

# Suds, Subs, & Subterfuge

By

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## Chapter One

I hung up the phone and stared at the certified letter sitting on my desk like it owned the place. My first instinct? Scam. My second instinct, once I'd done a thirty-second Florida Bar search on my phone, was that it very much wasn't.

There's a particular feeling you get when the universe rearranges your life on a Tuesday afternoon, and it doesn't feel like anything you could have prepared for.

"You okay?" Adeline appeared in the doorway of our shared office, coffee in hand. She had the look of someone braced for news that could go either way.

"Not sure." I shook my head and held out the letter. "I just inherited a house, a building with a laundromat, and a tenant with a sandwich shop from my aunt Catherine."

Addie's brow went up. "But you don't have an aunt."

"I didn't think I did. I always figured Star was an orphan." I grabbed my bag before I could talk myself out of it. "I'm heading to Poe Lakes — some small town in Florida — to get to the bottom of this."

A notification chimed on my desktop.

"That's the rest of the background reports for the Melman/Mac case," I said.

"Forward them to me. You've got a mystery to solve." She held up her mug in a small salute. "Keep me in the loop."

I nodded in thanks and headed down the hall to arrange time off. I had a feeling I was going to need considerably more than a few days.

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My name is Summer Lewis. I'm an investigation researcher for Schuster and Shields — one of the largest security and investigative agencies in the southeastern United States. I spend my days running searches through databases and, when the universe decides to be particularly unkind, digging through physical files in local archives that haven't been digitized yet and may never be. I am probably the only thirty-nine-year-old in America who is still genuinely comfortable with microfilm.

My mother, Star, never used the word orphan. She said she had no family and shut down any further discussion on the subject, efficiently and permanently, the way she did most things she didn't want to deal with. I figured if she wasn't an orphan, she had a difficult past she'd left behind. If my dad knew anything, he never let on. Then again, he wouldn't have. Dad adored Star and would have kept her secrets to his last breath without a second thought.

For a few years when I was small, I had Pops — my dad's father. His blue eyes always sparkled with something just short of mischief, and he could pull quarters from behind my ears and steal my nose and make it feel like the most impressive magic in the world. He made Grandparents' Day at school feel like a celebration rather than an obligation. When he died, I was seven, and the world got noticeably quieter.

After my dad had a heart attack when I was in high school, it was just me and Star. Then, three months ago, Star died of cancer, and for the first time in my life I was completely on my own. Even at the very end, she never mentioned a sister. Never mentioned any family at all beyond me and my dad.

Star was Star. Nobody called her anything else, including me. No Mama, no Mom. Just Star. Her beadwork was legendary on the festival circuit — from basic jewelry all the way up to jackets, shoes, and hand-beaded purses that people waited years to get on a list for. She built real profits doing something she loved, but it was being listed as an honored bead artist in Smithsonian Magazine that she considered actual validation. Her clothes were tie-dyed and sometimes featured her own beadwork. She was a little too young to have been a real sixties hippie, but to look at her, you'd never have known it.

After she died, I knew I'd investigate her past, eventually. The research was always going to happen — I am incapable of leaving a question sitting open. I just didn't expect the past to find me first.

A quick search described Poe Lakes as a natural-lake town in central Florida with a population of just under five thousand. Six hours from Atlanta, according to Maps. The closest larger cities were Jacksonville and Orlando,

both more than an hour away, and Gainesville was the biggest nearby town, which wasn't much larger than some of the suburbs here in Atlanta.

This was going to be an adventure and a mystery; I wasn't sure I was ready to face. I went to pack anyway.

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I-75 south held the first several hours. I'd worn out two podcasts and a curated playlist by the time I exited the highway, filled up, and turned onto the north-central Florida country roads. Sometimes the oaks and pines grew so close overhead that sunlight came through in narrow columns, throwing long geometric shadows across the blacktop. The air smelled different here — pine sap and damp earth and something faintly sweet I couldn't name. I hadn't known Florida could look like this. I'd been picturing beaches and retirement communities. Apparently, Florida had kept this part to itself.

I passed through what had once been a town. A pink, boarded-up corner store stood at the center, its hand-lettered sign too faded to read. A yellow light blinked at the intersection beside a wooden sign where the town name had weathered away entirely, but "Population 20" still showed clearly in old black paint. Twenty people. Somewhere out here, twenty people had decided this was enough.

My turnoff to Poe Lakes. Twenty-five miles.

I put on the Grateful Dead in honor of Star. "Truckin'" seemed right for the occasion, and I sang along the rest of the way.

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The Poe Lakes sign greeted me as I turned off the two-lane highway: Established in 1869 — Population 4,760. I passed George's gas station, an old-time two-pump setup with glass roll-down doors over a pair of mechanics' bays and a glassed-in office with a register on the counter. A tabby cat stretched across the windowsill as if he personally held the deed to the property. I'd only seen places like that in old films. I liked it immediately and made a note to introduce myself to the cat at the earliest opportunity.

The parking lot opened onto a pedestrian Main Street — no cars, just shop fronts and the quiet hum of golf carts making their unhurried rounds. The Poe Lakes Inn sat on the corner where the parking lot met the street, its wide front porch catching the late afternoon light. A painted wooden sign swayed in the breeze like it was waving hello.

Two cats slept on the porch rail beside white rocking chairs. One of them, a large orange tom, opened a single eye as I came up the steps, gave me a slow, thorough assessment from nose to sneakers, and closed it again. I had apparently passed inspection. Either that, or his nap was significantly more important. I chose to take it as a welcome.

A woman at the front desk had a neat brown bob and lipstick in a shade of deep red that would have looked severe on some people but fit her. She looked up with a smile warm enough to take the travel-tired edge right off the afternoon. "Welcome. May I help you?"

"I'm Summer Lewis. I have a reservation."

Her face lit up. "Of course. You're Catherine Ellis's niece." She came around the desk, took both my hands in hers, and pulled me into a hug. I am not, under normal circumstances, a hugger. But somehow this one felt right — like she needed it as much as I did, even though I hadn't known until that moment that I'd needed it at all. "I'm Louise. Cat and I were best friends. Grew up together, same grade all the way through school. I knew your mother, Carolyn, too, of course. She was three years younger than we were."

I let that settle for a moment. "Carolyn?"

Louise still held my hands. I noticed I wasn't pulling away.

I had never once heard that name connected to my mother in my entire life. It didn't fit the Star I knew, not even slightly. This trip was apparently going to be full of more surprises than I could have imagined.

"Cat saw you, you know," Louise said, her voice going gentle. "When you were first born, before the falling out. And she kept track of you as best she could over the years. She always regretted not knowing you."

I nodded. I wasn't sure what else to do with that yet.

"But here I am keeping you standing after a long drive." She produced a room key from the desk — a real one, on a wooden fob, not a card. "Room Twelve, top of the stairs. I'm at the desk until five. After six, for emergencies, I'm on the third floor." She said it in a way that made emergencies sound perfectly welcome, like they were just a different kind of visit.

A slim gray cat with a white patch on his head had slipped in from somewhere and was now winding a slow figure eight around my ankles, purring at a volume that seemed genuinely ambitious for his size.

"Carolyn," I said again. Mostly to myself.

Louise smiled. "She wanted to see the world and share her beads. I think her given name just didn't fit the life she had in mind." She tilted her head. "Star suited her."

It did. I nodded, picked up my bag, and headed upstairs. The gray cat watched me go from the bottom of the staircase, tail flicking in a way that made it clear the jury was still very much out on my character.

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Room Twelve faced the back garden. Through the window I could see raised beds of herbs and flowers, an orange tree overflowing with spring blooms, and two old oaks spreading their arms over everything like they'd been doing it for more than a century and fully intended to keep going. A window seat ran the full width of the window — wide enough to sleep in if the bed hadn't already been a king. A small antique desk added more charm; its white top painted with blue pansies at each corner. At the far end of the room, a settee and two wingback chairs sat on an area rug and quietly dared you to sit down and stay a while.

The room was nearly the size of my studio apartment back in Atlanta.

I thought about how nice it would be to curl up on that window seat with a cozy mystery. Then my stomach growled — loudly, without shame — and reminded me where my actual priorities were.

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The Lakes Diner was two doors down. The smell reached me before I got there — hit me through the door like a warm front moving in, a smell that wraps around you and squeezes. Butter and something braised, caramelized onions and the deep, earthy perfume of slow-cooked meat. I sometimes attended church with my childhood friend, Eloise. This smelled like the Sunday dinner her mother always served afterward.

Inside: booths along the windows, tables down the center, a long counter with a pass-through to the kitchen. The kind of place where the regulars' drink orders are known without asking and appear at the table like magic. I loved it immediately.

I had barely sat down when the booth behind me started whispering with the enthusiasm of people who believe they are being subtle.

"Herbert." The woman's voice dropped to what she probably considered quiet. "I think that's Cat Ellis's niece. She sure looks like her aunt."

"Margaret," the man said, in the patient tone of someone who had been saying that exact phrase for thirty-odd years. "Mind your business."

I kept my eyes on the menu and smiled to myself. Small-town gossip was alive and thriving in Poe Lakes.

A young woman set a menu on the table, her blonde hair in a high ponytail, her smile easy and genuine in a way that couldn't be faked. "Welcome to Lakes' Diner. You must be Summer — Louise called ahead. I'm Marissa."

"Nice to meet you. What's good?"

"Everything. But tonight's special is pot roast with mushrooms, carrots, and onions over mashed potatoes. It's a local favorite and we don't always have it."

"I'll take it. Mac and cheese on the side."

"Oh, good choice." She wrote it down with the approval of someone who knew what good eating looked like. "Tea?"

"Unsweetened."

She wrote that down too, tucked the ticket into the pass-through, and called back to the kitchen without ceremony: "Special with mac. Cat's niece is in tonight."

A woman appeared at the window — about my age, dark hair, dish towel over her shoulder. She gave Marissa a look, then caught my eye and offered a small nod and a quick smile before turning back to the stove. I had the feeling I had just been filed away for future reference.

Pot roast arrived on a wide shallow bowl, and I actually paused for a second before picking up my fork, because it deserved a moment. The beef had been braised until it gave up any pretense of holding together — it pulled apart at the suggestion of a fork, dark and yielding, surrounded by mushrooms that had soaked up every bit of the cooking liquid as the gravy thickened, sweet caramelized onions, and carrots that had softened to near-butter without losing their shape entirely. The gravy was the color of mahogany and smelled like it had been thinking about itself for hours.

And underneath all of it: mashed potatoes. Not the kind from a box, not the kind stretched thin with too much milk. These were the real thing — dense, creamy, with just enough butter that you could taste it separately from the rest, blanketed in that dark, glossy gravy. Serving pot roast over mashed potatoes instead of alongside them was, I decided immediately, one of the finer ideas this town had ever produced.

I ate slowly delighting in every single bite.

The mac and cheese came in a small cast-iron skillet, still bubbling at the edges when Marissa set it down. The top had a golden crust that gave a satisfying little crunch before the fork went through to the creamy layer underneath — sharp cheddar, I thought, maybe something else, something that added depth without announcing

itself. It was the kind of mac and cheese that makes you wonder why you ever ordered anything else. I had to physically talk myself out of ordering a second skillet to go. I would be back. This was not a question.

The walk to the inn was short. The evening air was cooler than I'd expected, carrying the sweet smell of orange blossoms and something I couldn't name.

I thought about what Louise had said. She kept track of you the best she could.

An aunt who had known me from a distance. A mother who had been Carolyn before she was Star. A house on a lake I'd never heard of, left to me by a woman I'd never met.

I didn't know what to do with any of it yet. But I had a feeling Poe Lakes was about to start talking, whether or not I was ready to listen.