

## PROLOGUE

*Predestined Recipient,*

*If you're reading this desperate correspondence, I implore you to take my words to heart. Please don't reject my story as mere fable without first granting me some considerations. If you think you've just happened upon this harrowing tale, be forewarned. It was by design.*

*You see, from the time I was a young man, I've been an advocate for true justice. I had always believed that if you did good, good would come back to you, trusting that what I did somehow mattered.*

## THE END

**3:37 A.M., BOCA GRANDE SHORES**, a peaceful upscale bedroom community on the West coast of Florida. It was a quiet night in the dispatch center of the Sheriff's Office when suddenly, "911, what is your emergency?"

A frail, desperate voice, clearly that of an elderly woman answered, "Yes, I can hear my neighbors screaming at each other. It sounds like they're having a terrible fight. I've never heard them fight like this before. I'm very worried. Can you please send someone right away?"

"What is your address, ma'am?"

"I live at 2700 Red Oak Circle."

"Is this a gated community?"

"Yes, it's the Mossy Hammock subdivision."

"Is there a gate code?"

"Yes, but there is a guard on duty at the main gate. In case he's not there, the code is star one-five-four-three-two. Please hurry! It sounds like it's getting worse."

"We have units en route to you at this time. Can you see anything?"

In an attempt to conceal her anxiety, the woman answered facetiously, "Honey, at my age I couldn't see anything even if it was light out. They sound like they're outside now. I'm too afraid to look."

"Yes ma'am, please stay inside. Will you stay on the line?"

"Yes, of course."

"What is your name, ma'am?"

"Beatrice Johansen."

"OK Mrs. Johansen, I'll stay on the line with you until the deputies arrive."

"Thank you."

“My pleasure.”

Mike, a decorated deputy and ten-year veteran of the Sheriff’s Office, was enjoying an unusually quiet night in Zone Four. Mike was conducting routine business checks when suddenly the radio crackled, “Four-thirteen and four-ninety-five respond to the area of 2700 Red Oak Circle for a possible domestic in progress, caller advised it appears to be intensifying, she’s unsure if there are weapons involved, make contact with caller at 2700 Red Oak Circle.”

Mike answered, “Four-thirteen en route from the Carson & Associates Law Firm.”

Mike’s backup, Steve Wilcox, a rookie with six months on his own since completing his field training, also responded, “Four-ninety-five en route from Tampa Trail and Palm Lane.”

Mike recalled that Red Oak Circle was in Mossy Hammock. He was very familiar with this subdivision, since he had patrolled Zone Four for the previous three years. Mossy Hammock was an upscale community of high-end waterfront houses, home to executives and wealthy retirees. Mike thought, *I wonder if Old Joe’s on duty.*

Joe McCallister, a night security guard at Mossy Hammock, was a retired New York City police officer. After losing his wife to cancer four years before, he had picked up the security job to keep from getting bored. Joe preferred the night shift and always had, even as a cop in the Big Apple.

When Mike arrived at the guard shack, he recognized that the guard on duty was Joe. On quiet nights, Mike would often visit Joe and swap cop stories. Joe was a tall, thin man in his sixties and it appeared that he had fallen asleep in his desk chair. Mike honked his horn, and Joe jumped up, rubbing his eyes. Mike smiled. He identified with how hard it was to stay awake on the graveyard shift, particularly when it was quiet. Joe lumbered to the door.

Mike, now chuckling to himself said, “Mornin’, Joe. Didn’t mean to wake you.”

Joe countered in a gruff voice, “I wasn’t sleeping, asshole. I was just checking my eyelids for leaks.”

The two laughed briefly, and then Joe said, “What brings you around Mike—business, or just to screw with me?”

Mike replied, "We got a call from a Mrs. Johansen about a possible domestic."

"Old Lady Johansen... yeah, she's nice enough, kind of a busybody. She's always calling me about something she heard outside. To tell you the truth, I think she's trying to get me to come over. She lives alone in that big ol' house and she always wants me to come in for coffee."

Jokingly, Mike said, "Maybe you should court Ol' Lady Johansen."

"Don't think I haven't considered it, boy. But she might be a little *too* old, even for a geezer like me."

"Well, she called to say that she heard the neighbors screaming."

"Funny, she didn't call me tonight. Maybe it's legit. Watch your six. I haven't heard anything."

"How could you with all that snoring I heard pulling up?"

"Screw you! Get to work, ya prick!" Joe said as he opened the gate.

After a shorter than normal session of bantering, the two laughed, and Mike drove through.

Although he had been on hundreds of domestic-related calls in his tenure as a deputy, Mike knew that no two are ever alike. His training and experience had taught him to treat each one as a potentially deadly situation until proven otherwise. As he approached Red Oak Circle, Mike turned off the lights of his patrol car.

It was an uncharacteristically bright night. A three-quarter moon shone above in a clear, cloudless sky, creating a monochrome scene with a light blue hue, reminiscent of a black and white movie. Mike preferred patrolling on nights like this; stealthily driving, blacked out with the windows down, making use of all his senses. The November night air was remarkably cool and dry by Florida standards. An early cold front brought with it low humidity and temperatures in the low fifties.

Mike turned onto Red Oak Circle and reported "Four-thirteen arriving on scene," stopping his car four houses away from Mrs. Johansen's address. He knew this gave him a tactical advantage, allowing him to look and listen for danger as he drew closer to the scene. Before approaching the residence, Mike waited for his backup unit, knowing not to enter a potentially hazardous situation alone.

Shortly after his arrival, Mike heard over the radio, "Four-ninety-five on scene in the area."

Mike looked up to see the glow of Steve's headlights coming from around the corner, and with a brief radio transmission reminded him, "Four-ninety-five, kill your lights and park behind me."

Steve complied and parked behind Mike's cruiser.

On the phone the dispatcher spoke, "Mrs. Johansen, the deputies are on scene, can you see them?"

"Let me look. I'll step outside. Oh yes, I see them."

"Okay, Mrs. Johansen. I'll let you speak to the deputies now. Take care."

"Thank you, dear. Good night."

Mike and Steve exited their vehicles and closed the doors as quietly as possible. As the two walked toward Mrs. Johansen's house, Steve whispered, "What's up man? Been a quiet night so far, huh?"

Mike looked at him. "Rookie? Tell me you didn't just say the "Q" word."

With an innocent grin, Steve said, "Oops, sorry."

"Damn F-N-G!"

As they approached, they could see Beatrice, a petite, 87-year-old, silver-haired woman wearing an elegant, flowing white robe. She was standing on her darkened front porch with a concerned look on her face.

When Mike and Steve got closer, she shouted in a shrill voice, "Over here, Officers. I'm the one who called you!" Her voice cut through the crisp night air like a knife.

Afraid of losing his strategic edge, Mike took his right index finger and raised it to his now pursed lips, gesturing to Beatrice to speak softly.

Mike then approached Beatrice on her front porch. "Good morning, ma'am. Can you tell me what you heard?"

In a softer voice Beatrice said, "Well, I'm usually not a light sleeper, but tonight I woke up to the sound of a man and a woman screaming. It sounded like it was coming from that house." She pointed to the house across the street, 2701 Red Oak Circle. "They're usually such a nice, quiet couple. I ordinarily wouldn't have heard anything, but I was sleeping with the windows cracked open. It sounded just awful. I was afraid they were going to get violent, but then it suddenly stopped just before you arrived. I've lived here for