

1CHAPTER 1

I identified the body for the cops, and gave Lucas a quick moment of silence with a hint to a higher power to let the guy in the gates. He died in a place he didn't like, doing work he wasn't very good at, having no place else to go. No mother gives birth thinking her child will end up like this. Reading the note scrawled across his desk pad, tugged at me. "Sorry, Slade." Apologizing for what, I didn't know. Bless his heart.

Hands on my hips, I surveyed the small office. O-positive primer wasn't quite the color I had in mind, but Lucas Sherwood hadn't given the walls a second thought when he used a .45 to blow out the left side of his head.

Damn it, Lucas. What were you thinking? Why here? Why now?

He was a fifty-year-old divorced alcoholic, an agricultural technician five years short of a retirement he didn't want. I was the closest thing to family for him but couldn't tell you his phone number without looking it up.

Three days later, I had the official nod from the local authorities to enter his office and have it cleaned. The yellow police crime tape blocked the doorway to a room resembling a horror movie set. The sight did little for my employees' morale not to mention our clients. Painful or not, we had to return to business. People depended on us.

My signature line read Carolina Slade Bridges, County Manager, United States Department of Agriculture. I made government loans and grants on behalf of the American taxpayer to the rural residents of Charleston County, South Carolina. Frankly, I spent more time trying to get the money *back*. Poverty tended to make repayment difficult. This job made for stories the average urban dweller would never comprehend.

The county contains the stylish historic city of Charleston everyone associates with culture, Southern charm, and plantation bluebloods living in antebellum splendor overlooking The Battery. No one envisioned small time farmers scrambling to make a living on Rhett Butler's stomping ground, but the string of islands along the coastline support many of them surviving by the grace of federal monies.

On the Friday following the suicide, the three remaining members of my staff awaited directives, expecting me to put our professional lives back on track. We had a pile of pending work, and I assigned tasks attempting to create some semblance of normalcy. Normal lasted about five minutes.

"How can we just sit here like nothing happened?" said Ann Marie. My middle-aged, wide-eyed clerk often appeared as if she'd witnessed a miracle and couldn't forget it. She adored me, for some reason, and her Monday morning sugar cookies often thanked me for taking the time to explain instructions to her. Her smile dimmed on few occasions, but talking about Sherwood made it fade.

Jean Sparks, my office manager, sat with a ramrod spine and a steno pad. "Honey, life goes on." She tossed her coifed head of ink black hair locked with sprayed lacquer.

"He never hurt anyone," Ann Marie said, "and he seemed so lonely."

"He didn't do sh..." I cut Jean short with my "don't start with me" glare.

"Y'all, he's gone," I said. "Let's honor him with our prayers, but remember the work's stacking up. Jean, since you want to talk, how far behind are *your* deadlines?"

The return to hum-drum discussion about workloads eased the tension. We

covered the basics, and with a residual mourning of a minute and a half, we adjourned minus the usual chatter about kids, mall sales and local politics. Felt funny without a man in the room.

The last year had been rough for my crew. Lucas Sherwood was death number two. A year ago, almost to the day, my easy-going boss Reese Wilder drove to one of the islands and never returned. At least the staff had closure in Lucas' case. I immediately stepped into Reese's job and sensed he continued to peer over my shoulder. The man had been my mentor, and his spirit of leadership hovered in the office. The cops labeled his disappearance a probable suicide or unknown accident based on a string of personal factors I wasn't entirely privy to. The police moved on. We remained behind, shaken in our foundation of Reese thanks to the whispers and innuendo.

Phones started ringing and clients trickled through the door. I remained in my office dissecting complex applications. Slim chance management would replace Lucas considering the minor contribution he'd made in the grand scheme of things. He'd inspected the property we held as collateral for the millions of dollars in our loan portfolio. I'd have to assume his duties to count heads of livestock, inspect equipment and monitor crops. Mud-on-my-shoes stuff I hadn't done since becoming the boss.

Ann Marie poked her head around the door. "Slade, Mr. Rawlings is out here to see you."

Slade was my maiden name going back to my great grandmother from Mississippi. Only my Momma and Daddy called me Carolina and nobody who knew me used my married name, Bridges. I loved my heritage, but I didn't love my husband. Slade was the best title for all concerned.

I ran a tight ship garnering jokes from my counterparts with different gonads than mine. My husband would say it wouldn't alter the planet one bit if no one got to know me. We didn't see eye-to-eye, but that's his problem. I considered myself mostly misunderstood, especially when it came to males...especially those of the idiot persuasion.

"Jesse Rawlings' here? Did he say why?" I hated drop-ins. I liked order. Especially since I'd had so little of it lately.

"No. He only said he has a check to give you. He's short on his payment again, but I didn't talk about it with him." Ann Marie preferred to make nice with the public and direct problems to me. I had a reputation for squeezing money out of rocks.

"What can I do for you, Jesse?" I said walking to the front counter – an eight-foot barricade designed to buffer the disgruntled. We aided many people in the rural community and loved doing good deeds, but money issues brought out the worst in some.

The hog farmer grinned, exposing uneven yellow teeth in dire need of fillings. Here stood a comedy of errors in fashion. Jesse always traipsed into the office in well-used denim overalls, a John Deere cap and a tan and black hounds tooth sport coat he inherited from his father and stored on a hanger behind the passenger seat in his pickup. Wearing the coat was respectful of my position, and I reciprocated that respect. Jesse hadn't finished eighth grade and possessed a semi-functional command of the English language. He lived so far out that coming to town took half a tank of gas, a cost he could ill-afford. I think he held a mild affection for me.

He chuckled and gestured for me to lean closer. I obliged him not knowing whether to expect a joke or a plea for an extension on his payment.

“You know how I ain’t been making my payments, right?”

Real astute, Jesse. I nodded.

“Well, I’ve got a great idea on how to fix all that.”

Oh boy, here we go. Some of my clients concocted schemes of borrowing more money to make more money. In the agricultural world more debt meant a quicker demise ninety-nine percent of the time. I waved my arm toward my office, but he shook his head and curled his finger, drawing me in like an anxious kid with a secret.

“There’s ten thousand dollars in it for you,” he whispered. “If you find a way to get me the Williams farm. You’ve always taken care of me. It’s been...what, eight years or so we’ve done business? We can iron out the details in your office...in private.” He winked. “If you know what I mean.”

I whispered back with a smile. “Sure, Jesse, I’ll just hand you the Williams farm. No charge.” Jesse was prone to silliness at times. His effort toward humor amused me. I chuckled and decided to stand in public in lieu of my office, since he was simply cutting jokes.

A calloused hand with fingernails caked with God-knows-what pulled me toward him by my sleeve. A strong whiff of porcine manure filled my nose. “I mean it,” he said, the humor gone.

Suddenly the situation wasn’t funny, and my pulse escalated. He wasn’t joking. I got that. So now what was I supposed to do? Jesse was showing me a side I’d never seen before – cunning with a hint of desperation.

“I’m not messing with you, Slade. I got plans for that farm. You can’t imagine the difference a deal like this can make for me...and there’s ten thousand dollars in it for you.”

God! Now the man offered me a bribe.

“Don’t be silly, Jesse,” I said. “What’s gotten into you?” I glanced around at customers and employees. Thank goodness, no one appeared curious at our conversation.

“Just think about it,” he said. “We can chat another time about the details. I got to get to the feed store before they close.” He released me and regained his six feet two inches, grinning like he’d won the state lottery. A plastic smile held my composure in tact.

His voice returned to normal for the benefit of those in the room. “I only got a little over a thousand dollars for my sales this week, Ma’am. I lost six more hogs in the last few weeks. The vet don’t know what killed four of ‘em. I never could find two. Before you ask, I didn’t call the deputy. If they’re stolen, they’re already bacon. No point in looking.”

He handed me a piece of paper smeared with various hues of brown. I gingerly took the check, fingering the cleanest spot on one end. I wrote a receipt with a slight tremble in my hand, and tossed the payment in the safe for the next Treasury deposit.

No mistaking his offer: money for abusing my position. If I didn’t report it, I was as culpable as if I’d taken the bribe.

The loan manager in me wanted to scold and remind him to pay his debt on time. I didn’t have time for shenanigans. But the hairs bristling on my arms told me to tread carefully. Government officials like me easily wound up on the front page of national

papers over simple matters like this. Stupid misunderstandings got feds fired, often imprisoned. A manager in Calhoun County lost his job over something bribery related, and last I heard, he worked at a feedlot in St. Matthews making half his pay.

I leaned an elbow on the counter. “Jesse, at this rate you’re not going to meet your payment. If you’ve got ten grand, just pay up.”

Reaching over, he rubbed his finger over the back of my hand and winked. “You can’t get blood from a turnip, Ms. Slade,” he roared, in mock desperation.

Ann Marie and Jean raised their heads.

“Sorry,” he apologized with an apologetic wave.

The ladies returned to their work, Jean shaking her head.

Still snickering, he lifted his hat and ran a hand over slick raven hair. He slid the greasy John Deere cap on from front to back, and adjusted it in place - a move saying “I got to go” in country talk. Then he buttoned the sport coat like he’d just stood from a pew in church.

“Sorry I disturbed you ladies. Y’all have a nice day. You, too, Ms. Slade.” He bowed touching the brim of his hat in exaggerated fashion, and sauntered toward the door. He stopped and turned. “Shame you losing Mr. Sherwood. Kinda sad when someone pops himself over nothing. I’m just glad it wasn’t murder.”

Murder. Where the hell did that come from? I watched the farmer cross the parking lot and climb into his truck, with a dance in his step that unnerved me.

I hurried back to my office and sat down to think. Whether anyone found out about this bribe offer was up to me. Was I overreacting? Would it be so bad if I didn’t

report it? Jesse was a schemer, damn it. This could be no more than a sick joke on his part. How he'd find ten grand was beyond me.

My instincts told me to forget the conversation. Federal law told me I didn't have that option.

My red-headed assistant manager loved problems, especially when they fell on my plate. I felt Hillary's eyes on me before I saw her leaning against the doorframe. She was so stinking predictable.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"You know Jesse Rawlings. All mouth and excuses. I'll have to go out there and count hogs. They seem to be sprouting wings and flying away."

She threw me a sly smile. "So what did he whisper in your ear?"

"He said I looked damn good today. That's what all the farmers say in my ear." I moved toward her and she stepped back. I smiled and shut my door.

Hillary hated having a female boss ten years her junior. It wasn't my design to be younger, higher ranking and more affluent, but she acted as if I were the architect of her life. We'd had a few heart-to-heart chats about her attitude, but even so, she stood next in command in this little kingdom of ours. Some days I bit my tongue, remembering her rough upbringing as a foster child and a husband who beat her when his truck was in town. If she heard one word of my conversation with Jesse, she'd use it to her benefit. Another reason to report him.

I paced my office, a ground level room measuring twelve by twenty with three floor-to-ceiling windows on one side. The size emphasized I was the top dog in this small kennel. My desk was based at one end. A long table jutted perpendicular to it around

which I held meetings with loan committees, families, and my staff. A cheap pre-fab table next to my chair supported my computer, manuals, and management books on how to be perfect at my job.

The room's length made for good pacing, and if you peered hard, you'd see the rut. I liked walking. It beat the hell out of sitting still and rocking my leg like someone needing to pee. A quiet way to vent without exposing my self-doubts and dilemmas to my staff.

We'd just gotten rid of a cadre of cops, agents and assorted control freaks from Lucas' suicide. A half-joke, half-serious insinuation about a measly ten thousand dollar bribe seemed minor in comparison to losing a life, but I had to consider the rebound effect. Damn. Why did he have to get a wild hair now, of all times?

I had to think straight. Just the hint that I'd hidden his attempt would warrant an internal investigation. My record was as close to pristine as you could get, and a black mark on it concerned me more than Jesse. Recalling the touch of his rough finger on my skin sent a shudder through me. Why couldn't this man stick to raising hogs?

Decision made. We had too many unraveling threads in this office already, more than I could control, especially with an upcoming audit by the bean counters in Washington.

Somebody somewhere was going to consider me an absolute idiot for calling this in to the authorities, but my career meant more to me than anyone's half-assed opinion. Rules were absolute; that's the way I was raised. I stared out the window, biting my lip – pondering the ramifications of my next move.