

May 1986
Over the Atlantic seaboard

The Call

The Delta flight from Boston to Savannah seemed interminable in the weave of memories that ensnared me, memories I had fought to escape for years. I had long since lost track of Dani Cahill, though she was always a phantom waiting to appear un-summoned in my mind. She and Mark Roda and I had sworn *friendship forever – no matter what* the summer we were thirteen. We were on the dock at the county lake in Santa Lucia. We all felt bound to it and cherished the special bond it provided. It was something we all desperately needed.

The last time I saw Dani was fifteen years ago at my grandfather's funeral. Four years prior, she'd departed Santa Lucia without a word of farewell, without leaving a trace. Years passed. I settled in Boston. Then three days ago, when I picked up the phone at home, I knew it was Dani with the first words she spoke. I was stunned she had any idea where I was or how to find me – or any inclination to do so. She was, however, as direct as ever.

"I need to see you," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"It's English. A simple declarative sentence." She paused. "I need something you promised a long time ago. To be my friend."

The reference was riveting. That afternoon on the dock at the county lake was as searingly cinematic in memory as it had been in reality. Making reference to it now jarred me out of the frame of facts and circumstances that had become my life, disembodying and transporting me back across the years.

"Where are you?" I asked, stalling to regain a semblance of balance.

Dani lived in a house on a tidal river, she said, with a view out over an expansive spread of Carolina Low Country marsh forty minutes north of Savannah, Georgia. It was beautiful, she exclaimed, adding that I would love it.

"You swore. No matter what."

"Dani, it's not exactly the best time for me."

"I'm sure it's not," she agreed. "But I don't have a choice."

"What's up?" I asked, a nervous spasm fluttering across my shoulders.

She wouldn't go into details. I shifted the conversation to pursue an oblique angle of inquiry. Surprisingly, she seemed content to follow my lead making small talk. She had lived in South Carolina for five years, had moved there because it was where her husband, now ex-husband, had family.

"I never figured you a Southern belle," I jibed.

"You probably never would have figured me for a lot of things," she said. "What can I say? Life takes many strange turns." There were any number of reference points we shared that could explain her cryptic remark, but I suspected there were many others I knew nothing of at all. I certainly had my own share of private gyrations.

"Can this possibly wait a few weeks?" I asked. "I'm under a lot of pressure at work."

"I wouldn't ask, Luke, if I didn't need to," she said. There was a long pause. "I'm sorry about calling you like this." Her drop in tone and trailing vulnerability pierced me, conjuring an upwelling of feelings.

"I probably can't get away before Thursday," I offered, mentally running through my work calendar. "Maybe I could make it a long weekend." I wanted to sound convincing, though I wasn't committed yet to going.

"That'd be fine," Dani said. "It'll be really nice to see you. I'm grateful."

There are always events that mark us, some for the rest of our lives. We wish we could deny them, but there they are, never far below the surface, always ready to assert a presence in some dark form or another. Such happened to me – a long time ago. We never know if buried deep within them is also a seed that can save us. I had given up searching for it, denying that it existed. In fact, I was steeled against it.

So it was surprising come Friday that I was flying at thirty-five thousand feet down the spine of the Appalachians, tracking south-southwesterly at somewhere around five hundred miles an hour. My eyes were closed, the window curtain pulled, the deep, penetrating drum of the jet engines a welcome distraction. Still, I couldn't escape the dread mixed with a strange eagerness knowing I was only a few short hours from seeing Dani Cahill again.

For better or worse, it was about time.

May 1986
Carolina Low Country

Varies of Time

The flight to Savannah was uneventful and all too fast. Though only early May, the air was already heavy with moist heat when I walked out of the airport. I crossed the rental lot in search of my car. The sky was sculpted with towering cumulus clouds, giant white castles that pushed to great heights. I

slowed to admire them, recalling a long-ago memory of watching clouds like these drift over the front range of the Colorado Rockies, out onto the high plains. As a small boy I always wished I could climb up into them and let them carry me away. The memory made me realize there was something deep in me that had always been rootless.

I found the red Ford Taurus, leaned in, and started the engine, turning the air conditioner on full. I tossed my carryon bag in the back and then opened the map the rental agent had given me, laying it out across the roof to study while the stifling heat of the car's interior dissipated. *I can do this*, I told myself. *Three days. In and out. I can do this*. I got my bearings from the map, threw it up on the dash, and slipped in behind the wheel. *I can do this*.

I had debated how to tell Fran Johnson that I had to be away for a few days. She and I were both former journalists who'd partnered to start a creative agency four years before in Boston. We were a good team. She was very good at schmoozing rich clients to nail lucrative projects. I had a gift for creative ideas and copy. It was an ungodly high-pressure place to work and we cycled employees at a steady clip. The pace weighed on us as well; both our spouses had walked out, hers the first year and mine the second.

Since the collapse of my marriage I had started thinking about getting out, doing something different. Our partnership itself had become like a bad marriage, only one seemingly impossible to escape. The money was great but it wasn't really what I wanted to do. We had discussed various options, from selling to another agency, to her buying me out. She'd made me an offer, but we were far apart on terms.

As for going to see Dani, I decided to pull out the big guns and told Fran my sister had been critically injured in a car accident and was in a hospital in South Carolina.

"I didn't know you had a sister?"

"We're not close, but she's all the family I have," I lied.

I worked to maintain a look of pained concern as I watched her mentally calculate how big a bitch she could afford to be. Fran finally offered that she hoped my sister was okay, but couldn't help pointing out that this couldn't have happened at a worse time.

"We have the Pierson Technology presentation next week." As if I could forget. It was damn near all I'd been working on for days. I'd only that morning passed it to Sheri, one of our best creative people, to go over. I promised I'd be back the first of the week.

"Does that mean Monday?"

"Absolutely," I said. I felt bad about lying, but knew there was no way I could have explained about Dani and why I had to go. I wasn't sure I could even explain it to myself.

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I slipped out of the flow on I-16 to catch US 17 North, then rose with the road as it ascended the arc of the Eugene Talmadge Bridge over the Savannah River. The view of the Low Country was spectacular: a world part water, part marsh grass, part palmetto and pine. But mostly sky, it was so flat and vast. The big white cumulus airships sailed onward to the east like a giant armada.

The two-lane highway ran like a thin blade between aprons of marsh either side of the road. It cut in under dark oaks festooned with Spanish moss. The moss-draped oaks were reminiscent of California, but little else felt familiar. *Why am I here*, I wondered? Wasn't there a statute of limitations on childhood promises?

Dani's directions were faultless. Thirty-five miles north of the bridge I easily found the sandy road that wound through dense growth of mixed pines, vines and oaks. A hundred yards in, the woods opened with a thinning of trees.

The house was considerably nicer than I had imagined, given Dani's simple description. It was rustic-modern, built of pole construction and natural wood, raised several feet off the sandy forest floor. This was no redneck shrimper's shack, but no Hilton Head showcase either. The design melded aesthetically with the landscape. It looked more like something you'd find along the Big Sur Coast than the Carolina Low Country. It fit perfectly my memory of Dani: basic; open; natural. I pulled up beside a late model Volvo sedan covered with yellow pine pollen. It looked like it hadn't been driven in weeks.

I stepped out of the chilled embrace of my rental car and was immediately enveloped by a silence far more pervasive than the heat. From somewhere far off came the almost un-detectible drone of a big shrimp boat, the sound all but swallowed by the vastness of the landscape. I turned my attention to the house. It had an access ramp that had been recently added, its timber fresh in comparison to the other wood. Crossing the drive of crushed, white oyster shells and climbing the steps to the front door, I hesitated, hand raised to knock. *Can I really do this?* At this point, did it really matter? I knocked.

No answer. I knocked again. I tried the door. It was unlocked, as Dani said it would be. She'd told me to come on in when I got there, so I pushed the door open, leaned in and called out.

"I'm in here," came a small voice. I stepped into the cool space and closed the door behind me, then followed a short hall that opened onto a great room that was fronted with a wall of glass, floor to wood-beamed ceiling. It provided an immense view of the marsh. The room itself was filled with plants.

"Hello Stranger."

I turned to follow the sound of the greeting. Dani sat partially screened by a small potted palmetto. She was propped up with pillows on a large couch facing the windows. A wheelchair stood nearby.

She was impossibly thin, paler than alabaster. She sat with her legs wrapped in an afghan throw. I stared for an embarrassingly long moment.

"I know," she said. "It's kinda shocking."

"I'm sorry," I said, finding my voice, forcing myself to smile, stepping forward. "How are you?" I asked, the innocuous pleasantries out of my mouth before I could retrieve it.

"I'm a fright, apparently," she said smiling at me. I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek she offered.

"It's good to see you," I floundered.

"It's sweet of you to come. All this way after all this time," she said, reaching a hand up, taking mine. Her skin was cool to the touch.

"Sit with me," she said, pulling lightly on my hand. I stepped in between the couch and a large coffee table and sat.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. Didn't prepare you," she said, continuing to hold onto my hand.

"It's fine," I muttered. I sucked a deep breath and exhaled slowly, gazing into those still fiercely penetrating green eyes. "It's good to see you," I said, squeezing her hand.

She squeezed mine in return. "I'm so grateful for you coming. I was afraid if I told you..." She let the sentence taper into silence.

"That I wouldn't come?"

She shrugged. "Something like that."

"So what's up?" I asserted, wanting to take control of an impossibly awkward moment.

"I'm dying," she smiled wanly.

I stared at her, my nerves cut jagged.

"*Whoa*," I said breathlessly, lifting my free hand impulsively as if to signal halt, feeling as if somebody had slugged me. I swallowed, struggling for breath. I looked away, staring out the window. The view of the marsh seemed somehow utterly different now, drained of its vibrancy. I glanced back quickly, meeting her eyes, then looked away again.

"I needed to see a friend," she said. "Somebody I knew I could count on. *No matter what*," she whispered.

I turned back to her. I dropped my free hand, settling it over the hand I held in mine. She lifted her other hand and placed it gently on top, generating in an instant the memory of our oath swearing so many years before, Mark's and Dani's and my hands all stacked one atop another. She smiled the most beautiful, radiant, loving smile showered on me in a long, long while.

"I'm here," I said. "I'm glad you called. I'm really glad you called." I lifted her hands and pressed my lips against the cool parchment of her skin.