

Chapter 1

Ripples raced across the surface of the marine lab harbor, driven outward by the spinning thrust of overhead blades. The corporate helicopter finished its sliding rotation and lifted away to the north, heading up the bayside of Marcosta Island, bound for Tampa. The sole passenger aboard was Geraldo Diaz, general counsel for Nielsen Enterprises, the Florida real estate empire of billionaire Derek Nielsen.

Mayor Jake Crawford stood near the harbor fuel dock, watching the helicopter disappear in the morning sky. A screen door slammed shut. His wife, Caitlin, walked toward him from the lab's front office, her auburn hair flowing in the onshore breeze. He waited until her questioning eyes stared up at his, lovely ovals of emerald green and reflected blue sky.

"Nielsen just terminated the negotiation," he said tersely.

She reacted with surprise. "But you agreed to make the public statement ... about your belief in his innocence."

"He no longer cares about the suspicions, or so claims his attorney." Jake looked skyward. Frigate birds soared in widening circles above Munson Bay, spiraling upward in the warming air. "Something's afoot. It would explain why the negotiations were delayed for two months." He refocused on Caitlin. "There's something else. Nielsen turned the table and made an offer to buy this property."

"What's he thinking? Ida would never sell."

"It's a big offer."

"How big?"

"A hundred and seventy-five million in cash, plus a fifty-five-acre marina and boatyard on the east side of Charlotte Harbor, south of Punta Gorda. Nielsen bought it out of bankruptcy recently."

"You mean, move the lab there?"

"His attorney said it could be accomplished for under \$125 million, including new building construction, leaving at least \$50 million for ongoing research and operations, five times the lab's annual budget."

Caitlin glanced down, shaking her head. "Ida must be devastated. She so wanted Nielsen's land for a nature preserve."

Jake looked in the direction of Ida Hoefler's office. "I need to get back with her. I'll stop by the front office before leaving for City Hall."

"You forgot. I won't be there."

Jake tapped his forehead once, reminded of their breakfast discussion. "I'm glad you're finally going for a checkup."

"You know how much I dislike the clinic."

“Yes, but it’s not a smart choice at your age.

“And when was the last time you went? People in glass houses ...”

“Okay, fair point. Give Doc Harris my best.” Jake started for Hoefler’s office.

“Do you want anything special from Hawker’s?” asked Caitlin. “I’m picking up fresh grouper and shrimp after work.”

Jake paused, turning. “No, that sounds good. I should be home by seven, hopefully sooner.”

A cardboard tube occupied the corner of Ida Hoefler’s office. Its contents displayed aerial overlays of the planned nature preserve, replete with wooden walkways and elevated viewing stations. She eyed the tube with dismay.

A courtesy knock preceded Jake’s entrance, his head almost touching the top of the doorway. He traversed the distance to a corner conference table in three long strides, snatching Nielsen’s offer and extending it her direction. “Are you considering this?”

“Good grief, not for a second.”

“It’s a huge sum. What about your board of directors? Will they think otherwise?”

“They detest Nielsen as much as you and I do.”

Jake sat, placing his elbows on the table, head down, fingers massaging his temples. “A marina and yacht club were missing from Nielsen’s original plans. This property is the obvious solution.”

Hoefler grimaced at the thought of Nielsen’s plans, envisioning the island overrun with thousands of wealthy snowbirds. The southern boundary of the mega-resort would abut the marine lab property.

Someone knocked briefly, partially opening the door.

“Yes?” Hoefler asked curtly. Her gray-blond eyebrows started twitching, evidence of annoyance.

Judith Kerner’s tanned face peered around the door. “Sorry for the interruption.” She looked toward the conference table. “Hi, Mayor Crawford.”

“Dr. Kerner.”

“What is it, Judith?” Hoefler asked impatiently.

“Billy Watson is stumbling around in his mullet skiff by the shark pond, hollering and cussing a blue streak. I think he’s drunk.”

Jake jumped up, going to the bayside window. “Dammit, Billy.”

Kerner pushed the door open, stepping aside as he hurried out. She looked at Hoefler. “Should I go with him?”

“No. They’re best of friends.”

“A former cancer scientist and redneck commercial fisherman? Not your typical match-up.”

“They grew up together on the island.”

“How’d the meeting go?” asked Kerner, glancing at the conference table.

“Surprising,” Hoefler replied.

Shouting erupted, the two men arguing. The roar of an outboard motor echoed through the open bayside window, racing away at full throttle.

“Surprising in what way?”

“Mayor Crawford and I are still discussing what happened. I’ll update the leadership team after we’re done.”

Jake came through the doorway. “Billy’s upset at someone named Dirty Dick. Claims the guy called his mother a whore at the tavern last night.”

“I’ll speak with Richard,” said Hoefler.

“One of your dockhands?” asked Jake.

“No, our longtime cook.”

“Our longtime, *disgusting* cook,” clarified Kerner.

“Richard is eccentric, but a good person at heart,” countered Hoefler.

Kerner rolled her eyes. “Not toward scientists.”

“Sounds like a character,” said Jake. He looked at his watch and then at Hoefler. “I have fifteen minutes to finish our discussion. You can update me later about Dirty ... Richard. Try to find out his version of what happened.”

Kerner headed for the doorway. “I need to check an experiment.”

Jake exited the marine lab entrance. The drive north to City Hall would traverse the entire length of the island, just over five miles. Wispy horsetail clouds streaked across the sky. Cool, less humid air swirled through the open car windows, typical for late January in southwest Florida.

Native flora flanked the road, covering a continuous three-mile stretch of undeveloped land, eleven hundred acres in total. The elderly Garrett siblings had sold the acreage to Nielsen two-and-a-half years ago, in the summer of 1994, shortly before the old wooden bridge had burned down. Their great-grandfather had settled the island in the mid-1800s.

Jake shook his head. *Ole Cyrus must have rolled in his grave.*

Egret Avenue eventually appeared on the right, demarcating the northern boundary of Nielsen’s holding. Jake slowed, thinking about the progress on the sustainability complex at the east end of the avenue, close to Munson Bay. Several hydroponic greenhouses were already producing lettuce and cherry tomatoes, fed by captured rainwater from advanced cisterns. Three prototype windmills could be seen spinning above the palms and Ficus trees, generating enough power to run the greenhouse fans and pumps that circulated the water.

The City and its university research partners had formally broken ground on the complex a little over a year ago. It was easy to remember the date: *January 23, Caitlin’s forty-second birthday.* The two of them had celebrated afterward with a leftover bottle of champagne, laughing and fooling around behind a dune on Sand Point, pretending to be teenagers again.

Jake checked his watch. *Late for the lunch meeting.* Nielsen’s land receded in the rearview mirror as he accelerated. Ahead, a grove of magnificent banyan trees appeared on the right, bordering the St. Andrew’s Catholic Church. The trunks and aerial roots spread for an entire block, providing decades of enjoyment for island kids, playing tag or hide-and-seek, climbing and balancing on the branches, daring to jump from unnerving heights. Jake navigated the curve around the church property, entering the modest stretch of downtown buildings that paralleled Passage Channel. He turned left into his reserved parking space in front of City Hall.

Two blocks away, Caitlin reclined on an exam table at the island clinic, startled by the troubling discovery. Doc Harris pressed harder, probing the mass deep within her left breast. The expert fingers moved to the side, on an arc toward her underarm. His neutral expression masked what she sought. The room suddenly felt cold. She shivered.

The probing stopped. His hand appeared from under the paper apron, touching her shoulder. He met her look, a furrow forming across his brow. “It’s probably a benign cyst, but we’ll need to get it biopsied, just to make sure.”

The attempt at reassurance didn’t match the furrowed brow, failing to calm the rising fear. She bit her lower lip.

He went to her medical chart, flipping to a page. “Your last mammogram was five years ago. You should be getting one every year at your age.”

Obviously. She shifted her eyes to a watercolor painting on the wall. It depicted Sand Point, the small peninsula at the northwest corner of the island, captured from the perspective of the gulf. Sugar-white dunes and yellow sea oats stood out vividly against the backdrop of dark-green Australian pines. A squadron of pelicans flew overhead in a loose formation.

Doc Harris discussed the referral to a Naples surgeon, describing the likely biopsy procedure.

Caitlin stayed focused on the painting, attempting to blunt his words. Sand Point held such special memories. Many beautiful sunsets had fostered her youthful romance with Jake, their most intimate moments hidden behind those sugar-white dunes.

When do I tell Jake about the breast mass? She thought of what happened to his mother, all the suffering Jake had witnessed at a young age. It had been the reason for his research career, driven by the desire to conquer the enemy that had caused his mother such pain and, ultimately, an early death. *I’ll wait for the biopsy results.* She shivered again.

Two hundred miles to the north, Derek Nielsen watched a cargo ship heading toward the Port of Tampa. A corporate helicopter flew past the ship’s stern, approaching rapidly from the south. It climbed before flaring, descending toward his penthouse office suite above the northern edge of Tampa Bay, disappearing overhead.

The intercom came alive. A woman spoke in a calm, professional tone. “Mr. Diaz has arrived on the helipad. He will be down momentarily.”

“Just send him in.”

“Yes, Mr. Nielsen.”

A pilot boat moved in front of the cargo ship, guiding it toward the port channel. Men could be seen lining the ship’s railing. Nielsen wondered how long they had been at sea.

A nearby floor vent vibrated from a pressure change. A stocky, middle-aged man hurried through the inner office door, his black hair slicked back, briefcase in hand. Nielsen turned, gesturing toward a set of chairs in front of an elegant glass desk.

Geraldo Diaz settled in, retrieving a yellow legal pad.

“And?” Nielsen asked as he seated himself.

“Only Hoefler and Crawford were present at the meeting. She went quiet after I terminated the negotiation and made the offer for the lab property.”

“What about Crawford?”

“Visibly irritated. He asked if we’d take \$14 million for the island land.”

“He added \$2 million to their previous amount?”

“That’s right.”

Nielsen laughed, swiveling to face the bay. The cargo ship had disappeared behind the other high-rise buildings at left. *Nice try, Crawford. Millions are a pittance against billions.* “How’d you respond?” Nielsen asked over his shoulder.

“I didn’t.”

“Good. I’d never accept the pathetic offer.”

“I’ll send a letter declining it.”

Nielsen spun back. “No, do nothing. Let them stew. Hoefler will sell the lab property when the bulldozers get going.”

The rear windows of the mayor's office offered an expansive view, encompassing Passage Channel and the Florida mainland, a half mile away. Jake stared toward the northern horizon, deeply troubled by what had transpired that morning, wondering what had encouraged Nielsen to reverse course.

The passenger ferry came into sight, heading from the island transport dock toward the Gulf of Mexico, destined for Naples. A departing group of tourists lined the railing, aiming their cameras toward the island.

Jake identified the reason for their interest, a scene he had witnessed many times. A rampaging pod of porpoises worked the edge of Passage Channel, bulging torpedoes chasing a large school of mullet, repeated tail slaps scattering the panicked prey. Panting exhalations glistened above exposed blowholes—sunlit puffs of mist shot upward in an energetic display of predatory coordination.

The intercom beeped, followed by a young woman's voice. "Fletcher Hastings from the *Tampa Sentinel*. Line 1."

"Thanks, Sandra." Jake turned to the desk phone, punching a button. "Fletcher, my man. It's been a while."

The familiar New England accent came through the speaker. "I just received a call from our branch office in Tallahassee. There's something you oughta know."

No pleasantries? Jake masked the sinking feeling, responding lightly, "What's cooking in Tallyho?"

"A new bill is circulating in the legislature. If it passes, the State can overrule your no-bridge referendum."

The sinking feeling went deeper. "On what grounds?"

"That the lack of a bridge is severely limiting the development of Marcosta Island, which in turn is harming Naples ... all the missing snowbirds that would otherwise be driving up there to shop, dine, visit spas, engage wealth managers ... all the fancy stuff they do."

Jake shook his head. "Who sponsored the bill? Grimm?"

"No, some two-bit representative from Zolfo Springs. A guy named Wilbur Blake."

"Why would he care? Zolfo's far from here."

Hastings explained, "The legislation is broadly worded. Any local action can be overruled if it causes economic harm to another city or region of the state."

Jake connected the dots. "I'll bet Nielsen's driving this. The Zolfo guy is just a decoy, making it appear like statewide interest."

"Interesting thought."

Jake reacted swiftly to the troubling realization. "Marcosta will mount a legal challenge if the State tries to overrule our referendum. We've controlled access rights to our island since the 1800s."

"I highly doubt a state court would rule in your favor ... particularly if Nielsen is in the mix. Many judicial campaigns have likely benefited from his influence peddling."

Jake emitted a sigh. "You're full of optimism."

"Well, I do have some *good* news ... something I learned from my father last night. You've heard of Adrien Satorri?"

"The movie director?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why's he good news?"

"Dad's been a major investor in Satorri's movies, including the two blockbusters about Vietnam veterans."

"He's done well."

"Dad sent him my investigative series about the 1994 bridge fire, including the posthumous discovery

of Simon's heroic mission in World War II. I guess the articles galvanized Satorri's creative imagination. His production company has already started on the movie project."

Jake glanced at the large watercolor painting. It had been on the wall of the mayor's office for decades. The old wooden bridge had been captured with exquisite detail, spanning Passage Channel in the warm light of an early sunrise. Simon stood in the control shelter next to his bridgetender's shack. The local shrimper fleet paraded through the drawbridge opening, seagulls swooping around the laden vessels.

Hastings continued, "Something else of relevance ... Satorri is big on protecting the environment. He's used much of his wealth to preserve a large tract of land north of Santa Barbara, saving it from development. Apparently, he detests what Nielsen has done to the Florida Gulf Coast, including the suspicious events surrounding the '94 bridge fire."

Jake felt a familiar twinge. "Are you saying Satorri plans to implicate Nielsen?"

"I doubt he would point the finger directly—it would be a clear case of libel. He'll likely dramatize the suspicious events and let the audience draw their own conclusion."

Jake remained quiet, troubled yet again by the conflict of conscience: *violate solemn promises or continue allowing the unwarranted vilification of Nielsen?* Both choices lacked integrity.

"Pretty exciting, don't you think?" asked Hastings.

"Yeah. Where does Satorri stand in the movie process?"

"He has the financial backing lined up, including a chunk of Dad's money. The creative team is underway with pre-filming activities. Speaking of which, expect a call from Satorri's protégé, Anna Nyholm." Hastings spelled her surname.

"Why's Nyholm calling *me*?"

"They want to survey the island and surrounding waters."

Jake reacted skeptically, "To film here? There's no bridge. What little could be saved is now a fishing pier."

"I said the same to Dad. Apparently, they've struggled to find a wooden bridge with a drawbridge and co-located bridgetender's residence—modern concrete and metal bridgeworks are not an arson opportunity. They're considering filming background scenes at Marcosta and then integrating them into studio replicas of the bridgeworks ... using blue screens and CGI.

"It's amazing what they can do these days. Okay, thanks for the heads-up. It should be an interesting discussion."

Jake's new assistant entered his office on the heels of the call with Hastings. Sandra's compact physique reminded him of an Olympic gymnast, taut muscles ready to spring. Dark-brown eyes complemented the jet-black, pixie-cut hair. He thought of her recent arrival on the island, wondering if she was adapting to its slower pace.

"Ms. Hoefler called while you were on the phone with Mr. Hastings. She wants you to call back. Something about the lab's cook."

Jake glanced at his watch.

Sandra placed a document on his desk. "Ms. Wilson said to sign at the red sticker. It's the annual emergency services contract with the County."

Jake signed, handing it back. "How's the garage apartment working out behind Ms. Vickers's house? It's a big change from your swinging condo life in Tampa."

"It's okay. Kinda old and creaky. Ms. Vickers is super cool. She invites me over for after-dinner drinks most evenings. We chat on her back porch until the no-see-ums show up. They were awful last night—look at all the bites." Sandra thrust a muscular leg horizontally in the air, easily balancing on one

foot.

“Trying smearing bath oil on exposed skin. It clogs their tiny mouths, preventing the bites. Commercial fishermen swear by it. Horseshoe Basin smells like a fragrance shop most evenings.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. Hey, before I forget, I’m expecting a call from Anna ...” Jake glanced at his note. “... Nyholm. I need to take it, regardless of what I’m doing.”

Sandra’s eyes went wide. “*The Anna Nyholm? From Hollywood?*”

“You know about her?”

“Are you kidding? She was engaged to John Clanders ... but he backed out right before their wedding date, dumping her for his latest co-star. Katrina ... Katrina ... shoot, I can’t recall her last name. It’s Eastern European ... maybe Russian. She’s younger than me, only nineteen, I think.”

“Who is John Clanders?”

“*What?* He won the Academy Award for Best Actor last year. Didn’t you see Anna with him? You can’t miss her, super tall, slender, gorgeous blonde hair in a long shag cut, stunningly beautiful. John looked so short next to her.” Sandra struck a movie star pose, hands on hips, twisting to the side, chin raised. “I’m more his size.”

“We don’t have a TV.”

“Oh, that’s right ... I forgot. So, why’s Anna calling *you*?” Sandra put a hand to her mouth. “Goodness, that came out super wrong.”

Jake chuckled. “Relax, I’m definitely not a movie star. Listen, I can’t discuss why she’s calling.” He gave Sandra a stern look. “You need to keep quiet about Ms. Nyholm, understood? I’ll let you know when you can tell others.”

“Sure thing, but can I guess?” Sandra lowered her voice, sounding conspiratorial. “I bet she’s coming for a romantic getaway with a hot new movie star boyfriend. You know, the Hollywood rebound thing. No one would suspect them staying here.”

“I doubt she’d call the mayor to make romantic arrangements.” He pointed toward the office doorway.

“Unless she wants special treatment.” Sandra headed to the outer admin office, an extra spring in her step.

Jake shook his head. *She must devour the National Enquirer.*

A call with the county manager ended the long workday. Jake’s thoughts returned to the troubling Blake legislation, pondering the seriousness of Nielsen’s maneuver. The ruminations led back to the Satorri movie.

Jake studied the fishing pier from the office window, thinking of the expected call from Anna Nyholm. He wondered if a replica of the drawbridge and bridgetender’s shack could be erected on the far end. Depending on the filming angle, the downtown waterfront would be seen in the background, along with parts of the gulf and Munson Bay. A scaled-down version of the full bridge could be filmed in a studio using distant perspectives and special effects.

He returned to the desk and opened a side drawer, retrieving the projected city budget for the year. The income barely covered expenses, leaving little cash for capital improvements. He had considered debt financing, but the municipal bond brokers had only laughed, citing the island’s lack of a bridge and tenuous economic status.

The movie might provide the needed cash. He wondered how much the filming fees and extra tax revenues would add to the city’s income. The hit movie *True Lies* came to mind. Many of its scenes had

been filmed in the Florida Keys, recalling that Hanna Sawyer had run the Monroe County Film Commission before becoming mayor of Key West. She would know the financial contribution, along with other insights. *I'll contact her first thing tomorrow.*

He returned to the window. The car ferry was on the other side of the channel, loading vehicles at the mainland transport dock. The activity triggered another realization: if the Blake law succeeded, the new bridge construction would likely interfere with the pier location, removing the filming option. *I need to contact Fletcher and alert his father. Maybe Satorri can help delay the State, buying more time to fight Nielsen.*

Sandra came into the office, sounding breathless. "Anna Nyholm's assistant is on the phone from Los Angeles. Can I schedule the call for 11:00 a.m. tomorrow, Eastern time? You're available."

Caitlin prepared dinner, sniffing. The paring knife cut cleanly, slicing a large onion into small chunks. A bubbling sauce simmered on the stove to her right, filling most of a cast iron skillet. A bowl of shelled shrimp and grouper chunks sat nearby, to be added last.

A car door slammed. Jake came into the kitchen through the cabin side door. He recoiled immediately. "Whoa ... that's one strong onion."

Caitlin wiped her eyes with the back of a hand. "I know. Could you grab me a tissue?"

Jake pulled her close, using the tissue to dab the tears. "You need to wear a dive mask next time." He kissed her briefly, letting go and extracting a beer from the refrigerator, taking a long swig.

Caitlin returned to the task. "How'd it go with Ida this morning?"

Jake placed the beer on the kitchen table and took a seat, wiping drips from his beard with the back of a hand. "You were right. She's devastated."

Caitlin cleared her throat. "Ida had plans drawn for the nature preserve ... about a month ago."

"Interesting. She's never showed those to me."

"She wanted to surprise you—once the purchase of Nielsen's land was finalized."

Jake watched as Caitlin chopped the onion, appreciating his spousal good fortune. Entry into middle age had done little to diminish her natural attractiveness, a wholesome blend of Scottish ancestry and unassuming self-confidence. The appreciation brought a reminder. "How'd your appointment go with Doc Harris?"

"You'll have to put up with me a while longer. Before I forget, you've postponed *your* checkup three times. I told him you've been consumed with the challenges of being mayor."

"To say the least."

"I hope you're hungry," she said.

"Can you hear my stomach growling? Is it what I think?"

Caitlin pointed the knife at the skillet. "Spicy jambalaya sauce, fresh garden okra, and in a moment, the rest of this onion ... followed by the shrimp and grouper."

"Smells delicious."

"Speaking of being mayor, how was the rest of your day? It certainly didn't start well."

"Fletcher Hastings called this afternoon. There's troubling news out of Tallahassee ... proposed legislation that would enable the State to overrule our no-bridge referendum. It explains what happened this morning."

Caitlin spun in surprise, the knife pointing at him. "Overrule us? How?"

He glanced at the knife, eyebrows raised in mock concern, teasing her. "Careful now."

"Oh, sorry." She dropped her arm, pointing the knife at the floor.

Jake described the proposed legislation and the seriousness of the threat.

“Can the State get away with it?” She placed a steaming bowl of white rice on the table, returning to the dinner preparations.

“We’ll need to file a lawsuit challenging the action in state court, although Fletcher doesn’t give it much hope. I asked Miriam to research relevant court cases to verify he’s right.”

Caitlin shook her head in dismay, stirring the skillet. “You’ve had a crazy day.”

“More than you realize. Ever hear of Adrien Satorri and Anna Nyholm?”