

Chapter One

A soft knock on my office door broke my concentration. I knew it wasn't my wife, Carrie—she often burst into my office hoping to catch me at something shameful—and no one else would interrupt my work for anything less than a fire. That certainty caused the hairs on my arms to dance and my stomach to fall into my lap. For three months, a tenuous ceasefire had been in effect as my wife and I had moved into separate bedrooms and isolated areas of our large house. Except for the kitchen, our demilitarized zone, every room was off-limits to one of us. As I verified a complex algorithm that predicted debilitating diseases for people with certain DNA signatures, I didn't want to lose my train of thought, so I scribbled a note to mark my place in the long list of calculations before saying, "Yes?"

The door cracked open only far enough for me to see panic in the eyes of our maid, Rosa.

"Mr. Randle, a gentleman is here to see you." Without waiting for a response, she withdrew and pulled the door shut.

Loud enough to be heard through the door, I said, "Who is it, Rosa?"

She didn't answer, so I had no choice but to trot after her. From my third-floor perch, I scurried down the back staircase to the second-floor gallery and down the ceremonial staircase to the ground floor. Carrie stood beside the staircase, in front of the formal dining room, flanked by

Rosa and our yardman, Larry. They were lined up like “See no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil” until Carrie inched back and behind her two protectors, like a quarterback retreating into the pocket formed by burly linemen.

I looked at them with a question on my face, and they stared back. As always, my wife appeared to be a store mannequin in the department where they sell male attractions—buffed and polished, garnished with jewels, adorned in linen and silk. At five-foot-two, Carrie reached only to my shoulders, and in contrast to my lean, long-limbed torso, she was an eye-catching confluence of tanned, sweeping curves. Trying not to leer at her oversized bosom was like trying not to gawk at a car crash. Short blonde hair in the spiky style favored by sexually liberated women, sapphire-blue eyes beaming like expressionless gems on a ragdoll’s face, acrylic fingernails done in the trendy French style, and toenails painted a purplish color completed the picture of a forty-four-year-old woman who actively sought the attention of men of all ages.

Today a yellow stone the size of a man’s thumb hung from a platinum chain and rested on two inches of her exposed cleavage. Dangling earrings matched the necklace. A diamond-studded anklet encircled one sharply contoured ankle, and rings decorated one thumb and one index finger, but no wedding rings were in evidence.

I paused and shot the three another quizzical look. In return, I got nervous stares, so I headed to the front double doors that stood wide open. A slight black man I didn’t recognize fidgeted on my porch. He hadn’t been invited in, and he looked too nervous to have accepted. My heart rate changed from a lope to a sprint; everyone was nervous that something bad was about to happen. When I reached the porch, I saw that the visitor had parked his car facing the street on the circular drive, blocking Carrie’s red Jaguar convertible on the carriage porch. Carrie reserved that spot for her car because it afforded weather-protected access to the private spaces of the house. Guests used the front double doors that led through the foyer to the formal dining and living rooms. Rosa and I used the garage entrance. This guest had left his engine running and the driver’s door open, ready for a getaway, like a bank robber.

I said, “Can I help you?”

“Are you John R. Marks?”

That confused me for a moment. Then I realized he was referring to me. “Yes, I am.”

As soon as I identified myself, the nervous young man thrust a thick envelope at me and I reflexively accepted it.

“You’ve been served, Mr. Marks.”

The process server whirled around, trotted down the steps, and jumped into his car. Without a wave goodbye, he stepped on the gas and accelerated down the driveway.

It was not likely that my neighbors had served me some benign summons. It was not likely that I had been served with a business-related lawsuit at my home. There was only one possibility, and it had me swinging between anger and shock.

The three of them were behind me, waiting for a reaction, so I tore the envelope open with my back to them and read the top page of the document.

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF CORTES COUNTY, FLORIDA

Carrie T. Marks, Plaintiff v. John R. Marks, Defendant

SUMMONS

An italicized paragraph of pretentious eighteenth-century legalese demanded that I file a response to this complaint with the clerk of court within thirty days or face a summary judgment in the case. Below the legalese a number of notarized signatures—Carrie’s, the circuit court clerk’s, and that of Carrie’s attorney, a woman named Roberta de Castro with an address in Largo—made the document official. I wasn’t accustomed to seeing my name written as “John R. Marks.” As a youngster, people had called me “Jack” and my mother had called me “Jackie.” Still did on the rare occasions we saw one another. When I enrolled at Georgia Tech, I became J. Randle Marks, person of importance, and I asked people to call me “Randle,” my mother’s maiden name.

I flipped to the second page and found an oversized bold-type banner:

PETITION FOR DISSOLUTION OF MARRIAGE

Twenty pages of text followed the banner, but I didn’t bother to read them. I spun on my heel and charged toward Carrie and her bodyguards. When I was within ten feet of her, I tossed the document at her like I was throwing a Frisbee to a dog. She sidestepped the missile and it came apart, a big chunk flying under the formal dining table, two pages separating and twirling to the floor like elm tree seedpods falling in the springtime.

“You’ve quit on us! You should be ashamed of yourself,” I said as I turned toward the staircase.

Carrie cowered behind Larry and said, “Randle, you have to read this. You can’t stay here.”

“Don’t worry about that. I don’t want to be here.”

Seeing an opportunity to earn his keep, Larry said, “We don’t want any trouble.”

I leaned over the bannister and said, “Who’s ‘we,’ punk? You’re not involved in this. In fact, you’re trespassing, so get out of my house.”

Carrie said, “I have possession of the house, Randle. You’re the one who has to pack up and leave.”

“Keep him on the ground floor where he belongs,” I shot back. “If he puts one foot on the stairs, I’ll call the cops.”

“When are you leaving?”

“I’m going to make some calls. I’ll leave when I’m ready.”

I continued up the stairs to the second floor and heard Carrie say, “I’ll call my lawyer!”

As I walked across the gallery past guestrooms, I shouted, “Call the TV news for all I care.”

At the end of the hallway, I climbed the narrow set of stairs to the third-floor attic, my private portion of the residence. In one half of the attic I had stored my life before Carrie—all the paintings Carrie wouldn’t hang on her walls, all the framed pictures she wouldn’t display, all the trophies and masculine trappings for which there wasn’t appropriate space in “her” house. The other half was an enclosed home office, my refuge.

The office measured twenty feet by thirty feet, with blood-red walls and an indestructible Berber carpet. Bookshelves lined two walls, and two dormer windows overlooked the pool and wooded backyard. A nine-foot-long spindle table served as my desk, and an overstuffed couch often served as my bed. After a particularly vicious fight, I had moved out of the first-floor master bedroom and stored my clothes in a second-floor guestroom. I preferred sleeping in my office, however, because the door locked, the stairs squeaked, and I could keep my pistol within reach. I locked the door now and took a seat behind my desk.

My first call went to the cell phone of Tony Zambrano, my best friend and nominally my lawyer. He didn’t answer, so I hung up and sent him a text message: *SOS answer the damn phone*. About five minutes later my cell phone rang.

Tony said, “I was putting. Where’s the fire?”

“I’ve been served.”

“I assume you’re not referring to breakfast.”

“Cut the crap, Tony. Carrie filed for divorce, and I’ve been served.”

“Okay, okay, stay calm. What does the summons say?”

“We have to answer within thirty days.”

“Sure, that’s routine, but what does the filing say about terms of separation?”

“I guess it says I have to leave the country house. That’s what Carrie said.”

“You don’t know? Take a look and tell me are there any exhibits or notices attached to the summons.”

“Ah, I don’t have it in front of me, Tony. I threw it at Carrie, and it’s scattered around the dining room floor at the moment.”

“Dammit, Randle, you’re going to screw this up before we can fight it. Pack your bags and move to the beach house. Now!”

“Sure, just didn’t want her to think I was scared of her.”

“You should be scared. Your life as you knew it is now over. Don’t do anything stupid. Don’t even talk to her. Drop the summons at my office on your way to the beach house, and come see me tomorrow.”

“How is this going to work, Tony?”

“Tomorrow, Randle. Right now I have to hit my tee shot. These guys are drooling over the money they’re going to win from me. Drop in the bucket compared to what you have at stake.”

My second call went to my daughter’s cell phone. She didn’t answer either, most likely on duty for the Tampa Police Department. I left her a message that I would be at the beach house for the foreseeable future, in the remote chance she needed to reach me.

I was spurred to action by the realization that I was an isolated combatant in enemy territory, like a soldier separated from his platoon in the jungles of Vietnam. I packed two briefcases with my laptop computer, product designs, papers, pens, and business cards. Then I grabbed two large traveling suitcases from the storage room and carried it all down to my temporary bedroom on the second floor. There I packed business clothes as I had plenty of casual clothes at the beach house. I made two trips down the stairs to get it all into the garage before I stuck my tail between my legs and crawled around the dining room floor, gathering the pages of the court summons. Larry watched from the safety of the foyer, Rosa peeked around the corner of the kitchen, and Carrie stood in the hallway leading to the master bedroom. They guarded what Carrie considered valuable as though I were a thief in my own home.

With that embarrassment out of the way, I got into my aging Ford Bronco parked next to Rosa’s generic sedan on the garage apron. Before I could put the car into reverse, Carrie ran up to the window and said, “Give me the house keys and the garage door opener.”

“We both know you’ll change the locks before I get out of Cortes County, so what’s the point? And I’ll want your keys and garage door opener for the beach house in exchange. You got those handy?”

“I can get them.”

“You do that.”

When Carrie turned to go back into the house, I put the Bronco in gear and backed around Rosa’s car. As I sped down the driveway, Carrie waved in my rearview mirror. Probably the keys; probably not bon voyage.

In less than an hour I reached Tony’s office in a high rise at the intersection of Fourth Street and Fourth Avenue North in downtown St. Petersburg, dropped off the summons, and made an appointment for the following morning. Then I drove on Central Avenue to Dolphin Beach on the Gulf side of the peninsula.

Our “beach” house, which I had purchased before meeting Carrie, was not on the beach. It was a traditional Florida bungalow—a single-story cinderblock rectangle built on a concrete slab with a Mexican tile roof and electric hurricane shutters. The house had no curb appeal, and the interior added no charm—just a series of small square rooms adding up to less than two thousand square feet of living space. Located on an inlet off the Intracoastal Waterway, three blocks from Gulf Boulevard and the beaches, the house was off the beaten path of spring breakers and the locals who came out in the heat of the summer. At the back of the property, a wooden dock and boatlift sat unused because the inlet provided insufficient depth at low tide for anything but rowboats. As a result, I kept my elderly Carver aft cabin cruiser at the municipal marina in St. Petersburg.

I loved the bungalow because the floors were terrazzo and the carpets were Berber, a screened porch was fitted on the back, and the backyard was dominated by an in-ground pool and a hot tub on a slab. When I wanted to, I could climb out of the water and walk into the house dripping wet to get a beer without harming anything. Trees, hibiscus, and sea grape separated the bungalow from the neighbors, so I could skinny-dip day or night although I could never convince Carrie to do it with me. In fact, Carrie hated the bungalow and insisted that I put it up for sale. She loved the beach, but she was haunted by the reminders that I’d had a life before I met her. She said she wanted something different, something truly “ours.” The Realtor’s sign was in the front yard, but the Realtor was under strict orders from me not to show it and not to encourage buyers. No

way would I ever sell my favorite place on earth.

I pulled the Bronco into the circular drive and unloaded the luggage. When I opened the front door, the alarm system didn't beep its warning to enter the security code. While I was in Atlanta on business a couple of weeks ago, Carrie and her girlfriends had stayed at the bungalow, and apparently she had forgotten to set the alarm when they left.

I dragged the luggage indoors and found the interior stifling hot and humid. I flipped a light switch so I could see the air conditioning controls on the wall, but nothing happened. The switch controlled table lamps in the living room, but one of the girls must have turned off the lamps. The first lamp I tried didn't work. Neither did the second. Like a fool I went from lamp to lamp and wall switch to wall switch, hoping for light long after I knew there was no electricity.

As I walked through the house, intending to go out the back door to get some daylight to use my cell phone, I discovered that the dining room furniture had vanished. Peeking around the corner into the family room, I found it empty too. Outside, the wicker porch furniture was gone. Where the chaise lounge chairs should have posed beside the pool there were only leaves and twigs from overhanging trees. Without electricity the pool pumps weren't running so the pool was full of trash and the still water had stagnated. I raised the lid on the hot tub and the smell of foul water ringed by green scum assaulted me. Two abandoned wineglasses sat side by side in a corner of the tub.

Sitting with my legs crossed on the Cool-Crete surface surrounding the pool, I dialed the power company and navigated the maze of menus until I reached a customer service representative, who informed me that the electricity had been disconnected because the bill hadn't been paid in three months. As a result, I would have to pay past due charges, plus late fees, and make a new deposit to reopen the account. A succession of calls to the gas company, the cable company, and the municipal utilities produced the same results. Carrie paid the routine bills, so I had no idea the utilities had been turned off.

Just to be doing something other than wallowing in pity, I grabbed the pool skimmer and removed the leaves and seedpods from the pool. Then I drained the hot tub and carried the wineglasses into the kitchen. Lipstick smeared the rim of one glass but not the other. A quick tour of the interior revealed that Carrie had taken the guest bedroom furniture as well. Her closets and dresser drawers were empty. The glass-doored wardrobe in the living room had been emptied of keepsakes and statuettes. The only rooms that were still furnished were the small living room and

the cramped master bedroom. Behind my back, Carrie had taken everything she wanted from the beach house.

As I moved from room to room, my footsteps echoed in the empty spaces, drowning the echoes of an ex-girlfriend's laughter. Several murals painted by the girlfriend, Susanne, dominated rooms now devoid of furniture and turned them into small museums. An underwater scene of a coral reef and colorful fish decorated one wall in the family room; dolphins played between windows in the guest bedroom; and yellow seahorses hid behind the shower curtain in the guest bath. For me, the murals added a touch of class to an otherwise classless bungalow. To Carrie, the murals were my way of holding onto a former girlfriend and a former lifestyle. She was probably right; I had allowed the conflict to cause friction between us like a pebble in a shoe.

I dialed my wife's cell phone and reached a recorded message informing me that the number had been disconnected. Smart girl.

The refrigerator contained moldy food and spoiled milk, so I drove to the local Publix and bought a cooler, a bag of ice, and a case of beer. In the garage, I found a ratty old folding chair, placed it in the shade of the screened porch, and took stock of the situation. While pretending to work on our failing relationship, it was apparent that my wife had prepared for today's events over a long time. Carrie had shared the hot tub with someone who hadn't worn lipstick. Instead of sharing the financial windfall that was on the immediate horizon, Carrie had opted to run off with as much as she could grab and pull the center pole from the rickety tent of our marriage.

All my dreams dissolved like cotton candy on my tongue, except there was no sweet aftertaste. Yes, they had been dreams—a crowning success after a career studded with entrepreneurial failures, enough money to cut my commercial business ties, enough money to devote my time to writing and lecturing—and finally they had been within reach. Until there came one soft knock on my office door.