks of salt water speckled Olivia's face, hair, and hands, but she didn't mind. Neither did Haviland, who licked at the air and smiled widely. The poodle enjoyed a boat ride even more than a car trip because he could stand on the deck. He was so content that he appeared to have forgiven Olivia for strapping him into a canine life jacket.

For her own part, Olivia had refused the boatman's offer of a life jacket. She wanted to feel the wind ripple her clothing and gently chafe her skin. Besides, the harbor was calm today and the man working the shift and throttle levers handled them deftly, his alert gaze constantly sweeping from east to west in search of approaching vessels.

She'd found her ride to the creek that ran alongside the eastern boundary of the Croatan National Forest by asking questions at the docks on Friday afternoon. After the shrimp boats had tied up their trawlers for the day, she purchased a generous amount of fresh seafood for both The Boot Top Bistro and The Bayside Crab House and then made subtle inquiries on how to reach a recluse named Munin.

The shrimpers knew Munin only as "the witch" and none were interested in taking Olivia within a mile of her swamp, but one of the captains knew someone who would.

"Fellow by the name Harlan Scott knows how to find her," the grizzled seaman said. "But look out, girlie. There are wild things in that swamp. Things you won't see comin', things that'll creep out of the shadows like a shark risin' from the deep water. Bring a big stick. Maybe even the kind that fires bullets."

Olivia had disregarded the fisherman's advice and left her Browning BPR rifle in the coat closet. Instead, she'd packed insect repellent, a canteen of water, Haviland's travel bowl, a granola bar, a bag of dried beef strips, and something that was precious to her into a sturdy knapsack.

Yesterday, she'd felt prepared to face the witch, but now, as the sun-bleached shore of the parkland grew closer and Harlan eased off the throttle, dulling the motorboat's roar to a low rumble, she wasn't so sure.

She and Harlan hadn't exchanged a single word during the crossing, but Olivia suddenly wanted to speak with her guide. She stood and moved next to him, her body close to the steering wheel. "How did you come to know Munin?" she called over the sound of the engine and the wind.

Harlan kept his eyes fixed on the water. "I used to be a park ranger. Knew every inch of this place." He encompassed the land before them with a sweep of his arm. "I was clearing one of the trails when I lost my footing and stepped on a fallen log. The eastern diamondback rattlesnake hiding underneath didn't appreciate the intrusion. He bit me twice before he ever made a noise. Couldn't call for help because I hadn't bothered to check my battery before heading out that morning. I

hollered as loud as I could, hoping against hope that someone would hear me.”

“And Munin did?”

He nodded. “She saved my life.”

Olivia hadn’t expected this. “How? I thought the venom from an eastern diamondback was lethal.

“She had antivenom. She’s got vials of the stuff from a bunch of different snakes. We’ve got copperheads, cottonmouths, and rattlers in the forest. Munin milked all of the poisonous ones and injected a bit of venom into her goat. Don’t know how that works, but without that goat I’d be six feet under.”

“Antibodies,” Olivia murmured, impressed by Munin’s ingenuity. “The goat produced antibodies as a response to the venom.”

Harlan shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. Anyhow, I make deliveries for her now and then and I’ll run folks out to see her if they want to go. It’s the least I can do.”

“How often do people seek her out?”

The shore was closer now and Harlan slowed the boat until it was barely coasting forward. Olivia could see the mouth of the creek opening up before them. It resembled a wide river now, but she knew enough about the waterways of the North Carolina coast to predict that the shallow banks would draw close together without warning and then continue to narrow until even the diminutive Whaler would be unable to progress any farther.

Once Harlan had set his craft on a course favoring the right side of the creek, he pushed his faded baseball cap back on his head and scratched his brow. “Less and less,” he said, answering Olivia’s question. “And they all look the same. Full of fear and hope and a little desperation. Sometimes she has answers. Sometimes not.”

“Do I seem desperate?” She kept her tone light, but there was a hint of hesitation in her voice.

Harlan’s gaze took in the thick underbrush of the salt marsh and the cypress trees rising in the distance. “Everybody is at one point or another. That’s when folks seem to need Munin most.”

His reply silenced Olivia and she felt less confident as the open water dropped away behind them. The land seemed to be gathering them close, squeezing the small craft deeper into a world ruled by insects and birds. It didn’t take long for the noises of these creatures to overpower the sound of the boat’s motor. Haviland barked once as a blue heron took flight from the creek’s edge. Otherwise, he was quiet, as if sensing that they were heading toward a strange and possibly hostile destination.

Eventually, the water became tinged with eddies of mud, and Harlan tilted the motor toward the boat deck and coasted toward the left bank. He waited until the bow nearly kissed a slope of grass-speckled dirt and then jumped to the shore. A wood gatepost had been set into the ground and he secured the Whaler’s line to it using a figure-eight knot and then offered Olivia his hand.

She hopped onto the ground, feeling ungainly in her high waders. Haviland leapt with more grace beside her and immediately began to track an interesting scent in a clump of tall grass. The air was dense with the sawing of cicadas and the buzz of flies and mosquitoes, and the ground was teeming with armies of ants and beetles.

Harlan shouldered a heavy canvas bag and then grabbed a walking stick from inside the boat and made a final adjustment to his baseball cap. “We’ll follow the creek for a spell and then turn inland.”

Olivia fell into step behind him, her eyes on his walking stick. It had been hand carved and featured a rattlesnake winding along the shaft. The head formed the stick’s handle and Harlan’s fingers fell over a black marble eye, leaving the other to stare at the outside of his right thigh.

“Did you carve that?” she asked over the din of the insects.

He didn’t turn around to answer. “No, I don’t have the knack for it. I bought this from a Lumbee

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