

CHAPTER ONE

Pete Cully heaved the cumbersome oak limb onto the pile of deadfalls waiting for Bobby the tree guy to mulch up during his weekly visit. Big old sucker fell in the Oslund girl's yard sometime last night. Missed her house by a short foot, or he would've had a roof repair this morning.

As he rolled it over one last time to get it off the curb, he felt his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. He dusted off his hands and dug it out of his jeans, checked the screen. Yep, Leo again. Only the third time this morning, not as bad as some days. He stabbed the answer icon. "Hey, boss."

"Is there a delay? I expected you already." Pete could picture him tapping his size-fourteen foot and frowning at his telephone.

He glanced at his watch. Only a quarter 'til, and no way Leo forgot they agreed on eleven. But when Leo Burgess gets an itch, it ain't going away until he gets it scratched. Not likely he'd have him an itch over any maintenance update, neither. Gave Pete the skittish premonition that Leo really wanted him to go traipsing around behind whichever Burgess got their ass in a crack this time—probably Nick—and Pete already had a bellyful of that. "No, sir, just taking care of some of the debris from the storm on my way. I'm right down the block, be there in a minute."

"Thank you, Pete." Click.

The other possibility here was maybe Leo found out his daughter and J.D. had a thing going. Pete just did not get J.D.'s thinking on that deal. Sure, Lexy Burgess was a

hot tamale all right, but crazy as a snake in a sack, and damn if that old boy's wife didn't look mighty fine her own self. And J.D. had to know Leo would fall on him like a wrecking ball for him being married and all. But that fella just had the hungries, and bad. You could see it in his eyes, the way he looked at other people's cars, houses, and wives. Anything he saw as an upgrade. Pete'd seen it too many times, how that foolishness can get downright dangerous.

Pete tucked his phone away. "But I ain't getting roped into sweeping up after none of Lexy's nonsense either," he told the oak limb.

On his walk up the long driveway leading to the Burgess home, he shook his head at how much sand had washed down the hill from last night's rain. Got to work on that again, though nothing seemed to help. Grass simply didn't grow deep enough roots to hold this sandy soil on the slope of the man-made hill Leo had built for his home site. The old man just had to have his house up on a promontory overlooking the ocean, and Mother Nature didn't like it. Exactly why there weren't any promontories to be found in this part of Florida—something he would've known if he'd bothered to ask a native like Pete, who was born and raised on a dirt-scrabble farm over near Bartow. But Leo didn't hold no interest in any opinion what went against anything he'd already decided to do. Pete did not even want to know how the man got that deal past the county permit people. Or the swimming pool dug in down by the water's edge.

Pete's phone buzzed again. This time he didn't bother checking the screen. "I'm coming, boss, I promise. I'm right in your driveway." Hoping Leo didn't hear the laugh he smothered.

"Have you spoken with the police today?"

His amusement at Leo's impatience died in his chest, a sour taste rising in his throat. So that was the gnat in Leo's shorts—he'd heard about the latest Peeping Tom sighting. Last night's made the third report of a peeper in Heron Point within a month, and now Leo wanted to pick Pete's brain about Nick. Pete would rather swallow a handful of carpet tacks. Something kind of greasy-feeling about discussing what a sick squirrel the man's own son was. Pete didn't try to pretend he hadn't made this deal himself, jumping on this job when it was basically a payoff, but even an old pet hound dog won't lap up everything you scrape off the table. "No, sir, why, have you?"

"Not as yet, though I anticipate that I shall hear from them. Come around to the Florida room, please." Click.

Pete changed direction and followed the brick walkway circling the house that was as familiar as his own because of the endless labor demanded by Anna Burgess' fickle decorating taste. Two stories, eight thousand square feet, and built long so fourteen windows faced the ocean. Never mind that the brutal Gulf sunsets made those windows useless for five or six months of the year and jacked the power bill up into four figures. The thing almost looked like one of those fancy beach resorts, what with its design stalemated somewhere between Victorian and antebellum plantation style. Leo's image of old Florida aristocracy, Pete presumed. Not that there ever had been any such thing, at least since the Indians anyhow.

Leo, dressed in the white shirt, dark tie, suit trousers, and dress shoes sort of rig he seemed to favor when in the mood to throw his weight around, rose to shake hands as Pete entered the glass-enclosed porch. Nine years of working together and they still started every day with a handshake. Pete reckoned it fit Leo's idea of a man-to-man

welcome, though to him it always came across more like Leo patting the faithful old hound dog on the head.

Pete took pride in being a solid muscular man—even at just six months shy of fifty—with the thick limbs that came from decades of manual labor, and damn near six feet tall to boot. But he looked like a runt next to Leo. His giant boss stood six-five at least, and big-boned, built stout as a cement truck. Figure in for that fair-sized gut and he had to go for over two-fifty. Mid sixties, maybe near seventy, Pete knew, but big Leo hadn't lost a bit of his dominating physical presence. Despite almost a decade together, Pete still sometimes felt like he'd been called up in front of the school principal when he talked to his boss.

“Good morning, Pete”—as if they hadn't been on the phone ten seconds ago—
“Sit, please.” Leo returned to his own seat and crossed his legs. “Tell me what you know,” he rumbled in his resonant bass that always reminded Pete of an idling tractor engine.

Now Pete knew damn well Leo meant *let's talk about my son the stalker*, but sorry, he was supposed to be here to discuss repairs. He eased into one of the creaky, rickety wicker chairs Anna Burgess thought of as the last word in sunroom furniture. “Came through the storm fine, everything looks like, and no calls, so no leaks. Thirty-two has another pipe problem. I think it's time to give up and re-plumb the whole thing. It's our oldest plumbing, and I'm patching something every week now. I'll call in a contractor if you agree.” He raised his eyebrows in question, enjoying the frustration that showed in Leo's short nod.

“Gonna need an A/C unit at forty-seven, she’s grinding,” he went on, watching Leo’s banana of a forefinger tapping against his chair arm. Of the thirty-three homes in Heron Point, Leo owned twenty-four. Because of the way the street numbers fell, only two address numbers coincided, and this had gradually led to their private shorthand of referencing the other twenty-two solely by number. “I noticed another patched-up window in sixteen. I got a suspicion them Jameson kids are taking that place apart.”

“Let us find a rationale for entering sixteen and thus ascertain how bad it is.” Leo rubbed his lower lip with the forefinger—a sure sign that he was running out of fuse with Pete’s ducking the subject—and then added, “I do not believe they will be here much longer. Their check arrives later each month.”

Pete felt a twinge for the kids, even those brats, but he didn’t comment. Leo tended to take any tenant’s move-out as a personal rejection regardless of the reason, though money trouble was rare in the Point. He glanced up, startled by the rattle-bang of a jay flying slam into one of the glass panes in the cathedral ceiling, and felt an instant kinship with the bird for getting sucker-punched by the unseen barrier. At least the jay could fly away. Before he could keep plugging with more of his maintenance update, Leo held up a hand, palm out.

“See to all of it. You know I will not have our people worrying over basic needs such as plumbing or air conditioning. Now, what do we know of this distressing incident?”

Pete took off his cap and scratched his hairline with the bill, letting his gaze wander the room while he worked on how to get out from under this train wreck. He counted twelve chairs today, enough seating for a Sunday school class, scattered here and

there among the potted dwarf palms and hibiscuses. Guess Anna had been shopping again, but what else do you do with a fifteen hundred square foot sunroom? He worked his hat back onto his head and took one more shot at playing possum. “Not much, chief, ain’t looked into it. Thought we were going over repairs today.”

Leo let that one sail right on by, what Pete would’ve bet on him doing, and asked, “Was there a letter this time?” He watched Pete unblinkingly, his eyes carrying the opaque, shielded look Pete associated with intense personal interest from his boss. Pete stared back, taking in the big square-cut face on which every feature stood out aggressively—bushy brows, deep-set steel-blue eyes, sharply hooked nose, and a hard-bitten gash of a mouth that never looked comfortable in a smile.

“Not that I know of. Hain’t gotten my daily dose of the rumor mill yet, though.” One of the peeping victims had received a pretty rank note describing everything the peeper felt while watching her, and the cops said more of them would likely lead to a handwriting slip-up that should help identify the guy.

“Do you still think it’s him? Have you found out anything that I should know?” Leo’s eyes were hooded now, staring at his hands in his lap.

Pete tasted more acid billowing up and felt it burning in his stomach. He took his cap off again and ruffled his hair, trying to get the thing to fit right. What he got for breaking in a new one on a hot day. By *him*, Leo meant Nick, and no, Pete didn’t have any evidence. But his gut said Nick all the way. After all, the boy had him a history. A thirty-year-old cokehead who was too spoiled to get a rise out of good old-fashioned sex is what he was. Pete had tried to tell Leo all this once, and the old man wouldn’t hear it, so he wasn’t about to say it again.

“I don’t know anything more than I’ve told you, Leo. Maybe send him on vacation, see if it stops. We can’t sit around with our heads in the sand.” Pete used *we* to keep any threat from showing in his voice, but this was the old man’s to deal with.

“Just keep an eye on him, would you?” Leo uncrossed his legs and leaned forward onto his knees. “I’ll talk with him again and you monitor his comings and goings, will you, please? Although I must say, I cannot believe him capable of such depravity.”

Reckon that’s a no to the vacation suggestion, Pete sighed to himself as he pushed up out of his chair. Probably too likely to prove Nick’s guilt. And the hell of it was, asking came as close as Leo ever would to pleading, and Pete owed the man that much respect. Fact was, covering up for Nick is what got Pete this lifetime job security to begin with.

“You got it, boss,” he said, with a silent promise that if keeping an eye on Nick brought him any proof, he was going to drop a dime on the boy. Calling this nastiness peeping was downplaying it. It had begun to look more and more like stalking to Pete, and he couldn’t sit by and let it escalate into another deal like last time. Of course, that meant he’d have to be willing to face one pissed-off Leo.

He let himself out and sauntered back down the drive, squinting against the noontday sun. Yep, just another day in paradise.