

Chapter One

Life has a habit of changing when you least expect it, and on this most normal of days, it happened again.

Months had passed with no sign of Autumn's phone. Life had gone on. It had to. I had no choice. As much as I would have liked to throw all my responsibilities aside and get to the bottom of Autumn's death, I couldn't. People depended on me.

My first solo book was released by my publisher in early February, and soon I was getting invited to book signings and speaking engagements. The book went over well with readers better than expected. They were already asking when the next book in the series was going to be released. I had a few ideas knocking around the inside of my head and scrawled on napkins from the bookstore. To this point, I hadn't written the first word of the next book. Maybe after Memorial Day.

Currently, I was stuck in molasses-slow Memorial Day weekend traffic moving through Conway on 501. The unofficial start of summer brought tourists from all over the country to The Grand Strand, happy to get away from home after months of being pent up in their homes for the winter and spring. With the weather warming and kids getting out of school, families were eager to spend three days in the Grand Strand. Many of them did not know where they were going, even with GPS, and it caused headaches for us locals. Not to mention the authorities. The police and fire departments spent a large amount of time and resources cleaning up after fender-benders.

Conway was a chokepoint for much of the traffic flowing into town. I was on my way home from an author event for the library in Marion, sitting at a stoplight. I'd met some new readers, signed a few books, and enjoyed a tasteful charcuterie spread. It had been a good day, but I was looking forward to getting home. My plan was to grab a chicken biscuit from a Bojangles on 544 on the way back to my home in Surfside Beach. I didn't feel like getting home, lugging cases of books back inside my house, and then making dinner.

It was days like this when I missed Autumn. If one of us was going to get home late, the other had made sure dinner was waiting. I had wound up doing most of the cooking, but it had been my pleasure. I liked to cook, and she'd worked hard at her job. She had received a small inheritance from a rich uncle that enabled us to open Myrtle Beach Reads together. I managed the bookstore while she had kept her job at the courthouse. Her intention had been to do that until the store made enough money to where she could cut back on the amount of hours she would work and eventually quit.

She never made it to that goal.

It's been three years since her death. One year since Detective Gomez told me her suspicion that Autumn might have been murdered rather than having died of a heart attack at her desk at the courthouse. My life has changed in several ways since that night. The night I, your average

every day book store owner and coffee-slinger, Clark Thomas, solved the murder of Paige Whitaker. The first of four murders I'd solved.

Since then, I tried to figure out *if* Autumn had been murdered, and if so, who might have done it and how? I had come across her phone in my desk, charged it, and found several threatening text messages from an unknown number. Gomez had a tech person who could try to get more from the phone. I'd handed her the phone and never saw it again. Someone had stolen it from the forensics lab.

Gomez said the tech had put the phone in a tray and placed it into an evidence cabinet. The tech hadn't told anyone about the phone. I had thanked Gomez for helping, and she'd said she would let me know if she learned anything further. That was eight months ago.

Haven't heard a peep.

Only four people knew about the phone. Myself, the tech, Gomez, and her partner, Detective Moody. Its theft kept me up late ever since, racking my brain, trying to figure out who would steal the phone and how they could have known about it. The mystery behind the person who sent Autumn the threatening messages continued.

My Jeep rolled to a stop at another light. This was one of those days where I hit every light. Hurry up and stop. Traffic was bumper-to-bumper, as was typical in Conway this time of year. The temperature on the dash approached ninety, while the sun in the rear view fell to the horizon. I cranked the AC to high.

I tapped my thumbs on the steering wheel to a Pearl Jam song I'd listened to as a teen, now on the classic rock station. That made me feel old. It wasn't the first time I've heard some of my favorite music growing up on 104.1. Part of life, I guess. At least they considered it classic and didn't confine the song to the trash can.

To my left was a family in a minivan. The windows in the back were tinted, but I saw several shadows moving about. The mom was in the front passenger seat, head back, staring at a cellphone. The dad's head poked forward, trying to see the street signs, making sure they were on the right track.

To my right was a mobile home sales lot. Several doublewides in various configurations dotted the lot. The small sales office in the center had a "Closed" sign on the door. Two mobile homes sat side-by-side on this end of the lot, with the ends of the houses facing the road. There was, perhaps, seven feet of space separating the two homes.

In between them, halfway down their length, was a petite blonde-haired woman. I might not have looked twice, except for two things. One, she looked like a California girl in a Carolina town. Two, she stomped her heels into the gravel lot as she screamed into a cell phone.

And she would change my life. Again.

Chapter Two

I couldn't take my eyes off her. She wore a low-cut green blouse, navy skirt, and heels. Her hair fell past her shoulders. It glowed, even in the shadows between the mobile homes.

The stoplight remained red. She yelled, gesticulated, banged a hand on the vinyl siding of one home, then hung up the phone with an angry jab on the screen. She looked at the sky and raised her hands, as though asking for help. Then she took two steps and sat down on the temporary wood stairs leading to the front door.

The car behind me honked, breaking my trance. I looked up and saw the light had turned green. The van beside me was now inching through the intersection as I remained stationary. I glanced in the rearview. An older woman in the Mercedes behind me blew her horn. Guess she was in a hurry to stop at the next intersection if the traffic pattern for the last half hour held. I stuck my hand out the window and gave her a sarcastic thumbs up.

I made a snap decision and turned on the blinker and turned right and then made another quick right into the mobile home seller's gravel lot. Rocks crunched underneath wide tires. Plumes of dust arose. The doublewide was cream-colored. I parked and turned the car off. Eddie Vedder's voice died away.

After snatching the keys from the ignition, I opened the door. The homes for sale between the Jeep and 501 muffled passing traffic. The girl never looked up from the stoop.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped around the Jeep and approached her through the alley between homes. I cleared my throat, hoping she would notice me. She didn't.

When I was within hand's reach, I stopped. Her head was down between folded arms atop her knees. She sobbed to herself.

"Excuse me," I said. "Is everything okay?"

If my approach surprised her, she didn't show it. She looked up with mascara smeared across her cheeks. Dangling earrings shook. An elegant jaw line framed thin lips and a button nose. I judged her to be in her mid-20s. She tucked a blonde strand behind her ear to get a better view of me. The California girl vibe I had at first glance melted away. A true Cali girl would have worn waterproof mascara or had fake eyelashes. This girl, and I do mean girl, did not fit that mold. She couldn't have been older than her mid-twenties.

For once, I wasn't dressed in shorts and a Hawaiian shirt with flip-flops. I had dressed a little more respectable for the author event: khakis, white oxford button-down, and blue Sperrys. Even my face was smooth from a good shave before leaving.

She sniffled. "No. It's not."

"Is there anything I can do to help you?"

I reached in my pocket, pulled out an unused tissue, and handed it to her.

She accepted it with a soft "Thank you," and blew her nose once, then folded the tissue over and gave it another go.

I realized it might help to broker trust rather than be some random dude who showed up unexpectedly between two homes in a vacant mobile home lot. “I was sitting over there, waiting at the stoplight, when I saw you on the phone before hanging up. I didn’t see a car nearby, so I figured you were stranded or something and might need help.”

“That’s a good way of putting it. Stranded. I’m a thousand miles from home and have no idea where my fiancé, Brian, is.” Her voice was soft and carried a slight accent. Definitely not a Cali girl.

“Was that him you were talking to on the phone?”

“No. That was the police. I told them Brian was missing.”

“What did they say?”

“That there wasn’t much they could do until he’d been gone for a day or so. Unless he was a danger to himself. Or others.”

The protocols surrounding missing persons were familiar to me in only what I had read in books or on TV. What she said came as no surprise. “Is he? A danger to himself or others, that is.”

She snorted. I wasn’t sure if she was clearing the snot from her nose or trying to muster a laugh. The latter, I hoped. My hope proved true.

“Brian? A danger? Pfft. A danger to all-you-can-eat buffets maybe, but not to himself or others.”

“That’s good, I guess.”

“They said I had to wait twenty-four hours before I could file a missing-persons report. I told them he took our camper van and stranded me here.”

“And you were upset that they couldn’t help you.”

“Yeah, that and stupid Brian. I gave them my name and number and information about him. Like a description and birthdate. They told me to get an Uber and suggested a few motels.”

“That’s about as helpful as you’ll get on a weekend like this. How long ago did he leave you?”

“He’s been gone about an hour. We were at a coffee place one street over. I went to the bathroom. When I came out, he was gone. He’s not answering his phone.”

“Did he say he was going somewhere? Did you have some place you needed to be?”

“He didn’t. We just finished filming a review at The Trestle Restaurant and were headed back to the campground.”

“Which campground?”

“PirateLand on the lower end of Myrtle Beach.”

“Gotcha. Are you all food reviewers or something?”

She sat up. The flow of conversation seemed to have comforted her to a degree.

“Yeah. We call ourselves the 2 Foodie Nomads. We travel the country in a little camper van, finding cool places to do reviews.”

“Like Guy Fieri on Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives?”

“Yeah, kinda like that. Brian idolizes him. Doing this is what Brian wanted to do.”

“And you went along for the ride?”

Her eyes lit. She smiled for the first time. It was cute. “Yeah, you could say that.”

The sun crept lower. The shadows between the mobile homes stretched. Daylight was wasting.

“Is there anything I can do to help you?”

She gave me an empty look and shook her head from side to side. “I don’t know. I kept hoping he’d come back.”

“Do you have any friends or family nearby?”

“Not for a thousand miles.”

“Where are you going to stay tonight if he doesn’t come back?”

She shook her head. “I dunno. Can’t very well go to PirateLand without the camper van. We were getting ready to head south to Charleston on Tuesday.”

“Do you have any money on you?”

She looked up at me and leaned away, wrapping arms around her pocketbook.

I held up a pleading hand. “No, don’t get me wrong. I have no intention of robbing you. I’m just trying to figure out what kind of help you need, and money is part of it. I didn’t know if your fiancé ran off with your money too, or what.”

The death grip loosened on the pocketbook as she sat straight. She let out a breath. “I have most of that. We have a joint account, but he only carries cash. He closed his checking and savings accounts down before we hit the road. I added him to mine, but he doesn’t use it.”

“Does he carry a debit card?”

“He does but doesn’t use it.”

“You could monitor your checking account and see if he uses it.”

She sat up and stared at the siding of the cream-colored mobile home in front of her as my implication sunk in. Tears welled. “Are you suggesting that he’s not coming back? That he’s leaving me?”

I tilted my head. “I wouldn’t put it out of the realm of possibility. He waited until you couldn’t see him to leave. Turned his phone off. Has he done anything like this before?”

“No. Never.” She stood and looked at the sky. “What am I going to do?”

The humidity caused my shirt to stick to me. I sweated all over. She glistened. I wanted to get back in the Jeep and air conditioning. As I watched her standing there, touching the base of her neck with one hand and staring at a point in the gravel off to the side, I decided there was only one reasonable thing to do.

“Come on,” I said. “Hop in the Jeep. Let’s try to figure this out.”