



*The
Rising
Tide*

Tim Holland

A Sidney Lake Lowcountry Mystery

He knew that investigating a crime could be dangerous, but he hadn't expected trouble on a night like this...

Suddenly all the lights in and around the house began to flicker—once, then again, then total darkness in the entire neighborhood. A high-pitched sound suddenly pierced the thumping of the wipers. It startled Sidney, and then he heard it again. He peered through the rain streaked windshield. Lightning flashed, and he saw the shadow in the den move quickly toward the entry hall. Then he heard a definite shout.

He turned the headlights back on. The lights from the car picked out Cal starting up the stairway. Sidney pushed open his door. The rain and wind hit his face, and he struggled to get out of his seat. He still had his seat belt on. The door slammed back at him in another gust of wind. Finally getting unhooked and outside the car, he had difficulty seeing anything in front of him as he headed to the house, but he knew something was very wrong. The rain and the wind pounded him as he finally reached the front door and opened it. He stopped momentarily, surveying the scene in front of him.

Cal lay motionless at the foot of the stairs and Sidney saw Becky at the top, trying to pick herself up with the aid of Tillie. The contents of one of the overnight bags littered the stairway.

Midsummer in the lowcountry of South Carolina is a dreamy, quiet time. Professor Sidney Lake uses this respite for literary research and planning his next semester, but his Gullah housekeeper, Tillie James, has other plans for him. She needs his help in dealing with a touchy subject: the death of George Reed and the suspicions it aroused that his wife Becky was involved, even though the coroner and the police chief declared Reed's death an unfortunate accident. As the police are in the business of catching the guilty and have no interest in proving someone innocent, it's up to Lake and Tillie—along with his graduate assistant, the local minister, and a retired policeman—to save Becky Reed's reputation. The proof of her innocence seems to rest on the quirks of the rising and falling tide in the marsh where George died. But the search for the truth turns out to be more than Sidney bargained for—and suddenly, his life and those of his friends are on the line...

KUDOS for *The Rising Tide*

In *The Rising Tide* by Tim Holland, Sidney Lake is a professor who just wants some peace and quiet during his summer vacation to plan his next semester. But, alas, this is not to be. His housekeeper comes to him in distress because she fears the reputation of her friend Becky will be ruined since everyone is saying she murdered her husband, even though the police ruled the death an accident. Apparently, public opinion matters more than in the lowcountry of South Carolina than the judgment of the police and medical examiner. As Sidney sets out to prove Becky's innocence, the evidence seems to depend on the rise and fall of the tides in the lowcountry salt-water marshes. And when Sidney discovers that there is more to the "accidental" death of Becky's husband than what it appears to be on the surface, all hell breaks loose. I loved all the interesting people and places. Holland's vivid descriptions make you feel like you're right there in the scene, watching firsthand as the mystery unfolds. ~ Taylor Jones, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

The Rising Tide, A Sidney Lake Lowcountry Mystery, by Tim Holland is the story of close-knit communities and how they operate under the surface. When Becky Reed's husband George dies in a boating mishap, the police and county corner declare the death an unfortunate accident. Case closed, game over. But the locals in the area know better. They understand the rise and fall of the tides in the marshes, the way the water flows and eddies, and how the skiffs and small boats used in the marshes drift with the currents. And they know, based on this font of local information, that something is very wrong with the scenario the police are espousing concerning George's death. So if it wasn't an accident, it must have been murder. And the most obvious suspect, of course, is George's long-suffering wife Becky. This is where Sidney Lake, a professor at a local college, comes in. Convinced by his housekeeper that Becky is innocent, Sidney

sets out to prove it, setting in motion a chain of events that will put several people's lives in danger. *The Rising Tide* is both an intriguing mystery and a treatise on human behavior. Holland's character development is superb, creating a host of interesting characters, from down-to-earth local fishermen—who don't need forensics, only their knowledge of the tides, to know that this accident was murder—to charming, if somewhat clueless, graduate students, to interfering busy-bodies eager for any snippet of gossip they can spread to willing ears. Between his characters' fascinating idiosyncrasies, to his in-depth descriptions, Holland gives his story a ring of truth that's a rare treat. ~ *Regan Murphy, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing about the lowcountry is a true pleasure, as the beauty and calmness of its vistas lend themselves to quiet thoughts and contemplation, although they can also lend themselves to daydreaming and excessive descriptions of the rising and ebbing tides of the salt-water marsh. Luckily, I had some very good people to keep me on track. Carol Kent Holland has always been my chief critic and editor, whether writing fiction or non-fiction. She has the sharpest pencil around and has great instincts for characterization and word sense. After all these years, she knows me better than anyone else and is fearless in her opinions and suggestions. I guess those early journalism courses had more of an effect than she originally thought. Thank you for your patience, love, and criticism.

My first readers of *The Rising Tide* were Pete Palmer of Beaufort, South Carolina, and Kevin Holland of Arlington, Virginia. Pete understood the lowcountry of South Carolina while Kevin did not and kept confusing it with Beaufort, North Carolina, a world apart. They made me write for both worlds so the familiar and unfamiliar reader could understand the images being presented.

Never underestimate the value of a good professional critique group. Other writers can be harsh critics and truly test your writing skills. The Silver Quill Writers Group of Williamsburg, Virginia, challenged me at every turn. Much thanks is owed to Elizabeth Brown (E. Compton Lee), Cynthia Fridgen, Pat Ryther, and Peter Stipe and their blue, red, green, and even purple pencils that, at times, cut and slashed unmercifully. However, I must admit I gave as much as I received when it came to their novels. The five of us tucked away in a small conference room every other week for three hours filled with criticisms, arguments, concerns, learning, and laughter made all of us better writers—and, hopefully, made our editors lives a good deal easier. Five story tellers

crafting tall tales of murder, love, sadness and heartbreak—what great fun. Thank you all.

Black Opal Books tag line to its logo reads *Because some stories just have to be told*, and I am truly thankful for their support. Bravo to you all from Lauri to Faith, Jack, Arwen, and J.P. Sidney Lake and Tillie James thank you as well. You allowed them to be born and continue to thrive.

One other acknowledgement is especially needed and that's to Cassie—Cassandra's Chocolate Kisses—our chocolate Labrador retriever. She was my model for Mickey (Mrs. Micawber) and my constant companion while writing, walking, thinking, and planning. Although now gone, she continues as Sidney Lake's companion serving him well in the Sidney Lake Mystery Series.

Tim Holland

The
Rising
Tide

A Sidney Lake Lowcountry Mystery

Tim Holland

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: MYSTERY/DETECTIVE/CRIME THRILLER

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DEDICATION

For Mary Frances Broderick Holland, who taught me to read, write, and love a good mystery just as she did—this one is for you.

Chapter 1

The skiff drifted quietly in the still water—barely moving. George Reed stood up slowly, not wanting to make a sudden motion that would attract attention. The small boat wiggled in the water and sent tiny ripples out from its sides as he looked straight ahead over the bow and focused on the forested shoreline ahead of him.

“You’re sure about this?”

“Absolutely,” answered Warren, sitting behind him with a paddle lying across his lap. The long pole he used to push them out into the secluded spot in the middle of the open area with the best view rested along the left side of the boat, as it could no longer reach the deep, soft bottom.

George, now using the binoculars, carefully searched the shoreline of the small marsh island nestled in the remote reaches of the Morgan River. The tall marsh grass, that extended out from the island and surrounded the area from which they watched, made the small boat and its passengers virtually invisible.

“Should be about two-thirds of the way up on the left side. Got the camera with you?” Warren whispered.

“Got it right here around my neck so I won’t lose it,” George whispered back, while shifting his focus to a point mid-way up the line of trees.

He inched his head around laterally, while holding the binoculars steady, and examined each branch carefully. When he reached the perimeter of his search pattern, he focused on the next six feet above that and worked his way back. His digital camera with a small telephoto lens moved across his chest with the rhythm of his movements, its long looping strap around his neck so he wouldn't drop it overboard if the small boat suddenly shifted under him. Although a sure-footed experienced boater, he knew that he likelihood of hanging onto both the binoculars and the camera in a rocking flat-bottomed skiff would be slim, especially with the four scotches swirling around in his head. He kept one hand on the binoculars but the other one he wanted free in case he needed it for stability. An old hand at this, he had no expectation of accidentally falling out of the boat but knew that losing the camera could be a real possibility. It was his favorite for this kind of shoot: finding something unexpected. He brought it with him when he transferred to his friend's skiff from his own boat, which would have been too large to maneuver to this precise spot.

Finally, he thought he saw something. Focusing his eyes on an area near the top of one of the tall, skinny, pine trees, he took hold of the camera with his free hand but kept looking intensely at the tree. With extreme care, he switched from the binoculars to the camera—the left hand moving down and the right grabbing hold of the camera and bringing it into position. The small but efficient telephoto lens confirmed his find.

He started to whisper quietly, “Yeah, I—” He then gave out a yell, “Whoooooo—” as the skiff suddenly rocked violently. He dropped the camera as he spread his arms out to keep his balance. The binoculars headed for the water. “What the—” he started to say as he realized Warren seemed to be purposely rocking the boat even harder.

The camera, on its elongated strap, bounced wildly against his chest, leapt up, and hit him in the mouth, and then went over his shoulder to his back. He lost his footing and,

as he went over the side, his friend reached out and made a grab for the camera strap.

“I’ve got it.” Grabbing it tight, Warren wanted to get it off George’s neck and into the water, where it would be destroyed. The plan wasn’t working. It had gone terribly wrong. There wasn’t supposed to be that long strap. This was supposed to be an accident, with the camera the only casualty.

George went over the side but the strap around his neck held by Warren pulled his head back. Warren, now panicking and fearing he would be pulled into the water, tightened his grip on the strap. George’s head snapped back hard and slammed against the edge of the boat with a terrible cracking sound. His body went limp immediately and the camera strap broke sending the camera flying into Warren, who took a glancing blow to the top of his head. The force of George going over the side pushed the skiff in the opposite direction away from where he went into the water. The paddle went into the water. The pole went into the water. Warren fell backward in the boat—dazed. Frightened birds took flight all around, wings flapping anxiously. The water boiled and rolled pushing the skiff away from the drowning man.

Warren pulled and clawed his way back into his seat. The boat had been completely turned around, and he realized he faced the wrong way as he looked for his friend. He spun around and could see heavy ripples in the water but no sign of George. The urge to jump in after him flashed across Warren’s mind but left just as quickly. The water here was ten feet deep and he was no swimmer. He spotted the paddle about twenty feet opposite the boat drifting toward the marsh grass and began hand paddling toward it.

He kept looking back over his shoulder as his hands hit the water. Still no sign of George.

With the paddle in hand he made his way quickly to where he believed they were when George went over the side. The area was almost completely calm again, still no sign of George.

Panicking again, Warren searched in vain, trying to see through the black water. He didn't even know if he was in the right spot.

"Oh, my God! What have I done?" He sat alone in the middle of the boat with his head in his hands. The camera, the focus of his plan, sat in a pool of water at his feet. "It's been at least five minutes. He must be dead. I've got to get out of here. I've got the camera, and I'm sure the pictures are on it. No one knows I was with him. They'll just think he fell out of his boat, drowned, and drifted in here. It happens all the time. There's nothing I can do."

Warren looked around nervously. The quiet returned, the water still again, the ripples gone. The birds were coming back. He quietly put the paddle into the water and made his way back to the main channel through the marsh grass the way he came.



Warren sat in front of his computer and proceeded to bring up the on-line edition of *The Island Packet*. *The Beaufort Gazette* with the front page story about finding George Reed's body sat on the table next to him.

He searched through all the local stories and found one that mirrored what the *Gazette* printed. *Good*, he thought, *no hint of foul play*.

Chapter 2

Tillie muttered to herself as she dusted around the entrance to Sidney Lake's office. "I know she didn't do it. She's a good woman, a nice lady. She's one of my church ladies. No, she didn't do it. It was an accident. I just know it." She carefully kept one eye on the figure behind the desk as she spoke and, seeing no reaction, increased the volume of the last four words.

"What was that, Tillie?" Sidney didn't look up when he spoke but kept working away at the computer, his back partially to his housekeeper. Hearing Tillie mumble as she did the house work was not unusual but, this time, the tone and volume of her voice caught Mickey's attention and the black lab, lying on the floor at the edge of the desk, raised her head and looked directly at Tillie.

"I said she didn't do it."

Sidney now joined Mickey in looking at her standing in the doorway, the pocket doors to the room being fully opened. "Who didn't do what?"

"She didn't kill him."

Sydney, now fully engaged, changed focus from, *The Egoist* by George Meredith, which he planned to include in the fall semester of USC Beaufort's lifelong learning program, but kept himself ready to continue. Turning his chair to face her and looking over the top of his reading glasses, he

responded with a puzzled look on his face. “She didn’t...what? Someone killed someone?”

“Professor Lake, didn’t you see the paper this morning? It was right there on the front page.” Tillie stopped her dabbing at the pocket doors with her dust cloth and stood straight and tall in the doorway. Mickey got up and went over to sit directly in front of her, tail lazily wagging from side to side. Although they were, technically, employer and employee, their relationship had grown over the years since Rose’s death five years ago in 2009. She watched over him now as she would an older, bachelor brother, and he looked upon her not only as a friend and part of his household, but also as a loyal companion to whom he felt obliged for a variety of reasons.

“I—yes, I did, but I just gave the front page a quick glance and didn’t really spend much time on it.”

“Mister George Reed was found dead in the marsh yesterday afternoon an’ people are sayin’ Miss Becky did it.”

“George Reed?” Sidney perked up. He leaned forward in his chair and looked at Tillie in disbelief. “The landscape business? I know him. Know Becky, too.”

“That’s the one.”

“I saw her at church yesterday. Her full name is Rebecca. And she killed him?”

“No, she did not!” Tillie stamped her foot to emphasize her objection to his supposition.

“Well, there must be something to it if the police have charged her with his death.”

“But they haven’t. That’s the whole point. The police haven’t said she did it.”

“Really?”

Mickey decided that this was going to be a longer-than-anticipated interchange and lay down at Tillie’s feet.

“If the police haven’t charged her, who claims she killed him?” Sidney asked. “I know the Reeds, and none of this makes any sense.”

“Egg-zackley! That’s what I been sayin’. She didn’t do it!” A good firm shake of the head this time. “She’s one of my church ladies, and they’re all good people. Miss Becky didn’t do it!”

He looked at his housekeeper intently. “Let’s step back for just a moment. You say that George Reed was found dead in the marsh, the police have not charged Becky Reed, but someone said she did it. Right?”

“Right.”

“Who?”

“Who?”

“Who said she did it?”

At this point Mickey’s ears perked up, as it sounded as though they were doing an imitation of the owl in the backyard that had been tormenting her.

“Everybody’s sayin’ it.”

“Now tell me, why would they say that, especially if the police haven’t said it?”

“It’s the way people are. Always lookin’ for the bad in things.” She took a defensive stance, folding her arms across her ample chest, and tilting her head so that her good right eye could stare firmly at him.

Sidney shifted his bulk and moved the chair slightly away from his corner-positioned desk. Tillie then took a small step into the room so that she now stood at the edge of the carpet and positioned herself just to the right of the leather love-seat on the wall opposite the entrance.

“Tillie, please, there has to be more to it than that.”

Tillie thought for a few seconds. Mickey, hearing the break in the conversation, turned her head toward Tillie, waiting patiently for her to speak, and then moved onto the carpet.

“Well, it is kinda funny. I don’t actually mean *funny*, I mean strange, like unusual.”

“I’m afraid you still have me in the dark.” He leaned back in his chair again and this time folded his arms defensively, resting them on his large midsection.

“Well, Professor Lake, if you’d read the paper you’d know what I mean.” He could hear the frustration in her voice. “Here, let me get it for you and then you tell me what you think.” Tillie immediately turned and left the room heading for the kitchen at the rear of the house, followed by Mickey in search of a snack.

Sidney, on the other hand, shifted his five-foot-eight, 230-pound frame in his chair, turned to his desk, shook his head, muttered to himself, and reached over to bookmark the page he was reviewing.

She came back just as he moved the book to the side. “Okay, you take a look,” she said, as two of the three main females in his life made their way back to his office. She handed him the paper, and he spotted the article headline immediately: *Man dies in boating accident*.

“Well, yes, now I see it.” He leaned back again.

“Professor Lake, read the story!” Tillie raised her voice as she spoke and put serious emphasis into it. The power in her seventy-year-old vocal cords elicited another one of Sidney’s over-the-glasses looks.

He read the story while Tillie and Mickey waited, both impatiently. The look on the housekeeper’s face remained intent and focused on her employer. Mickey sensed the anxiety, so the two of them just stood there, waiting, a foot shuffling and a tail wagging.

“Okay,” Lake said as he skimmed the story. “It looks like Becky and George went out boating on Sunday afternoon and stopped at a sandbar to do a little sunbathing and swimming. According to Becky, she fell asleep and George took the boat out for a ride. George didn’t come back and Becky ended up being rescued from the rising tide by some passing boaters.” Sidney paused, looked over his glasses at Tillie, and then read on. “Let’s see here. The empty boat is later found stuck in the marsh grass in one of those channels that appears when the tide goes out, apparently out of sight of Becky’s sandbar. George’s body is later found floating in some tall reeds a good distance away from both the boat and

the sandbar, although the story doesn't really give specific locations. There's a mention here of a problem that George had that is believed to be a contributing factor in his having fallen out of the boat and apparently he hit his head on some driftwood. That last part was a comment by the coroner." He again looked at Tillie. "There must be something personal about George that the family would just as well not have printed. That, I guess, is also not unusual for the *Times*, especially if the family is pretty well known locally. Sidney finished reading and dropped the paper into his lap. "It seems like a pretty straight forward accident, Tillie."

"But don't you see?"

"See what, Tillie? What am I missing?" The questions clearly demonstrated his own growing frustration. He wanted to get back to Meredith. He didn't need this.

"Professor Lake, everybody still thinks she did it. Mr. Wilcox didn't prove she didn't!"

"Tillie, I don't understand. You seem to feel that, even though George Reed's death has been declared an accident, the issue is still not settled? Consider two points: one, coroner Wilcox clearly said he believed it was an accident and, two, I don't see any indication of anyone saying it wasn't." His voice rose slightly.

"That's because you don't hear them. Everyone I know thinks that one of my people killed her husband, and I know she didn't. I wouldn't work for someone as would kill her husband, not that he maybe didn't deserve killin', but I'm a good judge of people. In my business I have to be—goin' in an' out of people's houses an' all—an' I know she didn't do it!" Tillie's voice contained a little heat as well.

Sidney sat silent for a moment, trying to digest the logic of all Tillie said. She was a proud woman and particularly proud of her ability to choose good people as her employers. With a spotless reputation, she could pick and choose for whom she would like to work and not just anyone who offered her a job. Money was not an inducement. Tillie and her friends had, on occasion, turned down job offers that would

have given them more pay, but if a good housekeeper didn't like you, your money wasn't going to make a difference. Tillie especially liked her *church ladies*, as she called them, a group of five women who belonged to the same church, were close friends, and frequently made referrals on Tillie's behalf. She liked them and they liked her. She also made a point of letting her friends and family know that the people she worked for were the best people in town. Sidney, who prided himself on understanding what motivated people to take or not take certain actions began to see Tillie's problem, in that she viewed her own reputation as being challenged.

With a softer tone, he finally said, "Okay, Tillie, what are people saying?"

"They're sayin' she did it."

"Yes, I know, but how? What have you *specifically* heard? You know, motive, reason, how it was done, that sort of thing." After having read the story in *The Times*, he still didn't have a good idea of what happened to George Reed.

"Well, the story I hear most often is they had a fight and Miss Becky pushed him overboard and left him. Mr. Reed, he liked to drink a lot, as most people seemed to know, an' sometimes he kinda embarrassed her with the drinkin'. Anyway, they figure he was drunk, they had a fight, she pushed him overboard, and then left him to swim home. She then went to the sandbar, didn't tie the boat up right an' it drifted off with the tide. That Mr. Wilcox, he likes Miss Becky and Mr. Reed, so he just decided to let it go as an axident, which it was. Some other people think Mr. Wilcox and Miss Becky had somthin' goin', you know, an' they planned out the whole thing. That's just wrong! There just ain't no truth to it."

"Well, you're probably right about the last theory but what about the first one?"

A very indignant Tillie jumped on his response. "Professor Lake, she wouldn't do that! If Mr. Reed fell overboard she would get him a line an' pull him back in. If she couldn't, she'd go get help. No way would she leave him to

float off an' drown. Even if she was havin' a fight with him, she'd still help him. Miss Becky's a good lady, a church-goin' lady, an' she wouldn't do that."

Sidney sat for a moment with one arm folded across his chest and the other resting on it while he rubbed his chin and gently patted his face. He carefully contemplated his next statement before speaking. "Tillie, there are some things about human nature you're not going to change. Jealousy and envy are two very big ones, which when added to gossip, make for a rather large hurdle." Sidney knew that, even if Becky Reed had been accused and then completely exonerated by the authorities of all possible blame, a significant portion of the population would always think she did it.

"I understand that, Professor Lake, but maybe if someone was just to prove she couldn't of done it, that would make a difference. If someone could just show how the axident could happen like it did, an' it was all logical and everythin', then maybe people would stop talkin'."

Sidney ran his hand through what small amount of hair he had left on the top of his head and then prompted her to make the request. "You have something specifically on your mind, I take it?"

"Well, I was kinda hopin' that you could maybe axe some questions. You know everybody there is to know in town, lots of important people."

"Okay, Tillie, what is it you're actually looking for me to do?" As Sidney measured his words carefully, Mickey sat up from her position at Tillie's feet and leaned against her leg, clearly showing whose side she was on.

In an uncharacteristically sheepish way, Tillie threw the challenge to him. "If you could maybe axe some of your police friends and maybe some of your friends in city hall as to what they really think happened? If I went and did it, they'd just ignore me, brush me off like they always do us island people. An' you know that's true. You, on the other hand, they know you. You're white. They pay attention to you an' you know it. Besides, after talking to them, maybe you could

put some ideas together and some arguments I could use when people say some bad things about Miss Becky? I know she didn't do nothin' wrong, I mean she just lost her husband and it's not fair what they're sayin' an' I know there's a logical way to say she didn't have anythin' to do with it, an' if I could say the police truly believe she didn't do no wrong an' that it was all Mr. Reed's own doin', well, then I'd have a good argument to use."

Sidney took a deep breath and Tillie obviously needed one. "This is just a supposition now but what if the opposite turns out to be true? I mean, what if the police really think she was in some way responsible for George Reed's death but realize they will never be able to prove it so they just let it go as an accident? There is that possibility."

"Then they'd be wrong an' I don't want to know about it."

Another pause, longer this time, as Sidney weighed his options to become involved or not and what level of involvement would be appropriate. "All right, suppose I have a chat with Ray Morton. He may be retired now but he still knows everything there is to know about what goes on around here, and if he can give me some good reasons as to why there wasn't more of an investigation of the accident, I'll pass them on to you. However, if I never mention this to you again, it's because you don't want to hear what Mr. Morton said. How's that sound?"

"It's a deal." A look of relief. "I'll stop in tomorrow an' you can tell me what he said. I'll be at the Hamdon's and that's just down the street." Tillie, having achieved her objective, immediately turned and walked toward the back of the house to finish her cleaning.

Sidney looked at Mickey and Mickey at Sidney. "Okay, now what do I do?" He leaned back in his chair, took a deep breath, and continued to talk quietly to Mickey, who, as usual, listened attentively. "What was Wilcox thinking? I understand his consideration for the family in not wanting to add to their grief, but it looks like he didn't ask the state law en-

forcement department people to have a look at things. An extra day or so wouldn't have made a big difference. But then, maybe old George was so drunk and the evidence on the boat was so obvious that confirming the cause and manner of death was indisputable, routine, academic, 101 stuff. We can hope, can't we, Mickey? Besides, we both know we can never say 'no' to Tillie, can we? We owe her too much, so let's get it over with so I can get this outline I'm working on wrapped up."



Warren put down *The Morgan City Times*. Good, he thought, *they've got it down as an accident as I thought they would. There's no way they could think anything else as long as they don't get hold of the pictures. Now if I can only get the damn camera to work so I can make sure they're there, then I'll destroy it. But I've got to confirm I've got them.*

Chapter 3

Shortly after lunch, Sidney wrapped up his work on Meredith for the day and decided to take Mickey for a walk. Besides, something nagged at him about George Reed's death and if he didn't figure out what it was he'd find himself thinking about it in the middle of trying to concentrate on Meredith. Steele Wilcox already looked at it as an accident so he must have some evidence to prove it. The trick would be to get Steele or someone else to let him know why. What evidence did he have that clearly showed there was no foul play?

He knew the Reeds from church but not well, only casually from simple chats after a service on Sunday morning. He'd been to their landscape business but only to buy odds and ends for his rose garden. Meetings were casual, time of day, how are the roses doing conversations. Sidney really didn't know anything about them other than being able to recognize them on sight. However, he did know where to go to get a personal, intimate perspective: Alice Ringfoot, the secretary to the pastor of the Bay View Presbyterian Church, who was also a big fan of Mickey's. Having served as the pastor's secretary since 1960, Alice Ringfoot was as much a symbol of the church as the pastor. She knew everything of interest about every member. Miss Alice kept an index card file filled with an invaluable compilation of information,

where she made notations about births and deaths of family members, job changes, address changes and personal notes about likes and dislikes, so as not to offend anyone. She never removed or erased a notation. Even if someone moved away, their card was merely placed in the inactive section. Pastors had come and gone and all of them found her knowledge of the congregation to be invaluable. When visiting a member of the congregation in the hospital, the pastor would be armed with information on the person's last major illness, as well as the health of the rest of the family. The name of the dog, cat, bird, or hamster would also be in Alice's private record. The pastor showed up with an enormous knowledge base to please those he visited. Yes, Alice Ringwood would be able to give him some of the background he lacked.

"Hello, Miss Alice." Sidney greeted her as he and Mickey came into the church office.

He huffed and puffed as though the office stood on the top of a hill instead of being only a four block level walk. The secretary's desk served the dual function of guard post and greeter station, as you had to pass right in front of it as you entered. The office itself occupied an interior hallway between the two rectangles of the Church Sanctuary and the Education Building. In addition to secretary to the pastor, she also served as *de facto* administrator making sure the sanctuary door was always open when she occupied the office. Although an open, unprotected church was a contentious issue with some of the elders, as they were concerned about someone wandering in unannounced and unobserved. The current pastor continued to remind them that such openness was the whole idea of a church in the first place. A compromise involved placing a sign on the front door directing visitors to the side door entrance and inviting them to stop by the office, an entrance to which could be found to the left as one entered the church from the side. The interior door to the church would always be left in the open position, so Alice

would be able to monitor the visitors. Besides, nothing and no one ever got past Alice.

“Sidney. And Mickey” She did not lift her head but continued to write on a note card. Not only did she recognize his voice but also, peripherally, the jacket he wore, the latter a definite mid-July give away. Sidney seemed to make a formal occasion out of the most mundane events, regardless of the weather. “Cal isn’t in at the moment. He’s over with the Reeds going over the memorial service.” She finally looked up. “Hi, Mickey. Yes, I’ll get you a treat. They’re right over here.”

Sidney let go of the lead and Mickey went right around the desk to say hello and sniff at Alice’s middle drawer where the dog treats were kept. “Isn’t it just terrible about Mr. Reed? He was such a nice man. It’s so terrible when young people die, just doesn’t seem right. Not that George was that young but when you’re my age, fifty-three is young, don’t you think?” One treat gone, then another. “But then you’re young, too. Lately, it seems everyone is young, keep getting’ younger all the time. Their daughter just got into town. She lives up in Charlotte and drove down this morning. Such a nice girl. Cal is sitting down with them both. Becky is in a terrible state.”

So far Sidney had made out pretty much as well on the information front, as Mickey did on the treat side, without ever asking a question. Being a true local, Alice’s great grandfather served on the original organizing committee for the founding of the church, there were very few bits of information about town or church activities that she was not plugged in to in some way. “Actually I wasn’t really looking for Cal, I expected him to be busy today. I just wanted to find out about the memorial service. I don’t know the Reeds that well, except for church. It certainly was a surprise. You must have known them quite well.”

“Oh, yes. Well, certainly Becky. She’s in and out of here all the time. She’s actually the church historian. So good with a camera. Takes wonderful pictures. That’s the main job

of the historian: record church events. George was the real photographer, though. His pictures of marsh birds and wild-life are just wonderful. Cal's got one in his office. Let me show it to you."

Alice got up, moved to her left through the open door to the pastor's office, and stopped just inside the doorway. Mickey, by this time, had curled up on the floor behind Alice's desk to keep an eye on the snack drawer. Sidney and Alice were almost the same height with her being five feet six inches to his five foot eight, but she was a tall stick of bones and angles compared to his rotundness and seemed the taller of the two. "See, there it is." She pointed to an expertly framed picture of a snowy egret above the bookcase.

Sidney peeked around the door. "I've seen that picture there for years and had no idea who the photographer was."

"That was his favorite thing to do. He just loved roaming around the marsh in his boat and takin' pictures. He often said that if he had discovered photography when he was young, he would never have taken up with landscaping. That's why he wasn't in church yesterday. Out all night takin pictures of birds and such."

"He must have been a very experienced boater."

"Oh, yes, he was always in that boat of his. Day and night he would be out there with his camera. Actually, he had two boats: one to roam around the marsh in and the other for just general things. You can't get close to wildlife in the big boat, that's just for use in the channels. Y'all don't have a boat do you?"

"No, I don't." Sidney envisioned a new entry being added to his file card.

She led them both back to her desk. "Well, anyone from around here knows the best boat to have is a small, flat bot-tomed one that only draws about two or three inches. You can go just about any place with that. Get right up close to the shore. Best way to go fishin' and crabbin' in the low-country. Did it myself when I was younger."

“George must have certainly known his way around the marsh *and* boats.”

“Oh, he certainly did. Knew places I never even heard of and I was born and raised here.”

“With that kind of knowledge and experience, how in the world did he ever fall from a boat?”

Alice did not answer for a moment, as though wrestling with what to say. She looked down at her desk as she spoke. “I don’t like to say things about people who are gone, after all they don’t have a chance to correct flaws like we still do but let’s just say it was possible.”

“I understand. I believe he did have a reputation as a social drinker.”

“And for George there seemed to be an awful lot of social occasions.” She stopped and covered her mouth with her hand, as though to stop anything else from popping out. “I guess I shouldn’t have said that?”

“The truth is the truth, Alice.”

Just then the outer door to the office opened and the Reverend Doctor J. Calvin Prentice, pastor of the Bay View Presbyterian Church came in. Cal, a tall, gangly sort who could easily play the part of Ichabod Crane, seeing Sidney immediately offered a cheerful greeting and extended his hand. “Hello, Sidney, how’ve you been? And, Mickey, figured you’d be nearby.”

“Just fine. Stopped in to find out about George Reed’s service.”

“Isn’t it terrible? I just came from the Reeds. Becky’s daughter is in. What a shame about George. My goodness.”

“Yes, I really didn’t know George very well, just knew him in passing from church but I did want to pay my respects. Alice tells me he was quite a photographer and boater. I had no idea.”

“Oh, yes. George was quite a photographer. Did you see this?” He moved toward his office and pointed to the picture above the small bookcase.

“Alice just showed me that.” Sidney followed him to the doorway. “I’ve seen that picture for years and until today I never knew it was George’s.”

“He did wonderful work with wildlife. He took me out with him one evening in that little boat of his and it was amazing how he could sneak up on just about anything. He used a pole to maneuver in the marsh grass. There was a metal ring at each end of the boat and he would just jam that pole through one of them into the muddy bottom and hold us just perfect against the tide.” Cal gestured with his arms imitating the action of pushing the pole into the soft bottom of the marsh. “That’s the other thing he knew so well: the tides. If you ran into him at any time of the day he could tell you exactly where the tide level was at that moment.”

“I guess his love of the water makes the accident all that more bizarre.”

Cal studied Sidney for a moment. “You have a minute to stop in? I’ve been meaning to bounce a few things off you.” He motioned for Sidney to come all the way inside and pointed his hand toward the desk surrounded on two sides by chairs, bypassing the conference table that was just inside to the left.

“Of course.”

“Alice, do I have any calls?”

“Just Howard Northridge about this year’s scholarship candidates. He said he’d call back.”

“Good. Sidney, come on in.” Cal held the door as Sidney moved in front of him and then closed it. Mickey stayed outside with Alice to guard the treat drawer. The pastor removed his jacket and placed it over the hanger affixed to the back of the door, revealing the short sleeves of his blue check shirt, an item that Sidney would never purchase much less wear. There was something about short sleeve, dress shirts that just didn’t fit into his dress code. They seemed to be an attempt to be formal and informal at the same time. Sidney’s preference would be to choose one or the other and not try to blend the two, although he was only too aware that

the current trend was to blend everything from clothing styles to ethics. "Just grab a seat." Cal quickly checked his desk for messages to see if someone might have slipped past Alice and left him a note, a feat most unlikely to be sure, but he always checked anyway. "You know you mentioned the word bizarre and that's the same word that Becky used," he said slipping into his chair. "She just doesn't see how it could have happened. She said George was the most sure footed person in a boat she knew."

"She doesn't think it was anything other than an accident, does she?" Sidney took the right one of the two chairs positioned in front of Cal's desk, ignoring the one on the side. He sat back, crossed his legs as best he could, and made himself comfortable for a chat with one of his closest friends.

"No, no, I don't think so, but she's having difficulty believing it could have happened. She's in shock, of course." Cal leaned forward as he talked. "I suppose it's a natural reaction when someone in the best of health dies unexpectedly. When such things happen, it's not unusual to have denial step in. This is probably the toughest part of my job." As Mickey quite often served as Sidney's sounding board, especially when Hattie Ryan was away, Sidney had, at times, become Cal's. Ministers did not usually have many really close friends in their congregations, as there is always a consultant-client relationship with just about everyone. With Sidney, the relationship developed around Cal's interest in Victorian literature, quotes, and references which often punctuated his sermons. Sidney's vast and practical knowledge served as a resource for Cal in his effort to be accurate with his quotes and historical time-lines. Sidney, on the other hand, enjoyed the philosophical discussions and the interesting interpretations that Cal would often present. The two had become good friends on a social and intellectual level: one teacher to another. "I must admit it is strange though."

"What?"

"His falling out of the boat."

“But isn’t that the definition of an accident? An occurrence that is unusual, unexpected, out of the ordinary. I mean there isn’t anything to suspect otherwise, is there?”

“Oh, no. I certainly don’t think so.” Cal paused. “Although, people do talk.”

“In what way?”

“It’s so ridiculous but I do wish that Steele Wilcox hadn’t been so quick in the handling of everything. I’m sure he thought he was doing Becky a favor. They were good friends—the Wilcox’s and the Reeds, I mean—and not just Becky and Steele, although they were good friends, too, but not as individuals, as couples. Do you understand?” Cal fumbled and Sidney assumed the gossip reported by Tillie that tried to tie Becky Reed and Steele Wilcox together made its way to Alice and hence to Cal.

“Yes, I think I do, and I do agree with you on the quickness of everything but then it must have been very clear to Steele exactly what happened and certainly no evidence of foul play.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s the case.” The pastor leaned back and started to play with a pencil. “It’s just that people can be so, how shall I say it, cruel, maybe. Gossip is such a terrible thing. I really have to do something on that topic soon.” Cal, not known for his preachy sermons, felt more comfortable with the intellectual/literary model for his Sunday lessons. The congregation was made up of people who were not particularly interested in being preached at; told how to live their lives or scolded about an aspect of community life.

They were more inclined to pat the minister on the head and say, “Very interesting this morning, Cal. Good job. I enjoyed it.” And then go on about their lives secure in the knowledge that they were well aware of right from wrong and could make the correct decisions without outside influence.

“I must admit I’ve heard some things as well. Wilcox’s desire to avoid embarrassment for the Reeds may be doing just the opposite. My understanding is that George probably

couldn't have passed a breathalyzer test that afternoon and Wilcox saw no reason why that needed to be public information, after all George was dead and no one else was impacted in the accident—except his own family.” Sidney leaned forward in his chair. “Why make public something that doesn't need to be?”

“I agree, but the fact that George tended to over indulge from time to time was not exactly unknown. Confirming that his condition was a contributing factor in the accident might have been a better thing to do.”

“Yes and no. Given the nature of a small town like this, I think the gossip would still be there. You're convinced he had a few too many and then just slipped overboard?”

“That's obviously what Steele believes. Becky, on the other hand, hasn't said it outright but I don't think she is entirely willing to admit to it yet. She was used to the fact that once twelve noon hit, the bar was open for George, and the liquor cabinet on the boat was always full.”

“She still thinks it was an accident, though?”

“Oh, yes. She just doesn't seem to agree on how it happened.”

“Does she have any ideas of her own?”

“I don't think so. When someone dies unexpectedly from an accident, especially a meaningless one, it's very difficult to come to grips with it. There's nothing heroic about falling off a boat and hitting your head. There's an anger, a disbelief that develops. A life is ended and it's hard to believe it could happen so easily.”

“Yes, I can see that. Well, I think I've taken up enough of your time,” Sidney said, firmly grabbing the arms of his chair and pushing himself to his feet. One of his prime requirements was to always find chairs with arm rests. “What are the arrangements for George?”

“Everything on Thursday. There will be a private service for him in the chapel at McLaughlin's. Just for the family. That will be at ten a.m. Burial will be in Marsh Glenn Cemetery at eleven, with a short grave side ceremony and then a

memorial service here in the sanctuary at twelve-thirty. Becky's circle, I think it's the 'Ruth' one, will put on a luncheon in the community room afterward." Cal, with his tall but light frame, practically leapt out of his chair. "In fact, I've got to get all this to Alice so she can make the arrangements."

"I'll let you get to it then. I'll see you on Thursday if not before. Oh, by the way, didn't you say you had a *couple* of things you wanted to talk about?"

Cal thought for a moment. "Yes, yes. Well, I thought about doing something a little controversial with regard to the bible reading on next Sunday but I've talked myself out of it for the time being. My mistake at the Fourth of July service last week is a little too recent for me to do anything experimental."

"Ah, the Jenkins family, I presume?"

"Right as usual. Having put all that effort he put into the Fourth of July service only to have no one remember any of it other than the Jenkins family, all eight of them, marching out of the church from the second row up front when the choir began to sing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." No, I think I'll lie low for now."

"Well, if you're planning to go off the beaten path again just let me know. Sounds like it might be a great discussion topic for after dinner with a good sherry or brandy."

"Is that an invitation?" Cal said with a smile.

Always."

Cal, knowing that Sidney spent more time in church observing the people around him and their reactions than following the service itself, knew his friend always had a good feel for how a topic would play with the congregation.

An effective preacher knew that Sunday church service was theater and while not supposed to be entertainment, contrary to the proliferation of popular music and commercial choirs playing for applause, it was important to keep the audience awake and involved.

Not that Cal would intentionally avoid a topic he believed would raise the blood pressure of those sitting in front of him, but he wanted to make sure the approach he took did not detract from the lesson. The trick was to teach and not to offend in the process.

Sidney positioned himself to get out of the chair. "And now I think I've taken up enough of your time this afternoon."

As Sidney stepped out of Cal's office, he saw a tall, lean, Southerner dressed in a light blue golf shirt and dark blue slacks step up to the secretary's desk. His cap was in his hand showing his blond hair and his goatee was clearly visible in profile, "Mornin', Miss Alice. How're you this fine day?"

"I'm doin' well, Caldwell. What brings you here today?"

Mickey never moved but just kept to her curled-up position almost under Alice's desk.

"Oh, the Wednesday night supper. Miss Lilly talked me into givin' the presentation this week. Need the key to the Education Building door."

"Of course, I know that. I made up the schedule." She picked up the key that was on her desk just in front of her and handed it to him.

"So I have you to thank for this," he said with a bright smile taking the key with its blue, plastic identification disk clearly marking it as the correct one for the education building.

"Caldwell, good to see you," greeted Sidney from the door of Cal's office. Mickey's head now came up.

The startled visitor turned. "Sidney, didn't realize there was anyone here. Parking lot was empty except for Cal's and Miss Alice's cars. And Mickey being so quiet I didn't ever see her there."

"Living in town has its advantages."

"That's right, you're just down the street, aren't you? Afternoon, Cal," he added, seeing the reverend follow Sidney from the office.

“A mere five minutes away,” Sidney responded. “I’m looking forward to your presentation on Wednesday. A view of the Civil War from the perspective of a Southerner who is a student of the subject is always enlightening.”

A suddenly serious Caldwell Talbot replied, “Ah, prefer the War of Northern Aggression, since the states that formed the Confederacy had every legal right to do so.”

Sidney, taking note of the change in Caldwell’s mood and manner answered: “I have a feeling that Wednesday will prove to be time well spent.” Mickey also got to her feet.

“Ah hope so. A good many of your colleagues at the college would do well to focus on the real facts of the war and not just what the Yankees wrote about it.” This was vintage Caldwell Talbot. “What brings you here on a Monday?” He made the question more in the form of a challenge than a simple inquiry.

“Just checking on the memorial service for George Reed.”

“Shipping the body back north, I guess, like most of the Yankees.” There was a sudden hardness to the tone.

“I don’t believe so.” Turning to Alice, the definitive source for everything, Sidney looked for confirmation. “Isn’t George Reed being buried at Marsh Glenn?”

“Yes, he is. George and Becky bought a plot over there about five years ago.”

“Most surprisin’,” Caldwell continued. “A Yankee wantin’ to be buried in Southern soil. Especially one whose family fought against the South. Mostly, they don’t want to be caught dead down here, literally. They just use us like they always do.” The comment seemed almost matter of fact in a reflective mode, almost as though he was talking to himself.

“I don’t think George was that way, Caldwell,” said Alice. “They’ve been members of the church for almost twenty years and built that landscape business of theirs up from scratch.”

Talbot developed a scowl. “Takin jobs and business away from Morgan people. Reed and I have had some words about

that from time to time. Plenty of good folks around here from Clemson. We don't need Pennsylvania people tellin' us how to grow plants in Southern soil."

"Goodness, Caldwell, the man just died a terrible death. This is no time to re-fight the war," Alice scolded.

"Makes no difference." Now a sense of frustration and futility entered his voice. "Too many people coming from other places telling us how to do things. We know how to do things just fine. We don't need people telling us we're doin' things wrong. It's only them it's wrong for. They don't like it, they're welcome to leave, go on back where they come from. Hell, if it was so great where they came from and everything was done right there, what're they doin' down here? George wasn't all that different, just here longer."

"Caldwell," said Cal, "I don't know what to say but I do know this is not the appropriate time for this subject matter. I understand how you feel. We've discussed this often enough but this is not the time or the place."

Sidney and Alice remained silent once Cal stepped into the exchange. Caldwell's views about the influx of retirees from the north were well known and he always made it a point to speak his mind whenever the opportunity presented itself. The trick was to determine how much of what he said represented intentional Yankee baiting and how much was hardcore belief. Caldwell often gave presentations about the War of Northern Aggression and he loved to work over a transplanted Northerner whose relatives passed through Ellis Island and had only a limited history-book knowledge of the Civil War. At them he would throw out names and dates and quote from both pre and post war legislation.

"Okay, a Yankee died so I shouldn't talk bad about Yankees. Did I like George Reed? Actually, I did. We got along pretty good. George and I had some lively discussions. He knew where I was comin' from. Anyway, okay, that's enough for now. I didn't come to talk, I came to check out the audio equipment and projector down the hall stairs and, if it's all right with everyone, that's what I'll do. Good day to

you.” With that, he headed for the door to the interior hallway and the entrance to the education building, opened it, and left.

A consensus of those in the room would have sworn that each of them muttered the words “good riddance” but no one spoke, they just watched him leave and heard the door slowly close behind him.

By the time Sidney and Mickey left the office of the Presbyterian Church, the sun stood high and hot, too hot to continue walking. Besides, that bit of nagging at the back of his head had become a full-fledged thump, and he needed to do some thinking and planning before he started asking any more questions. Caldwell’s reaction startled him.



George Reed’s camera sat on the desk in front of Warren. Periodically during the day, he kept coming back to the office to see if he could get it to turn on. He had some success an hour ago after he took the battery out and dried it off with a hair drier but couldn’t bring up any pictures. So he just left it with the back open and the hair drier blowing warm air on it. This time it worked and he found twenty-eight pictures taken during the last week of a wide variety of birds in the marsh and around the dock where Reed kept his boat. But they were all taken during the day. Where were the pictures from Saturday night? Those were the ones he needed to destroy. They were the pictures he knew had him in the background. That’s why he needed the camera. Where were the pictures?

Chapter 4

Hello? Mr. Lake? Anybody home?"

"In the kitchen, Geoffrey. Come in." Long ago, Sidney found the kitchen to be one of his thinking places. The routine of cutting, chopping, mixing cleared his head and left it open for solutions to break through. The size of his girth gave evidence of many intellectual searches.

"I didn't think you would be working today?" Sidney moved from the kitchen counter to the small center island. Living in the downtown historic district had its disadvantages. The updating of the kitchen with new appliances and cabinets and some other renovations, such as the addition of the island and a pass through to the combination dining room living room proved to be real challenges, as the original outside footprint of the building had to be retained. The original small size of the room, a design of 125 years ago, remained but minus the small eating area.

"Officially, we're closed. You heard about Mr. Reed? Hi, Mickey."

"Yes. Terrible business that." Sidney looked up from the carrots he was about to slice.

"That's why I came by. Mrs. Reed shut everything down for the week so I have plenty of time to help you with your roses like I promised. Don't really have anything else to do so, here I am." Geoffrey took up a position against the coun-

ter and Mickey came over to say hello. Working outside during the summer gave him a wiry look and hardened his six foot frame. He leaned over to scratch behind Mickey's ears.

"Never mind the roses, you could help me with Reed."

"With Reed?"

"I'm afraid I've done it again. I've agreed to look into something I probably shouldn't and, given where you work, you may be able to help." Sidney's involvement in the seemingly innocent death of a New York banker over on Hilton Head made him the center of attention in Beaufort County for a while, publicity he never felt comfortable with.

Geoff looked puzzled, almost as much as Mickey, who tried to decide whether she should stay with Geoff or go back to her standard position at Sidney's feet as he worked with food.

"You are aware of the circumstances surrounding Mr. Reed's death?"

"The boat, the sandbar, all that kind of stuff? Yeah, I read about it this morning. Also got a call from Bev, she usually opens up. Mrs. Reed asked her to call everyone and let them know the shop would be closed for the week." Geoff had already dressed for work when he received the call and wore a green tee-shirt sporting the company's logo: tiny crossed rakes over a potted plant emblazoned on the left breast.

"Did this Bev person say exactly what Mrs. Reed said to her?"

"Not really. Just said Mr. Reed died in a boating accident and the store and shop would be closed for the week, said she would keep in touch to let us know what was going on. She was kind of in a hurry trying to call everyone. Bev knows I usually come in early so she called me first."

Sidney continued cutting. "Well, I understand there have been some comments made relating to Mrs. Reed's possible involvement in her husband's death. A good friend has asked me to help her prove the comments wrong and chalk them up to malicious gossip."

“You’re kidding,” Geoff gasped, surprise evident in his voice. “Have the police arrested her?”

“No, and I don’t think they will. My concern is with rumor and innuendo.”

Geoff left the counter and positioned himself on one of the two stools at the front of the island where the professor continued chopping as he spoke. “Interesting. Umm, I guess some of those arguments they had at the shop could give someone the impression they didn’t get along too well. Yeah, it wouldn’t surprise me to hear a comment or two.”

“And do you think there might be some truth to them?” Sidney stopped his chopping and looked over his glasses straight at Geoffrey.

“Oh, I don’t know. Really haven’t paid much attention. I mean, I’m a summer employee. I’m heading back to USCB in mid-August. Mrs. Reed seems like a nice lady. Do I think she had something to do with her husband’s death? I don’t know but I’d bet if she did, it was probably unintentional. How did you get involved in all of this and what are you making?” seeing the potatoes and fresh peas on the counter.

Sidney recounted the conversation with Tillie.

“So you’re working for Tillie.” Geoff made the comment with a wry smile. Needling Lake was not something Geoffrey would normally do with someone—there being a more than forty-year difference in ages—but their relationship had become more and more comfortable as they worked together on his roses, and Geoff’s majoring in English literature and philosophy didn’t hurt either.

“I hadn’t really thought of it that way, but, yes, I suppose you could say that. Shepherd’s pie.”

“And your job is to prove Mrs. Reed didn’t do something she hasn’t been accused of. I don’t think I’ve ever had Shepherd’s pie.” He snared a loose piece of carrot as it popped off the cutting board and came his way.

“You, as usual, have gotten to the heart of things. Yes, I suppose that’s precisely what I’ve been asked to do.” Sidney recognized a trait in Geoffrey he admired: the ability to

quickly cut through data and get to the heart of a subject without being distracted by non-essential information.

“Okay, cool! How can I help, and does it include dinner?” He popped the carrot into his mouth.

“I’m not quite sure yet, at least of the help part. You’re always welcome to dinner. Because of the lack of information, the newspaper article was just bare bones, I’m having difficulty fully understanding not just *what* happened but especially *where* it happened. For some reason, I have a feeling that will be critical. And yes, I know it was on the Morgan River but if I could actually visualize the location, it would be a big help. I think it may have an important bearing on everything. You read the newspaper account this morning?”

“Yes.”

“Did you get a sense of exactly where everything occurred?”

“Actually, I didn’t pay that much attention to it, other than it confirming what Bev said.”

“The paper’s on the counter over there, read it through again.” Sidney pointed with his knife toward the end of the counter on the other side of the room, away from the food preparation area.

As Geoff began reading, Sidney moved the thoroughly diced carrots into a waiting pot and then covered them with liquid from a bottle of spring water. Mickey then changed allegiances and decided to sit next to Sidney again. Although Sidney didn’t get to be 230 pounds by dropping food on the floor, Mickey knew there was always the possibility something could come her way. Sidney often thought of dieting but never actively pursued it. He knew only too well that real weight loss required life style change and exercise, neither of which he had any intention of doing. The words stubborn and unreasonable passed Hattie Ryan’s lips more than once before leaving on her summer research vacation to the Lake District in England.

“The problem as I see it,” Sidney observed, “is they never say where the sandbar’s located, where Becky Reed took her nap, and they don’t say where the boat and the body were found, other than to say they were both someplace in the marsh. If we just knew where that sandbar was”

“Yeah, I can see where the paper isn’t much help,” Geoff said, after quickly scanning the article, “but the sandbar thing may be easy, if it’s the same one they use all the time. Mrs. Reed showed it to me, said it was a great spot and I should sneak out there once and a while. She showed it to me on a map in the office. Never did get a chance to try it, though.”

“You have a boat?” Sidney said, stopping what he was doing and looking straight at Geoffrey. “Do you still have that map?”

“No, but Susan does—the boat that is. Susan Abbott. Actually, it’s her father’s boat but we’ve used it to roam around a bit. I think I know where that map is.”

“Excellent! That’ll give us a frame of reference for everything. Very good, Geoffrey.” Clearly buoyed by the information Geoff provided, Sidney continued in an enthusiastic and eager manner. “Our other problem is one of time—time of day. There is no indication when all of this happened on Sunday. However, since the tide was coming in and most sandbars, undoubtedly, don’t appear until the tide is halfway out and disappear the same way on the way in, and if the tide change occurred about one p.m. yesterday—already verified that—we’re probably looking at a three to four hour window—maximum. Say, no earlier than twelve noon, given that Mrs. Reed was in church that morning, and no later than three p.m. Also, apparently she was asleep when he left and no idea when he left or how long he was gone, or even the direction he went. When she did wake up, the boat and George Reed were obviously out of sight.” Sidney’s habit of enthusiastically working out problems while he cooked sometimes resulted in missing or unusual ingredients which could make attending a dinner at Lake’s an adventurous undertaking at times.

“Do you think the newspaper knows the answers to most of these questions and just didn’t print them?” Said Geoff, who in the process of shifting his weight on the stool, the belt of Geoff’s jeans caught against the edge of the counter and made a scraping noise, not unnoticed by Sidney.

“It would not surprise me. The story was particularly vague, although, I suppose some might say that is not unusual for a local newspaper.”

“Another thought. I happen to know a couple of students from the college who are working as interns over there this summer. I could do some checking.”

“Do that. Geoffrey, you’re full of help today. I also have some ideas on how to obtain more detailed information on where everything happened. Between the two of us I may be able to get this off my plate sooner than I thought.” Sidney stopped all his preparation work and looked directly at Geoff. “We’ll compare notes later. Keep in mind, Geoff, that what we are trying to do is to prove she had nothing to do with her husband’s death. If she had pushed him overboard, she obviously would have had to be on the boat to do it. If she was, then she would have had to jump over the side herself and swim back to the sandbar.” Picking up the pencil next to his cookbook, he took a sheet of paper from the back of it and began to draw as he spoke. “However, as the boat was far enough away from the sandbar so it was not visible to her rescuers, that means it was drifting inward on the tide and Mrs. Reed would have had to swim against the tide to get back to the sandbar.”

The paper was now full of lines outlining a waterway and a bunch of arrows pointing in a variety of different directions. “So, distances here are critical. My suspicion is that even if Mrs. Reed were a tri-athlete or a masters swimmer, neither of which she is, I don’t believe she could swim against the incoming tide, as it appears to be almost ten feet at this time of year. The same is true if she drove the boat back to the sandbar and didn’t secure it properly. It probably would have been visible in the marsh and certainly in sight

of the sandbar.” Sidney’s animation gave evidence that he believed he had managed to sort everything out.

Geoff got up from the stool. “I can see why the position of the sandbar in relation to everything else is so important and especially the boat. Looks like a slam dunk to me.”

“Possibly. Certainly, when one thinks it through, one can easily understand why the coroner didn’t see the need to press for an elaborate investigation.”

“So my job would be to work out the location, as accurately as possible, of the sandbar to prove she wasn’t on the boat when George fell in.”

“Well put. I need to talk with Ray Morton to get the official side of things but if it all comes together, as I believe it will, I’ll have the arguments Tillie needs to logically refute the accusations she’s been hearing.”

“Sounds good to me. What about the roses?”

“Let’s forget the roses for a few days.”



As Geoff maneuvered his pickup truck down Howard Street and headed for the drawbridge across the Morgan River, he wondered why Sidney Lake would want to get involved with trying to clear Becky Reed’s name. He’d known Sidney now for two years. Mowing his lawn picking up leaves and, lately, helping with the rose garden. They grew comfortable with one another. And then the English literature connection blossomed. The long porch conversations over iced tea and lemonade analyzing *Bleak House* to *Jude the Obscure*. Through it all, Tillie was always there. Even though she worked for Sidney only once a week she would stop by and pass the time of day. Those last four months when Sidney’s wife Cynthia was so ill, Tillie came every day. She washed, she cleaned, she cooked, she ran errands. She kept Cynthia company. They talked, they prayed, had a laugh or two and shared family stories. Yeah, Geoff could understand why Sidney would get involved in almost any-

thing for Tillie. It was a form of pay-back. The kind that could never be completed and never should be but also one where you had to try whenever you could.

So Geoff would help his friend pay back a debt that could never be paid and switched his thoughts over to the task at hand: figuring out what happened to the map Becky Reed gave him, the one where she drew some marks showing the location of the sandbar. He didn't remember taking it home so he assumed it has to be at Roots and Rakes. When she drew the location for him they were in the outside shed where the yard manager had a desk and work area. The shed had a light and he often spent time there reading during breaks in his schedule. In fact, he had some of the research material for a paper he did last semester in the bottom drawer of one of the file cabinets.

The drive took him past areas that looked across the low-country of South Carolina. The vast expanses of water and tidal marsh were everywhere and made him feel comfortable and at home. So much of the region reminded him of parts of southern New Jersey where he was born and raised. On the drive over he kept visualizing his conversation with Mrs. Reed and the exact location where he thought he left the map.

The distance to the Reeds' garden and landscape center was just five minutes across the bridge on Deer Island. Becky Reed actually sat down at the desk in the shed and marked up one of the local Chamber of Commerce street maps that he often used to locate customers. The maps covered Morgan, Deer Island and the surrounding area and contained all the major streets and landmarks. He remembered her saying that while it was not as accurate a map as one would use when boating, the shore points were in the right places and, with quick triangulation, the location of the sandbar would be easy to find.

The sun dipped in the west as he pulled up to the fence at the rear of Roots and Rakes. There were no cars in the parking lot out front, as expected, since Becky had closed down

everything for the next few days. Around back it was the same. He opened the rear gate, drove in, stopped, and then closed the gate behind him, although he did not lock it. No point in going through the lock and unlock process for such a short stay. He parked behind the shed and made his way to its front entrance. As he came around the side of the building, he spotted a car pull up to the back gate and watched the driver get out. He seemed to be carrying something in his hand. Something long and narrow like a piece of pipe. The driver reached out with his left hand and grabbed the padlock. Seeing it unlocked his head came up quickly as he scanned the yard between the fence and the main building. Geoff stepped away from the shed to get a better view and the driver of the car spotted him, hesitated then immediately turned and made a dash back to the car, jumped in, backed up and took off in a cloud of dust. "What was that all about?" Geoff said out loud.

From where he stood he could not identify the person. The car appeared to be green, sort of, and he thought it might be a GM type with four doors. "Nothing to steal here, fella," he said "unless you're into wood chips and manure." But then he realized that the business would be a good target for someone trying to break in since Becky Reed shut it down for the week, and no one was likely to notice anything missing until they reopened on Saturday. It wouldn't be the material stored in the yard that would be the target but the computers, irrigation equipment, and expensive plants and pots in the store. He gave the spot where the car stood another hard look, visualizing everything so he could describe it later if necessary.

Finally dismissing the intruder, Geoff headed back toward the shed, opened the never-locked door, and turned on the light. The desk sat just inside to the left, with a long work table next to it. Some file cabinets and a few folding chairs could be seen on the opposite wall. The shed was used to record bulk purchases of gardening material and to serve as a scheduling center for the irrigation work and plant deliveries

that R and R made. His search went quickly with the map being found in the desk's top right hand drawer. He took a quick look at it to make sure it had the markings on it and then tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans.

Mission accomplished.

Geoff then set about closing everything back up the way he had found it. He also made a mental note to give Bev a call and tell her about the green car and suggest she might want to do a quick inventory check.



Warren pulled over to the side of the road. "Damn! The place is supposed to be closed." His hands pounded the steering wheel. "The pictures weren't in the camera so they have to be in the landscape office." He took a couple of deep breaths. "Damn you, George Reed." Finally he began to calm down and analyze the problem. *Okay, the pictures are not in the camera, he began to reason, which means either they were never there or were erased when he moved them to his computer for editing.* He paused, trying to gather his thoughts, looked at the road ahead. Staring but not seeing. *What if, after all this, it's the wrong camera? He's a photographer. They all have more than one, even serious amateurs do. They're probably all together in that spare room he pointed out to me. The one that's in the equipment area of the loading bay. He said that he used it for a dark room. If it's anywhere, it has to be there. He wouldn't use the company office computer to play with pictures. There has to be one in the old dark room. But how do I get in and when?*

Chapter 5

So you're a detective again," said Ray as he handed Sidney a sweet iced tea. Alcoholic beverages before the dinner hour were not permitted in the Morton household.

"No, I am not a detective. The only detective work that really interests me is the literary type. I'm just trying to help a friend solve a problem based on an unusual event."

"People falling out of boats around here is not exactly unusual."

"You know what I mean."

"Still sounds like detective work to me." Ray eased himself into the oversized porch chair across from Sidney and placed his own iced tea on the small table next to him. He did his best to suppress a smile as he made himself comfortable and contemplated the best way to continue needling his friend.

They made a fine pair as neither of them looked as though they ever missed a meal. Although two inches taller than Sidney, at five foot ten, the marine trained body had begun to slip since retirement and his 210 pounds began to be more visible. "Tryin' to know what the police know about an official investigation is a mighty suspicious thing to do."

“Yes, yes, I expected that. However, you’re not the police anymore so I’m not being suspicious and I’m not trying to be.”

“Well, what makes you think I know anything more than what y’all read in the paper?” Ray did not have a Southern accent, being born and raised in California, but, after being in Morgan for twenty years, he could drop into one if he had to and he learned over the years that *Southern speak* often contained a natural playfulness.

“Ray, please. Even the newspaper knows more than they print and you know more about what goes on in the county and city than just about anyone else I know. Most people have real hobbies when they retire. You spend your time sitting around city and county council meetings absorbing everything that goes on and, when you’re not doing that, you’re curled up in a booth at the diner with all your old police buddies.” Sidney tried unsuccessfully to suppress a smile. “Actually, you just need to get out of the house and out from under Marie’s feet, as that’s the only way she’ll keep you in food and give you a place to sleep.”

Ray laughed and shook his head. “You know when I retired Marie told me she married me for better or worse but not for lunch. Been retired three years now and it was the smartest thing she ever said. We don’t get under foot, have our own space, it works. Know some people from the job that when they both retired found out they really didn’t like one another, split up within a year—after almost thirty years of being married. Well, anyway, yeah, I do know a thing or two about how things work.”

The give and take between the two built up over the years. They genuinely liked one another. The retired cop and the English professor, an interesting association brought together by Mickey. Sidney believed that all domesticated creatures needed to be useful and his Labrador retriever needed to hone her breed’s skills. He immediately put her into training and continued with it even after the classes ended, being a

firm believer in lifelong learning. The job of retrieving the morning newspaper became Mickey's.

The training went well—bring in the newspaper and get a treat—and Mickey took to it right away. Then one day Ray, who lived two doors down from Sidney, showed up at Sidney's door looking for his newspaper. It seems that Mickey had decided to not only bring in Sidney's paper and get a treat but also went searching for other papers as well. Ray simply followed her home. Sidney apologized, offered Ray a cup of coffee, and they'd been sitting around talking ever since.

"But why do you need to know any more than what's already been reported?" Ray continued.

"All right, let me explain," which he did, putting a good deal of emphasis on the exasperation that Tillie expressed.

"So the idea is that you're supposed to prove that Becky Reed didn't kill her husband even though no one said she did, officially?"

"Look Ray, I'm not trying to be intrusive. You know how I feel about Tillie. Besides, she takes a lot of pride in working for good people in the best parts of town. All I want to do is tell her there's no way that Becky could have killed George because, well, because it just wasn't possible. Which is true, isn't it? I mean the police really don't think she's involved, do they?" Ray sat in his chair and thought for a long moment. "Ray?"

"All right, look. The truth of the matter is that whenever a husband or wife dies unexpectedly the prime suspect is always the spouse. You know that. Even the cop shows on TV got that right, especially when there are no witnesses and the death is either from 'natural causes' or a weird accident. So, yeah, they certainly have to consider Becky as a possibility."

"But ruled it out." Sidney showed some concern with the line of Ray's comments and almost cut him off before he finished.

"Not so fast. You want to know what the story is or not?"

“Okay.” Lake, duly chastened, sat back in his chair, and raised his hands, palms facing Morton as a sign of submission.

“Good. My understanding is that whatever investigation they did didn’t go anywhere because there’s nothing to go on. George had a bump on his head consistent with being hit by a piece of wood. They figure it was a piece of driftwood by the boat where he fell in. The marsh is full of old trees, logs, whatever. Yes, he had been drinking. Yes, he was known to have a drinking problem. Yes, he did drown. Nothing on his boat led anyone to assume there was any form of foul play. Steele and the chief’s people took a basic good look at everything. They have no idea how he fell overboard and are assuming it was just a freak accident. His fly was zipped.”

“His what?”

“Look, a good many of the male bodies that are found floating around the marsh usually have their fly’s unzipped. It’s how George fell in once before, only he had people with him that time. He had a few too many beers, stepped over the side of the boat onto the ledge to take a leak, boat hit a swell, and he was gone. The three guys on the boat with him picked him up. Try that alone at night with the tide moving and no one will ever find you in time. Anyway, there’s absolutely nothing to go on, which is probably why Steele didn’t take his investigation any further. Why waste taxpayer’s money when you don’t have to and upset the family and a friend, in the process.”

“So that’s it?”

Ray hesitated. “Yeah.”

“Why do I have the feeling that something’s missing. It seems pretty cut and dried to me. Do you see a problem that I’m missing? Is there something bothering you about all of this?”

“In all honesty, if I was still around, I probably would have had some words with Pete about signing off so quick. It’s not that I see anything really wrong, it’s just that there

wasn't any reason it couldn't have waited a few days. You know, just tie up any possible loose ends."

"Okay, but that didn't happen so what about my problem?"

"Which one?"

"You're a big help. I need to *prove* that Becky Reed could not have been involved with George's death. I'm not looking for court of law evidence, just something reasonable. Any ideas?"

"Well, let me think." Ray folded his hands on the back of his head and pushed back in his chair.

Sidney sat watching him while Ray looked into space directly over Sidney's head, a spot where the sun would be setting in a couple of hours.

The Sidney Lake, Ray Morton friendship was certainly an interesting one: the Easterner and the Westerner, one being born Virginia and the other California, the English professor and the retired marine sergeant/policemen both now inhabiting a sometimes foreign world. They both moved to South Carolina from those other now alien places. Ray's introduction to the Palmetto State came as a drill instructor at Parris Island, in the heart of the bucolic lowcountry, just outside of Beaufort. During his career, he was posted to the Recruit Depot a number of times and he and Marie decided to make the nearby lowcountry town of Morgan their new home. When retirement time came, Master Sergeant Raymond Morton and Marie knew they wanted to spend the rest of their lives along coastal South Carolina.

"I suppose the tide would do it. That would be my first cut, given I haven't had a good chance to study anything," Ray continued after some serious thought. "Given the particulars of the situation, you could probably work out that if she pushed him over and left him, returned to the sandbar, where the boat eventually came loose in the rising tide and drifted to where it was found, which, if I remember right, is one of the theories Tillie mentioned, you could verify that the boat could not have made it to the location where it was found by

being pushed inland by the movement of the tide around the sandbar, especially since it was out of sight from there.”

“That sounds relatively simple and straight forward.”

“Yeah. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s what Pete and the boys saw right off when they found the body and the boat, which is why it never went any further.”

“So why didn’t someone say so?”

“Why? An accident is an accident. Besides a cop’s job is to pursue the presumed guilty not prove someone innocent. That’s for someone else to do—like you, for instance.”

“I needed that.”

“You asked.”

“Okay, let’s say your theory is true, how do I put all this together?”

“An experienced detective like you should have no trouble,” Ray said, tongue in cheek as usual. Sidney gave him the over the glasses look in return. “All right, I’ll get serious but I still think this is a no brainer for you. Look,” he then said in a matter of fact, sing, song way, “obviously you need to know where this all happened. Three locations: the body, the boat, the sandbar. Next you need to know what time of day the drifting occurred and the position of the tides at that time. Pretty straight forward stuff.”

Sidney, as Ray had obviously surmised, already worked out most of this on his own. With Geoff already gathering some of the missing information, if he could just get Ray to pitch in he assumed he could have all his arguments together for Tillie by tomorrow and be done with the whole matter. “So how about giving me a hand?”

“What give you a hand?”

“Help me develop my argument. Have an informal chat with your City Hall Café buddies and find out the actual reason Steele Wilcox and Pete Hornig pasted the accident label on George Reed’s death so quickly. Based on that, I can put together my arguments to pass on to Tillie. You’re the cop.”

“Retired cop.”

“Sounds good to me. What else have you got to do? Besides, it’ll get you out of Marie’s hair and give you another excuse to roam around the county building.” Ray sat silent again, scratched his head a bit, looked to one side then the other. “Come on, Ray,” Sidney prompted.

“Maybe,” he finally said.

“Look, you said we needed to know the three locations and the time of day. If you could convince some of your old comrades—especially those who were at the scene—to give you an idea of how Steele and the Chief approached everything, then we could pour over the information and come up with a way to solve my problem with Tillie. I’ll buy lunch.”

“Oh, well, with that kind of an offer, how can I refuse?”

“Somehow I knew food would do the trick.”

“I get to pick the place.”

“Deal.”

“Okay, but I need you to do something, as well.” *Oh boy*, Ray thought, *I can’t believe I said that*. It had been with those same words that he enlisted Sidney’s help once before and ended by almost getting them both killed over on Hilton Head. Coincidentally, that also started with a body in the water.

“Sure,” Sidney immediately responded.

“If you’re going to work out marsh and tidal locations to convince Tillie you’ll need a chart of the Morgan River. You may not know much about the tidal marsh but, trust me, Tillie and her friends do and you better be dead accurate or they’ll never believe you.”

“So where do I get one? Boating, as you know, is not one of my strong points.”

Ray thought a moment. “Not mine either but I don’t think we need anything super special. Why don’t you just go down to The Previous Page and pick up something basic or even a recently used one? Tell Jarvis what you’re looking for and I’m sure he can come up with something that will do the trick. We don’t need anything new and fancy. Besides, I want you to save your money for lunch.”



Arriving back at his office, Warren knew he had to do something, but what? Or was he overreacting? No one knew about the forgeries. There'd been no public mention anywhere. It'd been five years now but he hadn't been too greedy, at least until last Saturday night. No, the pictures George Reed inadvertently took that night would undo everything, raise too many questions. Him and his damn nature photography, and at night, yet. No, it would ruin him, his family, everything. He had to find them. It had to be the old dark room, and it had to be this week before the landscaping business opened up again.

Chapter 6

After leaving Morton and then briefly stopping by his own place, Sidney made the three-block trip over to The Previous Page on Market Street, one of the few remaining old, local businesses still left on the street. With the influx of retirees from the North, the old downtown shopping district just didn't work anymore. The local shrimp and oyster canneries were all gone and the jobs as well. The transformation to a tourist mecca complete with gift shops, art galleries, jewelry stores, and small cafes and restaurants, as well as the mandatory acquisition of the local bank by a national chain, completely revitalized and up scaled Market Street. While the old facades remained, the stores and shops—now mostly owned by transplants from New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and other alien locations—no longer catered to the resident townspeople.

The locally owned pharmacy, driven out by CVS and Walgreens; the stationery store, now a Staples; local markets, now a sprawling Food Lion and Kroger; and all of them now located in strip malls at the edge of town. And while the wealthy locals—who ran the real estate companies and controlled the political environment—were happy to sell land to the outsiders, they also bemoaned the changes that occurred. Morgan was primarily a one street town, although now with the much-hated-but-gladly-accepted federal funding assis-

tance from Washington, efforts were being made to expand the commercial district along the side streets.

The three bells that rang over the door added to the charm of the used bookstore as Sidney entered the shop. It sat on the edge of the commercial area where rents were a little cheaper, as opposed to being down a block where the main tourist traffic congregated. The bells had a comforting and welcoming sound about them unlike the modern electronic buzzer or chime used by so many new places. The Previous Page had a local reputation of being a cut above the average used bookstore in a small, out-of-the-way town, in that there were no hidden treasures here. Admittedly, it looked disheveled and unorganized with books everywhere—a definite tourist draw—but Jarvis Oliphant, the owner, knew the value of every volume on every shelf in every aisle and if he did come across anything of true value he quickly moved it to a separate section, put it into his own personal collection at home or earmarked it for sale on the internet.

He also carried new material, mainly signed copies of books written by local authors, as well as tourist guides, maps, books and brochures of the lowcountry and anything else in written form that he thought he could sell to a tourist. He could spot serious collectors looking for bargains the moment they came in and sort them out from someone simply looking for an out of print book to read. Sidney frequently visited the shop and had passed the time of day with Oliphant from time to time but couldn't warm up to him.

A member of an old-line family, Jarvis played the combined role of bumbling good ole boy and Southern gentleman with the mixture of chatter and an over the top politeness facade he presented to customers. He never seemed to be out of character.

Sidney looked about the room trying to get his bearings. His plan to enlist the help of Jarvis in finding the appropriate Morgan River charts hit a snag as the *L* shaped sales counter next to the entrance stood empty, so it looked as though he

would have to go exploring on his own. He had no idea where to find nautical subject matter.

Locating fiction, history, biography, classics, and some other sections would not be a problem, as they were in an area he often browsed. Sidney drifted toward the back of the book-shelved, crammed part of the store, where he knew the office and store room were located, in the hope of still finding the owner and enlisting his help. A quick look inside the even more crammed and seemingly disorganized space of the office did not uncover the elusive Jarvis. However, seeing the computer on the desk just inside the doorway still showing the Brontë Society website, Sidney presumed Jarvis was not far away or the screen saver would be on. As he leaned over and began to take a closer look at the computer screen, Jarvis came up from behind.

“May ah help you?”

“Yes, Jarvis, I definitely think you can,” Sidney said before turning to face the owner, who at six foot three had come closer and looked over Sidney’s shoulder.

“Sidney, ah didn’t recognize you.”

“Not surprised. You usually find me on my hands and knees looking at titles. I wouldn’t be surprised if that wasn’t a more familiar position for you to recognize most of your regular customers. How have you been, Jarvis?” Sidney extended his hand with a smile and Jarvis took it eagerly with a bit of a chuckle in return.

“Oh just fine. You may be right about seein’ folks from a different view. Lot of bendin’ an’ reachin’ goes on in here. Picked up some new books over the weekend an’ was just sortin’ em out in the back here—” He pointed to the desk behind Sidney that was piled with books and papers. “—am doin’ a little research when ah got a strong urge for a Coke,” he said with another chuckle. “Lookin’ for somthin’ special? Seein’ as ya seem to know the place almost as well as ah do. Ya usually have the literature section corralled and know where to find everything.”

“Definitely out of my element this time. I was just looking at your computer here.” The screen display pictured the page related to the Brontë Parsonage Museum and Library.

“Yeah, ah tap into all the major literary web sites, as well as the on-line used book sellers.” Jarvis reached in front of Sidney, clicked on Favorites, which displayed web sites for not only the Brontës but Dickens, Austin, Hardy, Williams, Joyce, and every major author imaginable, then clicked on Book Dealers and brought up Alibris, Amazon, Barnes and Nobel, Oak Knoll and a series of others.

“You do some serious competitive pricing, it would seem.”

“Internet sure has changed things. Ah can find out just about anything ah need to about any book or author anywhere. Always nice to know what you have. Sure is different than it used to be. So how can ah help ya today?”

“Trying to find some charts of the Morgan River.”

“My, that’s a little bit out of your usual interest. You need new ones or old ones?”

“Fairly new one, I think. One that shows the Morgan River and marsh areas around it. I don’t own a boat so it’s not as though I’ll be out there using it all the time.”

Jarvis began to walk toward the front of the store and the sales desk. “A little nautical education for the professor then?”

Sidney followed along. “Yes, that’s probably what you’d call it. Ray Morton and I were just sitting around talking about the George Reed accident that was in the paper this morning, and I realized I was lost in the conversation not knowing where everything was, you know, the sandbar and everything. Did you know George?”

“Eh, yes ah did, a bit.”

“Did you know him well? I knew George and Becky from church but not socially.”

“Oh, no. Just came in from time to time, also met at some local chamber of commerce type things and such.”

“Being a landscaper, I guess he spent his time roaming about the old gardening books. I know you have a very extensive section on old Southern gardens and even some on gardens in Morgan. I have a rose garden that I fiddle with and I’m always looking for ideas myself.” Sidney eyed the gardening section as they headed up one of the aisles. “Yeah, I suppose that would be a big interest for a landscaper. Although, I understand he had a big interest in photography too. It certainly was strange the way it all happened but then I guess boating accidents are a way of life in the lowcountry. I have enough trouble negotiating the roadways around here without trying to maneuver a boat in that river, with the way the tide moves.” They reached the front of the store.

“Yeah, if ya don’t know what your doin’ out there, ya end up stuck in the mud pretty quick. Ah got some maps an’ charts over here,” he said, pointing to an area to the right of the sales desk, “an’ ahm sure you can fine what your lookin’ for. Prices are marked on ’em. Let me know when you’re done. Need to sort some things out at the desk here.”

“Thank you, Jarvis. I’ll see what I can find.” While most Southerners looked for opportunities for pleasant conversation and would rather pass the time of day chatting about local events than almost anything else they could think of, Jarvis, although pleasant enough, didn’t quite seem his usual chatty self this afternoon.

Sidney began to rummage through the maps looking for one that showed the Morgan River. Ray told him to make sure he found one that had depth markings on it but Sidney didn’t really know what to look for. After about five minutes, he had chosen two of them that he thought would do the job and headed over to the desk. Jarvis’s local, Southern accent was a treat for the tourists, who when they heard it assumed he wouldn’t know one book from another and figured they could find a bargain. Jarvis also knew it and played his part to the hilt. Sidney had learned a long time ago that strong, Southern accents were not unlike strong, New York accents, in that they were not an indicator of intellect just as

glibness in speaking was not an indicator of intelligence any more than inarticulateness was a sign of stupidity.

“Well, I think I have what I need unless you have some suggestions for me,” Sidney said, returning to the front desk.

“Let’s see whatcha got.” Jarvis picked up the two maps Sidney had chosen and knocked some papers off the counter in doing so. In picking them up he then knocked over the pad and pen he used to make notes about which books were selling. “Gotta get this place better organized.” The bumbling and clumsiness continued. Jarvis just didn’t seem to be able to turn off his tourist act. He then began to look at the maps. “These should probably do. Ya got the whole river covered with both of im. If ya knew exactly the spot ya wanted ya could get somethin’ just for it but I think these will probably do the job.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t know where anything happened, although Ray does and, when he talks, I’d just like to put something visual to it. Terrible habit of mine, I’m afraid. I always have to fully understand the topics of discussion. I just hate being in the dark.”

“Well, like you ahm not much of a boater. Lived ma whole life round here and had lots of fun roaming around when I was kid but those days are gone, just never took to the water. Have a couple of boats o’course. Mainly for the grandkids to go fishin’ with. They know where everythin’ is out there. Paper didn’t say where George Reed fell in did it?”

“No, it didn’t. Actually, the paper didn’t say too much about anything but then that’s pretty much how things are done here: protect the family first. Don’t say anything negative if you don’t have to”

“Nothin’ wrong with that. Nice part bout livin’ in a small town like Morgan. Even with the college over in Beaufort getting’ bigger an’ all those tourists folks from the North thinkin’ about settlin’ here, we’s still a small town. That’ll be \$25.28 for the two of em.” All the time Jarvis was talking, he was also writing and working up the sales tax with a desk top

calculator and pad and pen and never really looked at Sidney.

Sidney thumbed through his wallet for the cash. “That’s probably true. Someplace larger would have had a more extensive investigation of the accident too. Maps certainly are expensive.”

“One of those you have there is waterproof. Won’t get ruined if it blows overboard. Accidents do happen. Specially on the water, which is why ah try not ta go there.” Jarvis took two twenty-dollar bills from Sidney and started to make change.

“I suppose there’s good and bad to that but then when you’ve got something that was obviously an accident, and everyone agrees that it was, why stir everything up? Of course, there’s the other side too in that someone could take advantage of the situation.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no.” Jarvis gave Sidney his change. “Don’t need a bag, do ya?” The comment was dismissive.

“No, no. I’ll just take them with me.”



The map that Geoff retrieved from the landscaping shed now had three locations clearly marked *S* for sandbar—put there by Becky Reed—*B* for body and *WC* for watercraft—put there by the two interns at the *Morgan Times*. He realized that, while showing the points of interest on both sides of the river and providing a grid of the downtown shopping area, there was no real way to accurately pin point the true location of anything in the river, especially where the boat and George Reed were found. Geoff came to the same conclusion as Ray Morton in that a marine chart of the river would be needed and now headed for Susan Abbott’s figuring she might have something he could use. The Abbott’s lived on the Morgan River, were an old Morgan family, and owned at least two boats that he and Susan often used to roam around the marsh, in addition to the larger two-masted

sailboat the Abbotts used for deeper water excursions. Just before arriving at Susan's, Geoff called Sidney and left a message on his machine explaining that he had the information they discussed but would not be able to make dinner. He would stop by to see him around nine in the morning, if that was okay, as he had another errand to run that evening. Not knowing of Sidney's excursion to The Previous Page, Geoffrey planned to obtain a chart from the Abbott's and have Susan accurately plot the points on it, as she was the experienced boater, and then present it all to Sidney with everything clearly and accurately marked and identified. The plan fell apart when they found the power boat slip empty. It being such a nice evening, Susan's parents took the boat for a ride and the local charts along with it.

"Why do you need the charts, anyway? You've never really been interested in the river before," Susan said, staring right at him, blue eyes suddenly intense. They were standing on the end of the Abbott's dock looking at the empty boat slip.

"Actually, I'm doing a little something for Sidney Lake."

"I didn't know he was interested in the river."

"Well, I suppose you could say he's not really interested in the river."

"Then why does he want a river chart?" Susan placed her hand on his arm and looked at him intently.

Geoff called her a touchy-feely person who always had to make physical contact with a person when talking with them, a habit that sent the wrong signals to many a date.

"It's for research he's doing."

"I thought he was an English Professor?"

"He is but this is different."

"Is it some sort of secret?"

Geoff thought for a moment and looked at Susan standing in front of him. The habit of sharing everything with her came easy to him but now he wondered if he should tell her about the conversation with Lake and wondered if Lake expected Geoff to keep the matter to himself even though he

didn't specifically say so. On the other hand, Geoff and Susan had no secrets between them and, given the look on her face, could he afford not to tell her?

"You know Mr. Lake didn't specifically swear me to secrecy but, on the other hand, I don't think he wants it generally known what he's doing."

"Geoff, now you've really got me interested! You know I can keep a secret. I promise I'll not tell another soul." Her grip on his arm tightened.

He almost made a comment but managed to let the moment pass. Challenging her on her secret keeping record would not be a good way to enhance a relationship. Not that she would reveal something intentionally to hurt someone.

She just answered questions honestly without thinking and then became embarrassed and apologetic if it turned out wrong.

"Oh, well, what the hell." He made his decision. Good or bad he would go with it and accept the consequences. "Professor Lake is looking into the death of George Reed and he asked me to get some information for him."

"He's what!" Susan grabbed his arm with both hands this time.

"Look, there are a lot of rumors going around that Becky Reed killed George and—"

"Yeah, I know. Do you think she did it? Is he trying to prove it?"

"No, just the opposite. He's been asked to show that she didn't do it. It's just an informal thing. Someone who's a friend of Mrs. Reed heard all these stories going around and asked Lake to prove them wrong."

"Isn't that the police's job?"

"Actually, no. As Professor Lake put it the police are supposed to catch the person that did it and not prove that someone didn't." Geoff started to walk off the dock with the idea of heading for his truck but Susan was still holding on.

“I guess that makes sense. Okay, what do we do next?” She continued to hold him tight and stopped him from going any further.

“We?” He stared into those blue eyes framed by the shoulder length blond hair and Atlanta Braves baseball cap.

“Of course. Even if the charts were here neither you nor Lake would know what to do with them. You wouldn’t know one marine marking from the next.”

Geoff looked at her and knew she was right. Nautical charts were a world unto themselves. The local Coast Guard representatives seemed to spend almost all their time trying to convince the local boating community, especially transplanted retirees new to the tidal marsh, to take the Auxiliary courses. “Point taken. Well, if we’re going to do this, we’d better get going,” taking a look at the darkening sky.

“Go where?”

“Back to town.”

“No. If you want a chart we go to the marina.” They stopped again.

“But the marina’s the other way. Why couldn’t we just pick something up at one of the bookstores downtown?”

“Because the Old Fort Marina has old, new, used and everything in between. They don’t just have new stuff, they buy and sell used stuff. They have everything from clothing to equipment to books and, yes, maps and charts. Besides they’ll be a lot cheaper than downtown and if I know you, you won’t have more than five cents to your name and you’re buying, unless Mr. Lake has provided you with an advance and you’re working with unlimited funds.”

“Yeah, sure but I don’t even know if you’re supposed to know anything about any of this, I mean about checking up on Reed.”

“But I do know and we’re a team. Besides, you’ll find a way to tell him.” Leading the way, she headed for his truck.

Geoff shook his head as he looked at her and rolled his eyes. “Okay, we’re a team.” But he still didn’t look forward to the challenge of explaining Susan’s involvement to Lake.



The ride from where the Abbott's lived and the Old Fort Marina, with three stop lights and two stop signs, gave Geoff ample opportunity to fill Susan in on everything he knew. He couldn't leave anything out with Susan's rapid fire questioning technique. A fourth grade teacher in her first year at Bay Front Elementary School, she learned the art and skill of questioning nine year olds as a survival tool as well as a technical one. The questions needed to be simple but straight forward and to the point.

When Susan got going she knew, instinctively, how to hone in on the information she needed. By the time they were halfway to the marina, she knew everything about Lake's involvement and what Geoff had learned from the chamber of commerce map and the interns.

"This is not going to be easy to pinpoint," she said looking at Geoff's map with the three marks on it, as they drove into the parking lot of the marina. "These tourist maps are nowhere near scale. Yeah, we definitely need a pretty good chart. We're going to need a chart that gives us minor channel readings. The depth markings are real important. They'll tell us not only what kind of boat can go where, but also how fast the tide will empty an area. The general commercial ones usually keep to the main channels. Most boaters are looking for the Inter-coastal Waterway charts. We need something better than that."

Once inside the Old Fort Marina Store, it proved fairly easy to get around provided you knew exactly what you wanted. In addition to the store, the marina complex had a restaurant, showers, lockers, a repair and maintenance facility, and just about everything boaters going up or down the inter-coastal waterway could want. Geoff and Susan just stood inside the door and surveyed the main sales room. To Susan's surprise, everything seemed to have changed. Nothing was where she remembered it. The front sales counter being unoccupied they decided to split up with Geoff search-

ing on one side of the room and Susan the other. They had been there no more than a minute when a short, skinny, young, sort of blond haired woman came in the door and immediately stepped behind the counter, her smoke break over. Geoff and Susan, having made no progress whatsoever descended on the front desk almost immediately.

“Excuse me,” said Susan, “Where would we find charts of the Morgan River? I haven’t been in lately and nothing seems to be where it used to be.”

“Charts? Y’all mean like maps and things?”

“Yeah, you know for boating, finding one’s way around the marsh.” Susan couldn’t believe that someone working in a marina would have to confirm that a chart and a map were the same.

“Ah just take care of the register. Just started today. Mr. Carson, the boss, hasn’t had a chance to show me everythin’ yet. He’s in the back checking over some new stuff that came in, if you can wait just a minute I’ll ask ’im?”

“That would be great. He would certainly know.”

As the clerk headed for the back room, Susan and Geoff explored the check-out counter. They also looked about the room and digested the disorder. There were boxes everywhere: on the floor, on the counter, stacked against the counter, on the window sill. There were pamphlets on the counter offering tourist information, guides to shopping on Market Street, a map of the river like the one Geoff had in his pocket with the marks on it, information about bed and breakfasts and brochures about coming events. The vintage cash register took up most of the room on the counter and, being somewhat of an antique in the computer age, did not perform the now common inventory and accounting functions. Where and how one would write up a sale appeared to be a mystery unto itself.

“He said you’ll find what you’re looking for over with the books and magazines over there on the left,” the clerk said returning from the back room.

“I guess that makes sense,” said Geoff.

“Actually they’re facin’ the window on the other side of that first shelf”

“Thanks.”

As Susan and Geoff made their way to the magazine racks, a man dressed in Bermuda shorts and a golf shirt came through the door to the back room and headed for the front desk. He gave them a look as he walked by and seemed to focus on Susan. A good five minutes later, with two charts spread out before Geoff and Susan, the man drifted in their direction. “Find what you’re looking for?”

“Yes, I think we finally have,” Susan answered. “I’m Susan Abbott.”

“Of course you are. I thought I recognized you. I’m Dennis Carson. See your Father over at Rotary all the time. Had lunch together last Wednesday, in fact.”

“That’s right, I forgot the store changed hands. You sure have a lot more stuff than Bubba Charles did. Weren’t you retired or something?”

“Or something sounds about right. Can only play so much golf. Seemed like a good idea at the time though, just playin’ golf an’ hangin’ around the club. After about a year and a half it was pretty obvious I wasn’t gonna make the senior tour. So here I am, workin’ harder than ever but lovin’ it. Still sorting a lot of things out. Sorry for the mess. Decided to carry more used and exchange items.”

“This is Geoff van Horst, a friend from the college.”

“Pleased ta meet ya,” Carson said, extending his hand but instead of looking directly at Geoff, his eyes focused on the Roots and Rakes logo on his shirt. “Sorry about Tammy, soon as I can find a replacement up there, she’s gone. I wasn’t the one who hired her. Sometimes it’s just not safe to go away for any reason. Lost my regular girl while I was away and one of the fellas I left running things hired her in a pinch. How that girl thought she could work at a marina and know absolutely nothing about boats and water and sailing just amazes me? Got a feeling I’ve seen you around as well,” he said, turning to Geoff.

“Not in here. But you sure have a large collection of used books. I may just come back soon. Used book shops are like candy stores to me, I guess that goes with being an English major.”

“Swapping books for people goin’ up and down the inter-coastal has turned out to be pretty good business. Lot a book people on boats but not a lot of spare room so I let them swap them out. Charge a small fee but they always buy something else anyway. Developing serious quality as well volume an’ it’s taken up more space than I thought. Gonna turn the storeroom into a new book area. May even do some book events. So you found what you’re looking for? I guess it’s not literature you’re after today.”

“No, Susan and I are planning to do a little exploring of the marsh up and down the Morgan River and wanted to find some maps, er charts, Susan’s the boater, that had the minor channels on them.”

“It’s pretty easy to get stuck. See people sittin’ out there all the time waitin’ for the tide to come in. You’re father’s quite a sailor, Susan.”

“Oh, yes, Daddy has been all over with that sailboat of his. Took us on a trip to the Bahamas one summer and has been all up and down the coast and into the Gulf of Mexico.” Susan suddenly felt uncomfortable but she couldn’t put her finger on why.

“You handle sail as well?”

“I can but not like him. Actually, I tend to prefer motors.”

“An’ you, Geoff?”

“I’m strictly a land lubber. No salt in my veins. I’m kind of a straight line person, prefer to go from A to D without visiting B and C.” Geoff made a zig sagging motion with his hand imitating the tacking of a sailboat and, as he did, the tourist map with the marks on it dropped to the floor.

Carson saw it drop and reached over to retrieve it. “I can see where this map wouldn’t be of much help.” The marks Geoff made were clearly visible from the way he had folded it. “They’re great for walking around downtown but won’t

be of much help on the water.” He continued to look at the map as he spoke. “Wouldn’t your daddy have lots of charts you could use?” he said to Susan.

She fumbled in her reply. “Oh, yes, well, but he stays in the main channels and we were going to do some exploring. I don’t think he has anything we could use.”

Carson handed the map to Geoff. “He probably has the whole place committed to memory, anyway. There probably isn’t a nook or cranny in the river he doesn’t know.”

“Kinda like my old boss,” Geoff blurted out. Carson looked at him questioningly. “George Reed.”

“George Reed? Oh, the landscaper. That’s what the shirt is,” pointing to the logo. “I just couldn’t believe it when I saw that piece in the paper this morning. Family must be in shock. Terrible shame. Terrible shame. Just goes to show how dangerous it can be out there. Yeah, Reed, Reed, terrible shame. He was quite a man on the water, you know. You can be sure if you sat down at a Rotary lunch with George at the table, the conversation would sooner or later be about the marsh and its wildlife. So you work for Reed?”

“Just the summer. Lawn care, installing and repairing irrigation systems, that sort of thing. Going to USCB. English Lit. Looking forward to graduate school. Actually, I kind of have two summer jobs: one for the Reeds and the other for myself. Help people out with their flower gardens on the side. Sidney Lake in town has me working on his new rose garden. I didn’t know Mr. Reed that well. Mrs. Reed did most of the work around the store. She’s closed everything down for the week.”

“Not surprised. Sure was a terrible thing to happen. But that’s the water—a great temptress as well as master and servant. We think we have it under control and then...what do you do for Sidney Lake again?”

“You know Mr. Lake?”

“Taken some of those adult continuing Ed courses from him. Now that I have this place probably won’t be able to do much of that any more. Betcha that’s where else I’ve seen

ya. Used to have book store down in Jacksonville before I sold it and came up here. Bein' on the water's my first love but books are my second—thought golf was. Decided to finally put my priorities in order. You were about to say what you're doing for Professor Lake."

"He's trying to build a special area for hybrid teas. They're awful tough to grow in the lowcountry."

"Tell me about it. Sidney and I are in the same garden club in Morgan. Gets a bit competitive sometimes. Might just have another chat with Sidney. Y'all pretty much have what you want?"

"Susan's the expert."

"Oh, I think these'll do just fine," Susan said, nervously. She guessed that not telling Carson why they really wanted the chart set her on edge. Lying made her uncomfortable especially knowing she didn't do it very well. Blurting things out was more her style. Not because she would intentionally give away a secret but she just didn't know how not to tell the truth when asked. Thinking on her feet, as they say, was not one of her strong points. She also found that she didn't like Carson. Something about his manner, the way he looked when he asked questions, he seemed to be looking beyond the just getting an answer to the usual chitchat. She felt more as though they were being interrogated but then she rationalized it could just be her defensiveness about not being truthful.

"Good. Tammy will take care of ya when you're ready. Just be patient. Nice to meet you both. And Geoff, you come on back and browse whenever you like."

"Thanks. I may just do that."

Geoff and Susan, with charts and map in hand, headed for Geoff's pick-up as quickly as they could. The Morgan Diner was their next step. They had a lot they wanted to talk over. In front of them was an evening of plotting and analyzing, in addition to a few other recreational activities on which Geoff had originally thought he and Susan would spend a good deal of his unexpected free time.



The local television stations in Savannah, Georgia finally caught up with the death of George Reed and carried a couple of different stories. Of course they didn't last more than two minutes so there wasn't much depth to them. They gave the standard report from the local authorities about the nature of the accident and then filled in with some boating safety advisories. Then they showed some stock videos of the coastal marsh and that was it. Another bullet dodged. Warren relaxed a bit and gave some thought to how to get into Roots and Rakes late at night.

Chapter 7

The service yard at Roots and Rakes came to life in the headlights of Geoff's truck, the almost completely dark area creating shadows that danced everywhere. He unlocked the gate of the chain linked fence in almost a trance like state, lots of things rolling around in his head that had nothing to do with fixing an irrigation system: his time with Susan on Monday when they visited the Old Fort Marina, the poring over the charts, the argument later in the evening and on Tuesday making up after the meeting with Sidney. Then tonight the Wednesday night supper followed by Caldwell Talbot's presentation that he had to leave just before it finished. He didn't even remember the ride from the church until he found himself outside the gate.

Getting back into his truck he drove into the dark service yard and left the gate open behind him. When performing an irrigation installation, he usually tried to be at the job site as early in the morning as possible during the summer in an effort to avoid the main heat of the day. But this time the sun would not be coming up as it just disappeared from the western horizon. He also decided to drive head first toward the back of the main building, keeping his headlights focused on the area in front of him rather than try to back up to the doors of the loading bay. His normal routine would have him entering his upcoming task into the work book in the shed's ledg-

er before taking the material he would need but with the headlights facing in the opposite direction, he couldn't even see the shed.

Being here at this time of night was unusual for him but he wanted to hear the rest of Caldwell Talbot's take on the Civil War and held off leaving as long as he could. Besides, interrupting Caldwell in the middle of his presentation, well, that was not an option. Bev called him on his cell phone more than an hour earlier to ask if he would fix an irrigation system gone awry. She cleared it with Becky, since R and R was officially closed for the week, and said it would be okay to ask Geoff if he could do it first thing in the morning. The callers were an elderly couple living in one of the old cottages on the far side of town and were most apologetic, it being the day before George's funeral, but they had to turn off the water to their house as there was no separate turn off for the water to the irrigation system.

They were okay for this evening as a neighbor asked them for dinner and let them use their bathroom but they really needed it fixed first thing in the morning if possible.

The call came in about half way through Caldwell Talbot's lecture. He turned his phone to silent during the presentation and only checked it—surreptitiously—once, hoping to hear from Susan. Normally he would leave it on vibrate but Caldwell made it clear he would personally evict anyone from the room whose cell phone rang or interrupted him during the presentation. He even asked everyone in the audience who carried a phone to take it out and look at it to make sure it was turned off. Once Caldwell announced a ten minute break in his presentation, he noticed the message from Bev and called her back.

Sherman and the Lowcountry, as advertised, proved to be educational, revealing, informative and entertaining. Geoff did obtain a better understanding of the emotional factor of the Civil War South as Caldwell outlined the truly vindictive nature of Sherman's campaign and how he directed it not at the Confederate Army but the citizens of Georgia and South

Carolina for demoralization purposes. The march achieved its goal of cutting the heart out of the general population by destroying family farms and small town businesses and then burning libraries, both public and private, schools, churches, family as well as courthouse records.

Caldwell managed to go over the top as usual by comparing the Union Army to the brutality of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the disciples of many of the Ayatollah's followers in Iran, and he made it all believable with example after example. There were objections and raised voices but Caldwell cut them all down to size, again with specific fact built upon specific fact. Geoff never even considered getting up to answer Bev's call until the break came. He had no intention of becoming part of the evening's entertainment.

When initially driving through the gate he thought he saw a light coming from the main building but he knew he had to be mistaken. No one had been there all day, at least he presumed that to be the case, and the emergency night light in the office couldn't be seen from the angle he took toward the building. The only light in the yard was attached to the shed and that blew out over the weekend—something he should have fixed on Monday if they had been open—although it barely gave enough light to see much of anything anyway. Only Bev paid any attention to work issues today and she limited herself to checking the answering system. *No*, Geoff thought, *it couldn't be a light, not coming from this angle*. The building's three sections stood as a great, dark shadow in front of him with the office section in the middle separating the display area from the storage and supply area. In the dark everything seemed larger and certainly spooky.

The gentle wind rattling the palm trees didn't help either. Darkness and dramatic shadows had that effect. Geoff got out of his truck and walked slowly to the door of the storage area where the tools and spare parts he needed were located.

The darkness and the shadows made him nervous as he approached and just wanted to load up the supplies into his pickup, park it outside his apartment this evening, and then

leave directly from there to the cottage first thing in the morning.

Guided by the lights of his truck shining on the large, metal, garage doors, he made his way to the back of the building. The intensity of the light and its glare further increased the depth of the darkness. The doors were designed to allow him to drive the truck directly into the loading bay. He took out his key as he approached the rear entry door, which was off to the left of the garage doors and provided individual access to the storage area.

The door was slightly ajar. Could it be the reason he thought he saw a light? With all the confusion of the past few days, could Bev simply have forgotten to check the service area door when she last locked up and left, which she usually did from the front office door?

The door being left unlocked was not particularly unusual. He had been guilty of it a number of times. Because of its location, it was often forgotten when the last person left for the day and exited from the front of the building. In fact, Becky Reed had found it open so often that she considered posting a sign in the office to remind whomever was leaving last to make sure they closed and locked the rear door.

As Geoffrey pushed the door open and gingerly stepped over the threshold, his shirt caught on something, and he heard a tearing sound.

“Shit,” was his instinctive answer. He then reached for the light switch to his right as he moved inside and flipped it on.

With the quick change from dark to light, it took him a few moments to see clearly and his primary focus was his shirt. These were not his work clothes but a pale blue dress shirt, the one he had worn to the Wednesday night supper and Caldwell Talbot’s presentation earlier, and now it was torn.

“Damn,” he said exasperated and then he caught sight of why his shirt had become ensnared. The door jamb was splintered. Someone had broken into R and R.

Are they still here? When did this happen? He froze and looked around the cavernous space, scanning the floor to ceiling shelves and bins lining both sides of the room. He saw nothing out of the ordinary. He heard nothing. Scanning the room back and forth, he moved inside. *Should I call out?* His mind raced in a hundred different directions. He then realized that the act of turning on the light was a call in itself. He still heard nothing. The far end of the room had windows that looked from the office into the storage area.

Everything was dark except for the usual night lights. *Should I leave? Out into the darkness? Maybe not. What a time to leave my cell phone on the seat of the truck. Why not just stay put? If there is anyone here, they're obviously not in the service area, which means they're in the office or in the attached greenhouse.* Both locations had numerous doors and windows for escape. *So stay here and let them get away and you don't get hurt and you don't see anyone. Why not just act normal? Make like you didn't see the damaged door and lock and go about getting what you came for and leave. Call Bev from the safety of the truck away from the building. Shouldn't I call nine-one-one and report the break-in? What if it's already been reported by Bev and the cops already know about it? Okay, let's just get what we need and get out of here.*

Moving at what he thought would be his normal pace, he began assembling equipment on the floor in the center of the room: a tool box, some irrigation line hose, connectors, all the time trying to keep in view the window that looked in from the office, just in case someone was still around. Although, since no one made a move or sound, he started to feel more comfortable and began to rationalize that the break-in must have been on Monday, the day he noticed the green car by the back fence, or even yesterday.

He never did remember to tell Bev about the car so no one had any reason to check on anything in the storage area. Someone was probably in on Tuesday to water plants and

make sure the irrigation systems were working, again, no reason to check the storage area.

He worked his way up to where the controllers were stored, right near the door to the office, where the switch to operate the garage door was located on the wall. He peered through the large window next to it.

Suddenly, hearing a noise; he turned, saw a shadow, lifted his arm to defend himself, and ducked at the same time, but—



Warren picked up the phone at R and R's sales desk and dialed nine-one-one. "Looks like there's been a break-in at the Roots and Rakes Landscape business. Better check it out."

"Sir—"

He quickly hung up. His hand shook and he replaced the receiver. *God, I hope I haven't killed him too. No one is supposed to be here. It's all getting out of hand but I've got to find those pictures. Where the hell is the camera he used on Saturday night? There's nothing here but the old developing equipment. Damn, I've got to get out of here.*

Chapter 8

With Caldwell Talbot's presentation over, the crowd began to mill about, gathering in small groups to comment on what they heard as well as renew acquaintances and pass the time of day with friends. The meeting, as well as the dinner, was open to anyone who had an interest and there were about 150 people in all for the talk. Sidney chatted politely with Helen Oliphant, the used bookstore's owner's wife, when General Lawrence Brewster broke in. Although having a reputation of being a bit gruff and tending to be direct and to the point he could also be surprisingly engaging when he wanted to be. Retired army, six foot four and 250 pounds he moved to Morgan four years ago and usually had no difficulty making his presence known.

"Sidney, have you seen Caldwell? Hello Helen, excuse me for interrupting but I have to find Caldwell before he leaves."

Helen acknowledged his greeting with a nod to him.

"He was over there in the corner a few minutes ago. Edith's right behind you. I'm sure she knows."

"Just wanted to needle him a bit about a couple of points he inaccurately presented."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll just love to hear that."

“Only, fair, Sidney, he had two hours to push his views. I only need five minutes to rebut him.”

Helen looked at him and said, “Well, good luck.”

Sidney added, “You’ll need it.”

Then Brewster turned to Helen, “Where’s Jarvis?”

“Atlanta. One of his book conferences. Always likes to keep up with the industry trends. You know how intense he can be on the subject of antiquarian books.”

“Yeah, tell him I need to speak with him. When will he be back?”

“Tomorrow but very late in the evening.”

“Helen, General, Sidney,” said Steele Wilcox, joining the group. “Quite a presentation, wasn’t it?”

“Hey, Steele,” the general said, “good to see you.” They shook hands. “Can I catch y’all later? I just can’t let Caldwell get away without my getting my two cents in. Excuse me for just a minute.” He then turned and looked for Edith Talbot.

“Good luck,” Steele said. “Glutton for punishment that man.”

“Given their history, I’m not sure I want to be a party to that conversation. Caldwell may be one of the most uncompromising people I’ve ever met. I can still remember the argument he had with my husband about his carrying more books about the Civil War that were written by Northern historians than Southern ones.” Helen just rolled her eyes and shook her head from side to side as she spoke.

“You’re probably right about that. I seem to remember General Brewster having a run in with Caldwell Talbot, not that that’s difficult to do. Brewster had been asked to give a guest lecture at the college on the Civil War from a military strategy point of view and Caldwell didn’t like the idea of a Yankee presenting, what he perceived to be, a Union view of the war to Southern students. Caldwell, as you may have figured out by now, is not particularly shy about taking on just about anyone when it comes to the Confederacy. However, to give him his due, Caldwell is, actually, a superb historian,

even if he doesn't have the academic credentials. Brewster and he had a battle of letters to the editor a few months ago and almost an altercation at the college."

"Did I hear the name of a certain member of the Southern Heritage Society mentioned?" interrupted Cal Prentice, coming up from behind Sidney. The pastor placed his hand on Sidney's shoulder as he came alongside, not a difficult feat to accomplish, given their difference in height.

"You most certainly did. I was just mentioning his letter writing contest of a few months back, the one with General Brewster.

Just then Susan Abbott joined the group. Sidney spoke first. "Hello Susan, where's Geoff? You know everyone here?"

She exchanged hellos with Wilcox and Helen Oliphant.

"He got a call from Bev at R and R and had to leave. Something about an emergency irrigation fix or something. Said he would try to get back before we all left."

"Terrible thing about George Reed, wasn't it?" said Wilcox.

"Sure was," came a voice from behind. It was Lawrence Brewster back again.

Sidney started and turned. "I'm sorry, General, I must have been in a bit of a daze. Thought you went after Caldwell."

"Gone. Edith said he had to rush out to another commitment. I'll catch him tomorrow. So you were in a daze, eh, Sidney? You don't look old enough for senior moments."

"One never knows these days. The trick is to live long enough to have them. Seeing what happened to George. I didn't really know him that well, but when someone around your same age accidentally dies, it does make you think. You knew him pretty well, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I must admit we'd become good friends," replied the general.

"Mind if I ask what brings a retired army general and a landscaper together?" Sidney had become acquainted with

General Brewster over the last year through the Morgan Garden Association, where they were both members. Brewster, president of the group, took the position after his wife, an avid gardener, died a little over a year ago.

“Birds.”

“Birds?”

“Birds. I feed them, he photographs them. I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed but I’ve got a pretty elaborate bird feeding set up in my yard backing up to the marsh. George used to come and set up his cameras out there from time to time. I’ve got a picture of a painted bunting you wouldn’t believe. We’d just sit around with a bottle of wine and watch nature at feeding time. Hey, Steele, tell Sidney here what a great bird photographer George was.”

“Oh, that he most certainly was.” The coroner stepped into the middle of the two of them. “Yes, George knew his birds all right. Knew where to find um, knew how to sneak up on um, not a place in the marsh he didn’t know how to get to.” Wilcox was the picture of the perfect undertaker: the black suit, white shirt, black tie, white handkerchief in his breast pocket. He also had the marvelous ability to go instantly from smile to frown, to sincere concern, to a bright smile again. It was generally believed that a run for mayor was not far off. Although a close friend of the Reeds, he refused to handle the funeral, pushing it to McLaughlin’s to avoid any hint of conflict of interest with his coroner position.

“You know I heard that. Something about his being able to maneuver a flat bottomed boat with a pole.”

Steele and the general both chuckled. Steele continued, “Oh, yes, he could dance around that boat better than some folks that were born here.”

“Interesting.” Sidney paused and Steele caught it.

“Truth is, no matter how sure footed you think you are, slips on a boat are very, very common.” The jolly manner was suddenly serious.

“I suppose you’re right—”

Brewster cut in. "In a way, I suppose you could say it's a bit like the fellow who runs marathons and trains doing ten miles a day and then falls down of a heart attack. You tend to forget you're vulnerable; you have limitations; if you're not careful you can get burned."

"A fair analogy," said Wilcox. "So you didn't really didn't know George?" The question was addressed to Sidney, the cheerfulness beginning to return again.

"More acquaintance than anything. Met at church, have a mutual housekeeper—that sort of thing."

"Ahh, George, Becky, and I go back a long way," he said almost wistfully. "Was one of their first commercial customers twenty odd years ago, when they first started Roots and Rakes. Been good friends ever since. Brewster here I met because he's just a big troublemaker," the general laughed while Wilcox gave him a playful punch in the arm. "Didn't like the way ah was flying the flag outside my place and came over to complain. Told me to get a light on it or take it down. Funny how friendships form. If y'all hadda told me that George, me, and this big, ole, rough, Yankee bear would end up being friends, ah wouldn't have believed it."

"Are you also a bird watcher?" Sidney continued to register everything he heard and saw.

"In a way. Tend to absorb what George and the general would throw at me. Four of us would play cards every few weeks. They'd all get talking about birds sooner or later. George sure did love to take pictures. Mid-day or mid night it made no difference. He'd figure out what was migratin', where they were and off he'd go. Drove Becky nuts now and then. She never knew where he was. Becky's the only reason the business did okay. Denny always said she was the brains behind R and R's success."

"Denny?" The introduction of the name didn't register with Sidney.

"Sorry. Dennis Carson. You must know him from the college. He's always takin' those adult courses of yours over there. He subs as our fourth now and again. Came up here

from Jacksonville. Bought Bubba's marina a little ways back. Takes care of my boat. Think he did George's too. Thought you would know im."

"I may have, I just never put it all together. Now that you mention it, I think we were all together for dinner at the general's here a couple of months ago. It all just went right by me."

"Well, don't feel bad," said Brewster, putting his hand on Sidney's shoulder and giving a chuckle, "you academic types all seem like you're in a fog anyway."

"Speaking of fogs," said Wilcox, "what's this I hear about someone breaking into your place?"

"What's that got to do with fogs?"

"Assume you must have been in one not to turn your alarm on."

"I thought this was supposed to be Mayberry, no bad people here. Everybody leaves the door open."

"You must be starting to believe what the chamber of commerce has been puttin' out. You don't see us folks that were born here leaving our doors open."

"Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, I can never remember how the damn thing works. Pushing buttons and codes—lot easier to just shoot the bastard."

Wilcox laughed. "You gotta be home, though."

"I guess so."

"So what happened?"

"I don't know, I wasn't there."

"You must be a big help to the police," Sidney said.

"They know more than I do. Said the window pane on the kitchen door was broken and they found one of my paintings over by the marsh. No idea why he would leave it there."

"Probably realized you had no taste in art," Wilcox needed, "an' just threw it away. Nothin' else worth taking?"

"Have lots of good stuff," the general said, feigning indignation, "even if that painting was only worth \$500. In fact, I just inherited a bunch of old, valuable, books from an uncle of mine. Have a lot of them still in boxes in the den."

“If they’re still in boxes, how do you know they have some value?” Sidney said. It seemed as though everyone was ganging up on the general, but he just smiled as if he liked to be kidded and loved a good joke as well as the next person. The trick was to not cross the line. You did not want General Lawrence Brewster angry with you for any reason.

“I asked Jarvis over to have a look,” the general said, giving a nod to Helen. “He said there was some pretty good stuff in there.”

“So how do you know something wasn’t taken?”

“Don’t, yet. Jarvis is supposed to come over tomorrow and work on it. He started making an inventory list for me and will double check what’s there against what he’s gone through so far. If something is missing, we’ll tell the sheriff.”

“You mean the chief,” Wilcox said. “You live in Morgan so Pete Hornig’s got jurisdiction.”

“Chief, sheriff, whatever. I’m sure they’ll all figure it out.”

Sidney couldn’t resist. “Just like they figured everything with regard to George’s accident. You’re still positive it’s just a simple accident? No strange circumstances that would point to anyone helping him over the side?”

“No, no, Sidney. Come on, it was no secret that George was a bit heavy on the Southern Comfort side. I checked everything out and, believe me, he had enough alcohol in him so that he’d have trouble keeping to his feet on a cruise ship much less that forty footer of his. In fact, I even warned him about it once and Becky and he went round and round about it on a number of occasions. No, I don’t see any other way it could have happened. There’s a big log out there someplace with part of George still on it. Sorry, Helen. Don’t mean to be so graphic.”

“Oh, I understand. I’m just glad it was an accident and nobody to blame but himself.”

“Everything completely tied up?” Sidney said.

Susan watched Wilcox intently for his answer, knowing why Sidney asked it.

“Actually, I’d be a lot happier if they could find that log he hit and there’s a mark on his neck I need to ask Becky about, but those are miscellaneous loose ends that won’t affect anything. No, I’m happy to stand behind my accident report.”

“But without that log, you really don’t know for sure if he actually fell or was pushed. Right?”

“Sidney, he was all alone. There was no one with him.” From the irritation in the response it was evident that someone had been challenging his opinion.

Susan couldn’t resist this time. “But if no one saw anything, how can you be so sure?”

“Honestly, now, there’s no evidence of any one being out there with him. It’s an accident, pure and simple. Everyone seems to be coming up with conspiracy theories. There’s nothing to it.”

“Only natural. So tell me about the robbery,” Sidney said.

“Best I can tell, the painting was the only thing of value taken. And they did find it, just at the edge of the property, in the marsh grass. Kind of a mystery in itself, that.”

“No one reported anything? No one saw anything?”

“Apparently not.”

“But why leave the painting behind?”

“Maybe the thief *thought* someone saw him,” Susan offered.

“Very good,” said Sidney. “Very good. The thief was very likely spooked by something or someone and the ‘spook-or’ probably had no idea he frightened the ‘spook-ee’ and interrupted a robbery.”

“Geoff had a similar experience the other day at R and R.” Susan mentioned Geoff telling her of his spooking what could have been an intruder at the Reed’s landscape business but left out his going there to get the map. “Someone showed up when the place was closed and when they saw someone still there they took off.”

“Could have been anyone,” Steele said. “Don’t want to read too much into it. Hey, look, I have to be on my way. Probably see everyone at the memorial service tomorrow.”

Everyone in the circle agreed and the coroner took his leave.

Susan spotted Alice Ringfoot waving to the group and assumed she was trying to get the pastor’s attention. “Reverend Prentice, I think Alice is calling you.”

Cal took a look toward the back of the room. “Excuse me for just a minute.”

Right after he left, Helen Oliphant decided it was time to leave and she also made her way to the door.

“You know, Susan, I hope you didn’t mind our giving you the lesson on downtown protocol,” Brewster said. “It’s one of those unwritten things about the town that ya kinda just get to know.”

“Oh, that’s all right. I’ve lived here all my life, as I said, but since I’m out of school now and teaching, I’ve constantly being amazed at all the things I had no idea went on right in front of me.”

Cal rejoined them. “Alice was waving at you Sidney. Tillie left a note with Alice for you. Didn’t want to interrupt us. Made Alice promise to get this to you. Tillie said it was important.”

“Tell you what, folks, time for me to be headin’ out as well,” Brewster said. “Susan, give my regards to your father. Cal, Sidney, catch up with y’all tomorrow.

Sidney took the envelope, opened it, and stared at the paper. “Well, I’ll be.”

“Something the matter?”

“No, well. I guess I’m just a little mystified.” He looked at the note again.

“Can I help in some way?”

“No.” Sidney kept looking at the note. “It’s just that Tillie asked me to check into something for her and now she says I don’t have to because she already has the answer. I’ve been

working on it for three days and I certainly don't have the answer."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Cal, keep this to yourself."

"Sure, you know me."

"Susan, I know Geoff told you all about it. Tillie was concerned about the gossip going around with regard to Becky. I know you've heard some of it. You know, the idea that she may have had something to do with George's accident."

"I've heard some of those, yes."

"She asked me if I'd look around a bit and prove that she could not have had anything to do with it. So I have. In fact, I've been doing a lot of looking around and have bothered a lot of different people and done all sorts of research and, while I actually believe it was an accident just as Steele does, I couldn't prove Becky wasn't out there when George went over the side. In all honestly, I can't figure if there *is* any way to prove it."

"You're not saying that she did it?"

"No, no. The point is, I don't believe you can *prove* she didn't do it any more than Chief Hornig can *prove* she did. No one was there—no one saw anything."

"But Tillie says she can prove Becky didn't do it?"

"Not exactly. She just says she has the answer. Meaning, I guess, that somehow she has proven Becky innocent to her satisfaction."

"Then she may have come to the same conclusion that you did. Maybe she sees that since there is no way to prove her guilty then she is definitely innocent."

"Possibly, but I have to believe there's more to it. She was convinced she didn't do it from the start but what could she have found out that we didn't? I found the exact location of where that sandbar was, the exact location of where the boat was found, the exact location of where George's body was found, and mapped it out on nautical charts of the Morgan River, and we still couldn't prove anything. Even the

police came to the conclusion that there's no way to prove it either way."

"You mean they actually suspected her?"

"It's their job to suspect everyone. No, they don't really think she did it."

"Shouldn't that be enough? I mean, that the police don't think she did it."

"No, that's where we started. The police and the coroner have ruled it an accident. They didn't say she was innocent, they don't do that. The police just have no evidence to warrant an investigation of anyone."

"I'm beginning to see the problem. Given the nature of gossip in Morgan, yeah, I can see where total and complete proof of innocence would be a necessity."

"Right, I agree, and so does Tillie. So I have to believe that what she's discovered is not something that just proves Becky not guilty but complete proof of innocence, which is something I haven't been able to do. Reverend, Tillie, and I have to talk."



As Sidney walked home from the church, Tillie's message about no longer needing his help continued to gnaw at him. Admittedly, there were mixed emotions involved. The good news was that Becky seemed to be finally off the hook and Tillie seemed to have her desired, irrefutable argument in Becky's defense. The problem that bothered him was that she found her answer not only without his help but also that he continued to have no clue as to what she came up with and who gave it to her. Sidney liked things neat. He liked solutions that made sense, were logical, and conformed with the available facts. No, there was definitely something missing. Did Ray Morton know something that he didn't tell him?

Since he had to go right past Ray's on the way home, he decided to stop and pump the retired policeman a bit more.

Making his way up the front steps, he checked his watch and, making out that it was still before nine-thirty, gave the lighted button for the Morton's bell a ring. Dinner at the Morton's would have finished about an hour and a half ago and unless they had an appointment somewhere he expected they would be home. Of course he could have called ahead using his cell phone—if he had it with him, which he didn't

Knowing Caldwell's passionate dislike of being interrupted when speaking, he just decided to leave it on a table in his bedroom. Ninety-nine percent of the time nothing was so urgent that a message on his land line filled the bill just fine. He also knew it was not too late to be interrupting them, especially as the welcoming front porch light clearly identified the bell he just pushed. There were also lights on in the house, giving Sidney reasonable assurance he would find someone at home. He felt embarrassed for having involved so many people in his investigation, thinking of Ray and Geoff and subsequently Susan Abbott and Cal Prentice. Sidney, not the most outgoing of people, kept mostly to himself. If it had not been for his late wife, Cynthia, he would have had little social life at all. Mickey was his only confidant, although he had to admit Hattie Ryan was gaining some ground.

The challenge presented by Tillie intrigued him on a number of levels and the intellectual exercise of trying to prove Becky didn't kill George perked him up by providing an opportunity to interact with people. It also irritated him because he had not properly completed his task.

The door opened to reveal a rushed and hurried-looking Ray. "Good, it's you. I don't have to call you then."

"Excuse me?"

"Your boy, Geoffrey. He's just been taken to the emergency room."

"Geoffrey? What happened?"

"Don't know. Heard the report on the radio." Meaning the police and emergency call band he often listened to.

"I'd better get myself over there. He doesn't really have anyone in town."

"I'll drive. Come on. I'll have you there in a flash." Ray took Sidney by the elbow and directed him toward the steps he just came up. Ray's car was in the driveway next to the house. Marie's car was in the one car garage.

"Okay."

They both headed down the stairs when Ray suddenly stopped. "Marie," he called back over his shoulder. "Taking Sidney to Central Memorial, I'll be back in a while."

"What?" came the response? Footsteps could be heard running from the kitchen. "Is he all right?"

"Not him," Ray called back as the screen door to the house opened and Marie stood on the threshold. "Geoff."

"Oh, my."



During the ten minute drive to the hospital, Ray relayed what he had heard. A nine-one-one call resulted in the dispatch of paramedics, an ambulance and a Morgan patrol car to Roots and Rakes, where they found Geoff unconscious and lying in a pool of blood. There was no indication of the cause or the extent of his injury. Ray learned that much since the patrol car, which had been nearby, arrived first and notified the paramedics what to expect.

"I have no idea or information about anything else. The report was pretty cryptic, as it should have been."

"I suppose he could have tripped on something. I saw him earlier this evening and Susan said he'd got a call from the R and R office manager about something and he left just as Caldwell was finishing up. I didn't get a chance to talk with him, though." Sidney suddenly realized that Geoff was important to him. He truly liked Geoffrey. Yes, he was a bit brash and undisciplined in the way he approached life but that was a sign of the times. Everyone seemed to be that way, except Sidney, of course, and some of his associates at

the College's lifelong learning program. He liked having Geoff around. He was young, he was intelligent, and he had a mind that was filled with far more knowledge about the world than Sidney ever had at the same age.

"He's a hardheaded kid. He'll be all right. If they're alive when the paramedics get to them, they tend to stay that way. Tell you what, I'll drop you off at the emergency room and then take a run over to R and R. It's only a couple of minutes in the other direction. Hornig's guys will be there for some time yet, and I'll see what I can find out. I'll catch up with you on my way back."



The emergency waiting room was a simple affair: about forty metal and plastic seats spread out in small groupings, a check-in window and a room on the side where walk-in's could be screened by a nurse to determine what action would be required. Sidney rushed through the two sets of double glass doors and headed immediately for the check-in window, which was directly in front of him about thirty yards away. He looked neither left nor right but made directly for the glass partition and the male clerk seated behind it.

"You have a Geoffrey Van Horst in emergency?" he said, avoiding any of the niceties he might normally have used.

"Geoffrey Van Horst," the clerk repeated, not surprised at the anxiety Sidney expressed. The man picked up a file folder just to his left, opened it and looked over a list contained within. He acted calmly and efficiently, not responding to the tension that Sidney radiated, as if he knew it was his job to be calm and Sidney's to be anxious.

"He would have just come in by ambulance." Sidney's both hands were on the small counter area which also contained a pass through area between where the glass partition ended and the counter began so that forms could be signed and passed back and forth.

“I don’t see anything here. If he just came, in I probably don’t have the information as yet. Are you a relative?” He looked up at Sidney.

“No, he’s just a good friend, a college student. I just heard he was here.”

“Sidney?” came a voice from behind him. “Is something the matter?”

“Cal,” he said, turning and surprised to see the preacher. “It’s Geoff. There’s been some sort of accident. I think they just brought him in. What are you doing here?”

Sidney, in his interest in getting to Geoff, had paid no attention to the other people in the waiting room and breezed right past Cal. There were at least ten other people. Some were alone and others in small groups. Most were waiting to hear news from inside the double doors that were on the wall just down from the admitting clerk’s office. Others were walk-ins waiting to see the nurse that was in the other office area on the opposite side of the room.

“Mark Halley suffered a heart attack a few hours ago. Betty called me. They still have him inside. Betty’s in the restroom. He seems to have stabilized. They’ll probably move him to the intensive care unit in a little while. I told her I would stay with her. What’s this about Geoff?”

“Don’t know. Ray Morton heard it on his radio and drove me over. They don’t seem to have any information on him yet,” Sidney said, referring to the check-in clerk, who just looked back at Sidney and shrugged.

“An accident of some kind?” Cal said.

“Cal, I just don’t know. All I do know is they found him over at Roots and Rakes.”

“Let me see what I can find out. Do me a favor and watch for Betty Halley. Do you know Betty?”

“Yes, I’ve met Betty.”

“Good, just tell her I’ll be back in a minute.” With that, Cal gave a wave to the man behind the check-in window, who acknowledged him and reached for the door release buzzer. Once through the large double doors he headed di-

rectly for the central monitoring station, directly down the corridor. To the left of the station were another set of double doors that led to the ambulance bays.

“Excuse me, Nancy, I’m looking for someone else this time.” The semicircle where she was sitting was a flurry of activity. There were three other nurses with her, two of which were standing and speaking with other nurses and doctors, all holding clip boards filled with papers and charts. Another nurse was leading a woman toward an open room. She had dried blood all down the front of her, her left eye was closed and her face all puffy and bruised.

“Busy night, Reverend?”

“Not as busy as your night, I’m sure,” the reverend said, taking note of the activity.

She managed a smile. “Yes, but my nights are always like this. Who this time?”

“Geoffrey Van Horst. Should have just come in.”

She took a quick look at a batch of papers in front of her. “Boy, you’re quick. They just rolled him in. They’re working on him now.”

“Does it say what’s wrong?” he said trying to get a look at the paper she was reading from.

“No, but it looks like a lot of bleeding. Those are the paramedics that brought him in coming out of room seven. Maybe they could help.” There were four double rooms behind where Cal was standing and across from the central station. The far one on the right was number seven.

“Thanks, Nancy.” He quickly moved across the hall and headed for the two young men that had just come out of the room. “Excuse me,” he began. “I’m Cal Prentice from the Presbyterian Church in town.”

“Oh, sure,” said the six foot plus, sandy haired, twenty something paramedic. “I recognize you. See you almost every Sunday. I sing in the choir at First Baptist across the street. Corry Matthews, and this is John Harris,” They shook hands. “He’s a Catholic but we don’t hold it against him.”

They all smiled. The second paramedic was almost a mirror image of the first but a bit older. "What can we do for you?"

"Was that Geoffrey Van Horst you just brought in?"

"Eh, yeah," paramedic two responded. "I'm pretty sure that's the name. I'm not sure about the Geoffrey part but Van Horst sounds right. Kind of an unusual name for around here so it stuck. Larry, that's our third, usually does the paper-work."

"How is he?"

"Tough to tell. They're working on him now," answered number two.

Number one stepped in. "We managed to control the bleeding—head wound." He shook his head. "Very messy. One of your flock?"

"A good friend. Actually, he's one of yours," referring to paramedic number two. "I know him from the college. He has no family here. Another close friend is outside," motioning toward the waiting room as he spoke. "Was anyone else hurt?"

"No," said number one as all three walked back across the room to the monitoring station. "He was in a building. R and R landscaping, you know, the one over on eighty-seven. Guess he worked there. Not sure what he was doing there tonight though."

"He does work there, yes. I thought it might have been an accident. A car or something."

"No, it looks like he took a pretty good whack on the head. At least that's what I think it was."

"Oh."

"I can't be sure. Someone else will have to decide what happened."

"But he seems okay?"

"We got him stabilized pretty well. He started to come around on the way in but went out again. They'll take good care of him."

"Yes, I'm sure they will. Well, thank you for your help." Cal knew he couldn't press for too much information. He

didn't want to get the paramedics into trouble and he didn't want to put them into the position of having to refuse to answer his questions.

"No problem. Hey," he said in parting, "I think he'll be okay."

As the two paramedics moved away and headed for the monitoring station to complete filling out their paper work, Cal tried to peek into the room where he now knew Geoffrey was located. He stood outside the three quarter closed door and did his best to peer in. It looked like the curtain was drawn completely around the bed, but he could see a good deal of activity.

"Another one of yours, Reverend Prentice?"

Cal turned to see a male nurse standing behind him. "Oh, George, yes." George had earlier been working on Betty Halley's husband. "Geoffrey Van Horst is his name, came in while I was out front with Mrs. Halley. Thought I'd try to see what was happening."

"Took a nasty hit on the head but seems okay. He's awake and alert. We've still got a lot of tests to run on him to get a fix on the extent of the damage, if there is any. You can wait outside and I'll let you know what's going on and when you can see him."

"Thanks George. I appreciate it."

As Cal returned to the waiting room area he spotted Sidney sitting and chatting with Mrs. Halley. As he made his way across the room the automatic doors to the outside opened and Ray Morton and two Morgan police officers came in.

"How's Geoff?" Ray immediately asked Sidney after saying a few words and then leaving the two policemen, who were buzzed into the patient area.

"Don't know. Cal, here, was just inside checking."

"Do you know Mrs. Halley?" said Cal to Ray.

"I...errr..." Ray stammered.

"We met at one of the Wednesday night suppers at church," she helped out. "You were giving a presentation on

relations between the sheriff's department and the Morgan police department."

"Yes, I remember that."

"Mrs. Halley's husband, Mark, is in emergency. Heart attack," said Cal.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Ray said while taking her hand. "How is he?"

"He seems to be doing fine now. They're going to move him upstairs in a little while."

"Oh, that's a good sign."

"Yes, but how is the young man?" she said addressing Cal and all heads turned in his direction.

"Best I can tell he's doing okay. He's awake but hit his head very badly. They said they still have some tests to run."

"They think it was a break in," said Ray. "Probably walked in on them."

"Why would someone break into a landscape business? What does one steal from such a place? Plants?" said Sidney incredulously.

"Good question but it makes a good target, under the circumstances: place closed for the week due to the death of the owner, no one expected to be around. If you need money for drugs, you sometimes go after some very strange places."

"But what would they take?" continued Sidney? "Plants are too bulky and still have to be converted into cash. There wouldn't be any cash since the place has already been closed for three days and I don't imagine irrigation equipment comes under the heading of high priced items. The valves and so on can't be worth more than a couple of dollars each. Even computer equipment doesn't have a lot of value anymore."

"Sidney, you're being logical, as you always are. Most petty thefts, break-ins, are not really done by people who think straight or even really think. Like the bank robber who writes the hold-up note on the back of one of his own deposit slips. Thefts and violent acts don't have to be logical."

“Okay, point taken,” conceded Sidney. From his association with Ray over the years he had developed a great appreciation for the modern policeman, who spent most of his time dealing with the mundane and seemingly irrational nature of the crimes they came in contact with. Sidney found the concept of training someone to think in an illogical manner in order to catch a thief a fascinating idea. Also, the idea that there can be a rational pattern to irrational behavior had become of great interest to him.

“Are they’re sure it wasn’t an accident?” offered Cal. “Could he have tripped and hit his head?”

“Nothing cast in stone yet. Although the guys at the scene are pretty sure he was hit. They’ve seen enough to know. They’ll get a better idea once they’ve had a chance to talk with Geoff.”

“Well, it’s still possible we’re over dramatizing. Everyone is always looking for conspiracies these days. I think the benefit of the doubt is the best approach,” said Cal, ever the optimist.

“I agree,” chimed in Mrs. Halley. “Always best to look for the good in people.”

“Good idea for clergyman—bad idea for cops,” was Ray’s reply as they all looked at him.

“I’m not going to get in the middle of this one,” Sidney said. Then he turned to Ray. “Was there any indication of a break-in?”

“Could be. The rear door had some damage but no immediate way to tell if it happened tonight. Hornig’s people will work that out. Geoffrey might help with that too. They’ve put a call out to Becky Reed as well.”

“Just what she needs. Wouldn’t the alarm system have gone off?”

“Only if it was turned on. Or maybe some one knew how to turn it off. Not unusual. As you said, the most valuable items they have are the plants and they’re all pretty much outside surrounded by a chain link fence that may or may not be locked and just about anyone could get over it. No, my

first instinct is that Geoffrey walked in on a couple of addicts who saw the closed for the week sign and decided to see if there was anything of value around for them to steal.”

The door to the patient’s area opened and all heads turned in that direction to see George coming toward them. “Mrs. Halley, we’re going to move Mr. Halley up to the ICU in a few minutes. It’s on the second floor.”

“How is he?”

“I think he’s doing all right. The cardiologist upstairs is Dr. Clark. Just ask for him and he’ll give you a good overview.”

“I’ll go with you Betty,” said Cal.

“Oh, thanks,” she said getting ready to move. “I do hope your young man will be all right,” she said to Sidney as she gathered up her purse. Cal then walked with her to the elevator that was down the hall way on the other side of the room.

Before disappearing, Cal gave Sidney a hand signal indicating that he would give him a call.

“How is Van Horst, by the way?” said Sidney to George.

“He’s doin’ okay. They’re taking some tests now. Be a while before you can see him.

Police have first crack. You’re the professor friend?”

“Yes, Sidney Lake and this is Ray Morton.” They all shook hands.

“George Carter. Give it about a half hour or so.”

“Thanks.”

As Ray watched George disappear back through the doors from where he came, he then asked, “Say, Sidney? What were you coming to see me about tonight?”

“Oh, yes,” Sidney had completely forgotten how everything started. “Tillie left me a note saying she proved Becky Reed couldn’t have had anything to do with George’s death and didn’t need my help any longer, so I was going to tell you I didn’t need yours but I still have some questions.”

Ray gave Sidney a questioning look. “Did she say how she knows, because I couldn’t say that definitively and I’m sure the Morgan police can’t either?”

“No, and it has me puzzled as well. I was going to see her tomorrow and get her to tell me what she’s learned. I can’t imagine what she’s found out.”



Warren slowed the car to stay just above the speed limit. The back road to Savannah was a speeder’s paradise and every sheriff’s deputy in the two counties it crossed knew it. Although he also knew they preferred to set up their traps along I 95 and the US 278 connector to Hilton Head, which were more lucrative, he didn’t want to chance it. Beaufort and Jasper counties were not supposed to be on his agenda tonight. He had some serious thinking and planning to do over the next couple of days. Where in the world is the camera or computer with the pictures on it?

Chapter 9

Okay, Tillie,” Sidney said, walking to the left side of the Charleston stairway entry to the Gregory’s, where Tillie interrupted her sweeping and waived a greeting to him and Mickey.

This part of the street was one of Morgan’s prime locations, as it rose up to a height of twenty-five feet above the mean high tide level. The road followed the river and had old home after old home lined up on one and two acre lots filled with a multiple variety of ancient oaks, twisted and turned from the tropical storms that visited each summer. Most of the houses were restored but a few, at either end of the prime residential area, were waiting for the next influx of non-Morganites to buy them up. Money was coming in from Atlanta and Charlotte of late. Northern money seemed to be more interested in the upscale gated communities and new housing rather than renovation and restoration in the historic district. Tracking down his housekeeper gave Sidney an opportunity to accomplish multiple tasks at once: a morning walk for Mickey, and a conversation with Tillie. River Street sat on the down slope of the rise that gave The Ridge its name. “You have to tell me what you found out.”

“She didn’t do it an’ I know it for sure.” The arms were folded, the jaw was set, the issue settled, and she had no interest in hearing any rebuttals to her arguments. “Watch the

mud there by your feet, Professor Lake. The sprinkler system is overshootin' again." Tillie knew of Sidney's emphasis on clean, shined shoes. Most people would be wearing shorts, sneakers and a tee shirt to walk the dog but not Sidney, for him it was kakis with a crease, a long sleeve shirt worn loosely to smooth the bulge of his frame and neatly polished walking shoes. Sidney shifted position slightly and Mickey sat down.

"But how, Tillie? How do you know she didn't do it? Just saying so doesn't mean you have a better argument than you did before."

"Oh yes it does. Because Mr. Daniel said it was impossible." Tillie was standing above him as she was on the second step of the stairway.

"Mr. Daniel?"

"Mr. Daniel Doyle. He was born and raised on the island and knows every inch of water around it. More than eighty years he's been on the water an' if he says there's no way Mr. Reed could end up where he did and the boat where it did and Miss Becky on that sandbar—Can't happen, he said. Impossible!"

"Why?" Sidney couldn't believe this Mr. Daniel's word was enough.

"The tides."

"Wait. Indulge me for just a minute." He was determined to get a better explanation. "First of all how does he know where the boat and Mr. Reed were found? It wasn't mentioned in the paper, so how does he know the location?"

"Saw them both."

"Saw them?" Sidney envisioned Mr. Daniel watching George Reed fall overboard.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Daniel spends more time on the water than he does on land. He was just checkin' his traps as usual. He saw Mr. Reed's boat out there hung up in the marsh grass with nobody in it an later he saw the place where the police pulled Mr. Reed's body out of the water."

"And the sandbar?"

“Oh, everybody with a boat knows where that sandbar is.”

Sidney just shook his head. Here he’s been running around for four days developing and analyzing information, getting all sorts of people involved and unable to come up with a definitive answer to Tillie’s plea. “They do eh? And he claims that because of the tides, Mrs. Reed could not have gotten back to the sandbar from the boat, given where it ended up?”

“That’s right. He said she’d have to walk on water to get there or the boat get to where it was by driftin’ from the sandbar. Im-possible.”

“Interesting.” Sidney, knowing he and Ray, as well as Susan and Geoff, had pored over the charts for the Morgan River, needed more. “You think I could talk with Mr. Doyle. I mean, would he talk to me about this?”

“Don’t see why not. Just tell him who you are and that Tillie sent you. He already knows you, though. I tole him I axed you to help. How’s Mr. Geoffrey doin’ this mornin’?”

“Eh, doing much better. How did you know about Geoffrey?” Looking surprised that Tillie knew of the attack on Geoff.

“Ain’t too many white people scrubbin’ floors in hospitals, especially at night. They saw you at the hospital worrin’ about Mr. Geoffrey, knew I worked for you so they let me know. Somebody sure banged him in the head.”

Sidney just shook his head again and smiled. Life in a small town. No secrets. “Good thing his head is as hard as it is. Nothing broken. They should let him out this afternoon. He’s going to stay in the guest room for a few days. I told him I didn’t want him staying alone in that room of his.

“That’s good.”

“Something wrong?”

Tillie looked right past Sidney and focused on something in the neighboring yard. With only one eye that worked right, she had to actually move her head in the direction she was looking. “No, I just realized that’s where they found the

painting that come from General Brewster's place. Funny place to leave a painting."

"Where?" Sidney turned his head.

"Over there," she pointed. "The marsh curves around back there so that from the front steps here you can look right past the rear corner of the Bennett's. You see that big angel oak there? Well, to the right you can see some myrtle. It was right there against the myrtle."

"The Bennett's would easily see it from the back of their house."

"They're up in Maine. Been a way a few weeks now. No, Mr. Gregory spotted it and went over to take a look, then called the police. Whoever took it musta been spooked pretty good to leave it behind. Heck, Mr. Gregory said it wasn't very big."

"Tillie, is there anything you don't know?"

"Ha," she laughed, "in my business they ain't too many secrets. Ain't a awful lotta truth sometimes either. That's why I wanted to make sure the Miss Becky story was set to right."

"Just shows you have a good heart."

"It's the Christian thing to do. No point bein' just a Sunday Christian. You've got to do the right thing all seven days. My grandmother always told me that for six days you're supposed to practice bein' a Christian and on the seventh you give thanks for having made it and axe for help for the next six."

"You're all right, Tillie. Say, do you think anyone would mind if Mickey and I took a walk over there?" indicating the area of the marsh where the painting was found. "In fact, why don't you come with us?. You could help me think through a few ideas I have."

"Sure, nobody's around. Everybody knows you and Mickey anyway." With the mention of her name, Mickey got up in anticipation of moving on.

As they started for the neighboring property, Sidney said, "So where do I find your Mr. Daniel?"

“Every day about four he’ll be at Coffin Landing. That’s where he keeps his boat. Just axe for him. He’ll be either commin’ or goin’ but he’ll be there. That’s his mendin’ and fixin’ time.”

“Okay, thank you Tillie. I’m glad you’re satisfied with Mrs. Reed. Sorry I couldn’t have been of more help.” Sidney paused for a moment trying to collect his thoughts on how best to proceed and then decided to just jump in. “Tillie, I know you’re satisfied with what your friend said and I know for you the whole Reed affair is over but I would really appreciate it if you would come with me when I visit with Mr. Doyle. We both know how the lowcountry is and I don’t think your friend will be as open with me when I ask him a question as he is with you.”

She thought for a moment. “Yeah, you’re right and I know it. He really don’t know you even if I say you’re ok. I was kinda thinkin’ that. Yeah, I’ll go with you besides if he decides to talk in Gullah, you ain’t gonna know what he said. Yeah, we’ll go together but Mickey’ll have to stay behind. Makes black folks nervous when white men come askin’ questions an bring a big dog along.”

As the three of them moved across the lawn and over toward the Bennett’s Sidney thought, *Yes, the Reed matter is all settled for you but not for me.* As he continued walking, he began envisioning the marsh and George Reed falling overboard with the boat drifting away. Suddenly, a vision also came into his head of someone coming up behind George, hitting him on the head and pushing him over the side. *Where did that come from? Must be combining Geoffrey and Reed.*

They walked slowly and easily across the grass to the marsh edge and the target myrtle, with Mickey exploring every odor she could find along the way. They both stopped at their target—Mickey sniffing about the myrtle and Sidney giving the area a general look.

“This is one of the best views on the whole of The Ridge. Wow. Look at the view you get from here.” The Ridge name

was an obvious one as the area sat on a gentle slope that ran from the rear of most of the houses down to the marsh and the Morgan River. Sidney estimated that the rise on average would be about twenty feet with the high point being just slightly above that, which protected the homes from the storms and hurricanes that have come across the area since time began. The original residents were a branch of the Yemassie Indians who, having learned from experience, put their village on the ridge seven or eight hundred years earlier.

“Tillie, I know you’re happy with what Mr. Daniel said but for some reason I’ve got a feeling there’s more to this than a simple falling out of a boat.”

They stopped and Sidney released Mickey from her lead so she could wander a bit.

“I know. I mainly didn’t like that Miss Becky was bein’ talked about but it’s got me to wonderin’ too. Mr. Reed, he was a boat man. More alive on the water than he was on land. A lot like Mr. Daniel. I don’t see either one of them ever fallin’ out of a boat sittin’ quietly in one of those marsh channels. No matter how much they was drinkin’.” The view from where Sidney now stood was one you could watch all day and never become bored, a bit like watching the fire in a fireplace. The gentle breeze through the marsh grass not only provided movement but also color variations, as the sun caught different angles on the vegetation as well as the water. Even here at the shore he could see the movement of the tide pushing the water in the channels, a continual lapping and movement against the grass and reeds.

“And what went on here doesn’t make sense. Why would a thief leave the painting here. This house is empty, which everyone seems to know, so no one can see you. In fact, with all these trees and shrubs around, I doubt if anyone from the Gregory’s could see either. The down slope makes for a good screen too.” The area contained a wide variety of vegetation and a fifty foot natural barrier between where the marsh and the formal landscaping began. Looking toward the

marsh, Sidney could see a view lane to the left of where he stood that provided a panorama of the river and the marsh, while to the right there were a variety of tall pines and some white and red oaks and tall crape myrtle. The opening in the tree line provided a view that the Brewster's and the Bennett's shared. Birds kept swooping down out of the trees and over to the variety of bird feeders in Brewster's back yard where there were also three birdbaths automatically fed by the irrigation system.

"I kinda agree with you. So why leave the painting? Maybe to come back for it later? No, doesn't sound right. Any self respectin' thief would o' tried to hide it in some way. Why come back a second time and risk being seen out in the open?" Mickey, not listening, began sniffing to the left of the myrtle and led Sidney out to the more open area where the marsh began.

"Unless he wanted it to be found."

"Or maybe he was spooked."

At that point two egrets took to the air in front of Mickey, where they had been wading in the grass looking for a late breakfast. Sidney jumped. "Ah, like that, Mickey, yes, just like that. Maybe he spooked some roosting water birds or better yet maybe an alligator." Mickey, unperturbed, continued into the marsh and stood in the water. "No swimming today. We're just walking. Water comes in pretty close here doesn't it?" Mickey just stood there looking out at the river watching two sailboats gently tacking back and forth as they headed in a Southern direction. "Yes, probably just that simple. He thought he saw or heard something, panicked, dropped the painting and took off. Interesting thought isn't it Tillie?"



Sitting on the small balcony of his hotel overlooking Bull Street, Warren felt comfortable. The Savannah newspapers were on the chair next to him. No mention of George Reed.

He watched all the news reports on the local channels this morning and again—nothing. George Reed’s death was old news. An accident no one would hardy remember in a few weeks. But Warren didn’t have a few weeks to find the pictures. Now that the heat was off, it was time to get aggressive. And there was only one place left to look.

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With a background in international banking, author Tim Holland's financial articles have appeared in banking and financial trade magazines. Book reviews and literary criticism have appeared in publications of The Recorder Publishing Co, New Jersey; The Brontë Society, Haworth, England; and political commentary and general interest in *ToTheCenter.com*, *Charleston Post and Courier*, *Summerville Journal Scene*, *The Beaufort Gazette*, *The State*, *The Fountain Hills Times*, *Arizona Republic*, and *Virginia Gazette*. He has given speeches and presentations in twenty-two states and twelve countries to large and small groups alike.