

## CHAPTER ONE

It was known simply as The Tree; that is what the locals on Johns Island, South Carolina, called it. A Southern live oak born a thousand years ago (some even said fifteen hundred), its gargantuan limbs swirled and stretched as much as two hundred feet in all directions. The lower arms, heavy with age, sometimes sank into the earth only to reemerge. Other branches flailed recklessly in the sky, like some sort of once-screaming kraken turned to wood by an ancient curse.

Generation after generation had protected it. Rising from the center of a former indigo plantation, and now officially known as Addison's Oak, The Tree had long been a source of pride, even fear, in the surrounding community, as well as James Island, Wadmalaw Island, and the nearby city of Charleston.

But now, The Tree was dying. It was not from natural causes either, not from time, nor gravity, nor the weather.

Someone had killed it.

"Is that a thing?" Detective Charlie Harper asked as he turned his head to look at his partner, Detective Elena Vasquez.

"I think so." Elena squinted her eyes toward the top of the canopy, the leafy summit shadowed and backlit by the noon sun.

"Arborcide? That's a thing?" Charlie asked again.

An Asian-American man in his mid-twenties wearing wraparound sunglasses stood next to the two detectives. "Yep. You remember that incident a few years ago in Auburn? Toomer's Corner. Crazy Alabama fan poisoned the tree there."

"Yeah," Charlie said. "But I mean legally. Is it legally a crime to do this?"

"Cops were involved there," the man said. "The guy went to jail. Has to be something. Why don't you call them? See what they did." He pulled a pack of spearmint gum from the front pocket of his jeans and stuffed five pieces in his mouth, noticing Charlie watching him. "Quitting smoking. Nicotine gum makes me dizzy."

Charlie nodded. "Been there." Six feet tall, with a closely trimmed beard under bright-blue eyes, he walked around the perimeter of the field.

Salt air swirled around him—they were only a couple of miles from the beach—and Charlie realized it was the first time he had been away from the city and out on the islands in months, maybe even over a year.

Elena Vasquez, an athletic five-ten with shoulder-length black hair bobby-pinned over her ears, stood in front of the young man and opened a new page in the Notes app on her iPhone. "So, you're the one who called about this?"

"Yes. It took some digging to figure out who to contact. I didn't know there weren't any police stations out here."

"That's correct." She typed the date *5/19/2015* at the top of the page. "Closest station is the Island Sheriff's Patrol on James Island, but they don't handle things like this. That's why you got us from the city. And who are you again?"

"Daniel Lee."

She looked up from her iPhone. "Daniel is a nice name. It's my son's name, though we call him Danny. Where are you from, Mr. Lee?"

"I'm originally from Maryland—Chesapeake Bay area—but now I live in Charleston. West Ashley. I'm a Ph.D. candidate at the college."

"College of Charleston?" Elena asked and continued typing.

"Yes. Environmental science. Teach a couple of undergrad classes as well. And I'm president of the local Sierra Club chapter. Our service project for this year has been public park maintenance and cleanup. I came here a week ago and saw that broken limb—"

"This one?" Charlie pointed at a fat twisted branch about the length of a Greyhound bus lying near the base of the tree.

"Yes."

"Well . . ." Charlie said. "How do you know it wasn't lightning or something?"

Daniel went over to Charlie and squatted next to the fallen limb. "There are no burn marks. Lightning would leave those."

"Maybe it's just old age. Isn't this thing like a thousand years old or something?"

"Possibly more. It *is* rotting," Daniel said. "But not from old age. See this discoloration? The rust-colored saturation of the stump where it broke?"

Charlie leaned in a little closer. "Yes."

"That's from poison, from a lot of poison. And you can see spots like this forming and spreading all around the trunk and on other branches."

Elena stood beneath The Tree, placing her hand on a dark-orange splotch on the trunk. The gray bark surrounding the stain felt tough and firm, but inside the color spot, it was soft and crumbling. "I see it."

"It's like cancer," Daniel said. "The Tree is not dead yet, but it will be soon. I had the soil tested as well as samples from the broken limb. They came back positive for massive levels of DS190."

"And that is?" Charlie said.

"A variant of tebuthiuron. A very powerful herbicide. Similar to what was used at Toomer's Corner. Somebody has been injecting the tree as well as dumping it into the ground. Probably for a few months to reach these levels."

"Injecting the tree?" Elena said.

Daniel pulled them over to the base of the trunk where a ring of jagged holes stretched just above the ground. "Yes. See these gashes? Somebody has been boring into the trunk, then filling it with DS190."

Charlie took out a pair of latex gloves and put them on before touching the holes in the trunk. "You're sure this is intentional?"

"Has to be. This stuff doesn't just appear on its own. It's man-made. Someone has been doing this."

"But why?" Charlie asked.

Daniel held out a hand, palm up. "Thus, the reason the two of you are here."

Charlie shook his head. "I don't know about this. We usually work homicide."

Daniel gestured towards the gashes in the trunk. "You have a murder victim. Or soon will. Right in front of you."

"But it's a tree!" Charlie said.

Elena looked up from her phone. "Okay, Mr. Harper. Easy."

Daniel motioned for them to follow as he walked to the backside of the trunk. "There's something else." He came to a stop in a patch of grass ringed with dandelion sprouts and pointed to dark-red streaks spread across the blades. "That's blood, isn't it?"

Charlie bent down and touched his gloved hand to one of the blades. "Maybe." He took out a plastic bag and a Leatherman multitool from his jacket. He pulled apart the hinged scissors, then clipped away about a dozen pieces of grass and dropped them into the bag.

"And another thing," Daniel said and led Elena to a spot about ten feet away. He pointed to a white card lying in the grass. "I didn't touch any of this, by the way. I didn't want to disturb the crime scene . . . I watch a lot of cop shows. I know how that goes."

"Doesn't everyone." Elena squatted down, taking a plastic bag from her jacket. She used tweezers to pick up the card, muddy and frayed at the edges and turned it over to reveal a yellow cat emoji, just the head, whiskers, and a faint smile, printed on the opposite side. There were no words, just the image.

A strong breeze moved through the leaves of the great tree, a sound like rain showers mixed with groaning as the heavy limbs bent in the wind.

Charlie Harper removed his glove and rubbed the edge of his dark-brown beard. Looking at the massive branches, which did seem like the arms of giants, he began to understand why The Tree was such a big deal. "Have to say, it is beautiful here. Can't believe I've been in Charleston four years and never been here. I should bring Amy. She'd love it."

Daniel looked at Elena for an explanation.

"His daughter," she said, then turned to Charlie. "You should. My dad brought me here a few times when I was a kid."

"Well, you better hurry," Daniel said.

"There's nothing to stop it?" Elena asked.

"Probably not. I contacted a team of forestry researchers I know from Virginia Tech. They are going to send a team down to look at it, see if anything can be done. I sent a request to the Parks Department to pay for it. If they don't, Sierra Club will hold a fundraiser."

Charlie sighed. "Okay. While we decide what to do about this, I'll call and have some signs and barriers put up to keep the tourists away."

Elena turned to Daniel. "Thank you for meeting us here. Could you come to our station in the city today or tomorrow to give a formal statement?"

"Sure."

"Bring copies of the lab work. We gonna find anything when we do a background check on you?"

Daniel shook his head. "No. Just some parking tickets . . . a lot of tickets actually. Parking at the college is a bitch."

"That it is," Elena said. "Here is my card if you think of anything else."

"Thanks," Daniel said. He stopped a moment as if to say something, then continued toward a white Chevy Volt parked near the road.

Elena looked at Charlie and raised her eyebrows. "So, Mr. Harper, what do you think?"

"Ehh . . . I mean I understand it's old and rare and special and all that, but it's a fucking tree. I don't know anything about trees, do you?"

"No, but . . ."

"But what?"

"I don't know," Elena said and looked around the field. "My Spidey-sense tells me there's more to it than just some weird vandalism." She took a step forward and winced.

"Back acting up?" Charlie asked.

"A bit," she said.

"Lunchtime anyway. Let's take a break. I'm starving. June and I got into it again this morning. Skipped breakfast."

"Sorry to hear that." Elena swept a strand of black hair behind her ear. She pointed with her chin down a two-lane road to a crooked sign with a faded image of a pagoda: The Formosa Grill. "Chinese?"

"Sure," Charlie said.

The two of them began to walk toward their gray Ford Explorer when Charlie saw a flash of white out of the corner of his eye. He stopped and knelt in the grass. He used his Leatherman tool to again pry away several blades.

"What is it?" Elena asked.

Charlie's head bolted upright, his blue eyes narrowing. "Mr. Lee!" he shouted. He pulled another latex glove from his pocket.

In the parking lot, Daniel climbed out of his car and made his way back to the field. "Yes?"

"Mr. Lee, when was the last time you were here before meeting us today?"

"Yesterday morning," Daniel said.

Elena knelt next to Charlie, looked into the grass, and let a low whistle escape her lips. She used her phone to take a photo.

Charlie used tweezers to pick up a severed finger. Sliced just below the knuckle, the stump crusted in blood, the flesh covered with red ants, it ended with a sharp green fingernail. He looked at Daniel. "Did you happen to notice this?"

Daniel swallowed hard, turning his face to the side. "No. I did not."

Charlie put the finger in a plastic bag.

Elena looked at him, her wide brown eyes giving him a knowing shimmer. "You interested in this case now, Mr. Harper?"

Charlie didn't flinch. He stared at The Tree.

