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OUTER BANKS

DEAD BREAK

JAY COLES

AMULET BOOKS

NEW YORK

CHAPTER 1

KIE

“HELLO? ARE YOU THERE? I KNOW YOU SEE ME STANDING right in front of you!”

A big, burly man with a bald head is waving in my face. I’d seen him approach the counter I’m standing behind, but if I’m being honest, I kind of tuned him out until he snapped and cleared his throat at me loudly.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“I’d like a refill,” he says, his voice a little raspy, shoving a clear cup in my face.

“Can you remove your straw, sir?” I try to keep the sass to a minimum; Dad says “the customer is always right” and all that, but it sneaks out from time to time.

He reaches forward and yanks it out. I’m not sure who pissed in this guy’s cereal this morning.

“Diet Coke?”

“Coke Zero,” he corrects.

I turn around, hiding my eyes as they roll to the back of my head. Diet Coke. Coke Zero. What's the difference?

The end of the school year and the beginning of summer break should have felt like some kind of victory lap. Particularly after the year I had, I deserve a summer filled with lazy mornings, friends, time in the water, and delicious, ice-cold treats that cool you down from all the heat. Summer break should be just that: a break. I'm desperately in need of one, especially after attending the Kook school, KCD (Kildare County Day School), all year long. My parents thought that KCD would straighten me out, put me on some "better path." All the Kookness made me want to vomit after the first week, let alone the full year. But summer break hasn't been much of a break from anything at all so far. Instead, summer's been more work than usual.

It's not like Mom and Dad gave me a choice. Waitressing at The Wreck for the summer for more hours than normal was part of the deal we made to get me back to public school in the fall. I thought it would be a small price to pay, all things considered.

But summer at The Wreck is the opposite of a break from Kookness. It might be even more Kook-filled than KCD, and that's saying a lot. Well, Kook- and tourist-filled. I'm not sure which is worse.

After filling up the drink, I hand it back to him and tell him to have a nice day. He grunts in return. Charming.

I wipe my hands on the apron tied around my waist, emblazoned with the restaurant's name. Other than the apron, we waitresses get to wear what we

want, which for me means a black tank top and jean shorts. My dark hair is piled on top of my head, standard practice to prevent any stray curls from falling into people's food. At least I don't have to wear a hairnet like the folks who work in the kitchen (though Dad threatens to put me there from time to time if I can't be polite to customers). Hairnet or no, I'm not sure I'd mind. At least in the kitchen I could gossip with the chef and roll my eyes at the Kooks out front while accommodating their special requests: sauce on the side, dressing on the side, ice on the side. Sometimes I think they'd order their entire meals on the side if they could.

I glance at the clock above the entrance to the restaurant. One hour before my shift is up. If Pope was here, and if he was feeling as impatient as I am, he'd do the math: one hour, the equivalent of sixty minutes, or however many seconds, however many milliseconds, and on and on. (Unlike Pope, I can't do all that math in my head. Or I could, but I don't want to.)

My eye stops on the wall of posters and signs at the entrance to the restaurant, and I feel a thrum in my chest. My dream is to surf. If there's one thing I know I could do for the rest of my life, it's surfing. And not just for fun, but as a professional, with endorsements and a team and fans. A few weeks ago, some customer asked to put a flyer up on our local events wall at The Wreck. Annoyed, I waved him off and let him put his flyer up there. Later, walking by it, I saw that it was a call for surfers to enter a competition right here in our very own waters. I snatched the flyer off the wall and showed it to my parents that night at dinner, but between snide comments and being totally

ignored, it was clear they had no interest in letting me do it. But if there's anything I've learned about dreams, it's that they don't come true if you don't fight for them. And becoming a surfer is worth the fight.

After all, I've got nothing to lose.

The group sitting at one of our center tables gets up to leave, so I pull my gaze from the contest flyer, grab my tray and a rag to bus the table. The wait-staff has a long-running bet on who can bus tables the fastest. My best time so far is twelve seconds flat.

I clean the table in thirteen seconds this time. No record breaking today.

I turn around and let out a yelp that tightens up my whole body as I nearly collide with a tall guy who appears more like a brick wall.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," the guy says apologetically. He reaches for my shoulder but stops short of touching me, which is good. Dad doesn't like when I lecture the customers on boundaries.

I take a breath and get myself together, straighten myself out. "No problem, I'm fine. Just was caught off guard."

"Didn't mean to scare you," he says with a laugh, but I don't see what's funny.

"You didn't scare me." I've never seen this guy before. He has light brown eyes and dark brown hair that falls across his face like he doesn't have time for haircuts very often. He's wearing a bright tank top and jeans. He's definitely from out of town, and he's definitely not a Kook. Kooks don't apologize.

“Hey, do you, like, work here?” He has a slight foreign accent. It’s subtle but there. And before I can answer or react at all, he catches himself. “Sorry, that’s such a dumb question. You’re wearing an apron and you just cleaned off a table. Of course you work here. Unless you’re just the most generous person of all time.”

“Yeah,” I answer. “I work here.” Usually, when I smile at the customers, it’s all saccharine and aspartame, by which I mean it’s artificial. But I can’t help it; I’m flashing a real smile at this guy almost without realizing it.

“So . . .” he says.

I look up at him.

“Sorry, I just—can you tell me where the bathroom is?”

Oh, of course. That’s why people talk to waitresses. I point him in the right direction, but I can’t help watching him leave. He’s got a lean, athletic build, his movements almost feline in their fluidity and grace.

That’s when it hits me: This guy’s a *surfer*.

The competition is just around the corner.

The contest is open to anyone: professionals, amateurs, wannabes, and everyone in between. Major surf competitions aren’t usually held on the East Coast—our waves aren’t nearly as big as those in other parts of the world—but apparently, the organizers of this competition wanted to prove that there can be serious surfing on this side of the globe.

Even though Dad has a strict no cell phones policy, I pull my phone from my pocket and sneak a peek at Surfline. The site is predicting a storm off the

mainland that's going to bring bigger waves to the waters around the island, which means the competition won't just be paddle-in surfing but tow-in surfing as well. Which means surfers from around the world will be coming.

Here. To the OBX. Looking to catch monster waves.

I wonder if the guy who just bumped into me is one of them.

Dad shouts my name, and I stuff my phone back into my pocket. "Order up, Kiara! What are you doing on your phone?"

The thing I want to do most is lie, but Dad can fact-check me by looking at my phone history. "Just looking at stuff about the competition."

He grimaces. "Listen, Kiara, I know you really want to do this, but I don't think that's the best use of your time. We can talk more about it later, but for now, we've got hungry customers who have been waiting a while for their food."

I exhale loudly and walk away from him. I set a platter full of raw oysters on ice at table twelve and fried clam strips on table thirteen. I glance at the clock. *Tick, tick, tick.* Thirty minutes left to my shift.

Twenty-two minutes.

Eighteen minutes.

Did time always move this slowly?

Just when it feels like time has slowed to a standstill, I hear a whistle that can mean only one thing: John B, JJ, and Pope are approaching in the HMS *Pogue*. John B, JJ, and Pope are my closest friends—more like my mini-family—who often get me in a ton of unwanted trouble, but they're also

who I have the most fun with and they always have my back. All four of us are close, but John B and JJ have known each other the longest, having grown up together more like brothers than friends.

They pull up to the dock outside the restaurant, and John B tosses me a rope. John B is wearing a short-sleeved button-down that's not actually buttoned, showing his chest and abs. That's the thing about John B: either he's shirtless or he's wearing something that shows his chest. I've never asked him about that, but if I were a guy and had abs, I'm sure I'd do the same.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" I ask in a mock posh voice. Dad would love if I talked to customers that way. "Even Pope has decided to grace us with his presence."

Pope's spending his summer working, too, and he's working even more hours than I am. Not that he's actually getting paid. He has an internship at the local morgue, which would be weird for anyone except for Pope. For him, it makes perfect sense.

Sometimes I'm jealous of Pope. Both of his parents are Pogues. Both of his parents are Black. Both of his parents support his dream, or, at least, they seem to.

JJ's lounging across the back of the boat, but he pushes his sunglasses up to the top of his head and raises his eyebrows, bleached even blonder than usual by the summer sun.

"You see Surfline?" he asks.

"Yes!"

"Think you might try tow-in surfing?" JJ sits up straighter, his blond hair flowing in the wind. John B rolls his eyes as he secures the boat to the dock. JJ's got skills on the water, but he doesn't always remember to offer to help. John B wipes his forehead with the handkerchief wrapped around his wrist.

"I've only ever paddle-surfed, JJ," I answer. "I wouldn't have any chance of winning the tow-in competition."

"See?" JJ leans back in his seat. "This is why I don't think surfing should be competitive. It's all about the *experience*, not the medals."

"The prize isn't a medal, JJ. It's twenty thousand dollars."

JJ's eyes are already big, but they get even bigger. That's almost enough money to make him rethink his stance on whether surfing should be competitive.

John B says, "Maybe we should all enter. Four surfers have higher odds of winning than one. We could split the prize money evenly, whoever wins."

"You sound like Pope, calculating the odds," JJ says with a laugh, his smile revealing dimples.

"Five thousand apiece sounds good," Pope says. "But you forget, I don't really surf. Not like you guys." Of the four of us, Pope is the one who probably least enjoys being out on the water. But Pope's probably the smartest and the most talented out of all of us. He can do a little bit of everything. I like that about him.

"You sure you were born on this island, Pope?" JJ teases. "Cause sometimes you sound like you grew up on the mainland."

I hear the sound of Dad clearing his throat behind me. That's his wordless way of saying that I'm not supposed to spend my shift hanging out with my friends.

"Hi, Mr. Carrera," Pope begins, but Dad isn't interested in the Pogues, not even when they're trying to be polite.

"Why don't you bring some of those boxes from the back to the bar, Kiara?"

"My shift is almost over!" I protest, but Dad's expression is stern.

"And you three"—Dad nods at the other Pogues—"this dock is for *paying* customers."

JJ stands and winks. "We'll be out of your hair in no time, Mr. C. Just wanted to use the bathroom."

"Also for paying customers," Dad begins, but JJ's already hopped out of the *Pogue* and followed me into the restaurant.

But instead of heading for the bathroom, JJ follows me into the storage room, where Dad's stacked cases of wine bottles and liquor for the summer menu.

"Is this what heaven looks like?"

"Very funny, JJ."

He grabs a bottle of my dad's premixed sangria before I can stop him and races for the door.

"JJ!" I shout.

Dad keeps close inventory over his supplies. He'll know JJ stole. I run after him, but JJ's already on the *Pogue*, and John B is already untying the rope from the dock.

Crap.

The alarm on my phone starts to buzz. My shift's finally over.

I don't hesitate. I run down the dock and leap onto the *Pogue* just as John B turns on the engine.

"Saved by the bell," I say.

"Just tell him the bartender's stealing from him."

"I'm not going to get some innocent employee in trouble just to help you cover up your crimes, JJ."

JJ rolls his eyes, then takes a swig of his contraband. He pulls a face.

"How bad can it be?" John B asks.

"Picture grape juice mixed with sour trash can juice," JJ says. He passes the bottle to John B.

"It's not bad," John B says, thoughtfully taking a sip.

"My dad's specialty. It's called the Island-tini," I explain. "Merlot mixed with club soda and slices of pineapples. He worked really hard on that name. Kooks love it."

"It sounds like something a Kook would drink. Fizzy and fancy, yet dry. I don't like the way it makes my throat feel like a carpet is rubbing against it over and over again."

"Kooks don't know what a good drink is, I tell you," JJ adds. "Kooks don't understand life."

"What do you mean?" I ask him.

"They don't know what fine dining is. A nice hot with mustard and a PBR. Not some nasty merlot and a loaf of meat they eat in some fancy restaurant at one of the hotels."

"Fish," I correct.

"What?"

"Kooks are here for fish, not meat."

JJ shrugs. "Whatever."

I plop down next to Pope in the back of the boat. "You think if I won the competition, my parents would let me quit The Wreck?"

Pope runs a hand over his close-cropped hair. "I doubt it."

"Maybe serving Kooks wouldn't suck so much if I knew I had twenty K in the bank." I lean back, releasing my hair from its work-ordered bun. Pope laughs as my curls brush against his chin.

"If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell them?" Pope nods in the direction of JJ and John B.

"Promise," I say, crossing my heart like I did when we were little.

He tilts his head down and leans close so I can hear him over the roar of the engine when he whispers, "I wouldn't quit my job for all the money in the world."

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CHAPTER 2

POPE

“SO, HOW’S YOUR INTERNSHIP GOING, POPE?” KIE ASKS. WE’RE hanging out at the Chateau, which is kind of like our home away from home. It’s got a huge backyard, a hot tub, and a lot of pictures of John B as a baby with his dad. We’re sitting on the patio, just talking and hanging out. The bottle of Island-tini is long gone, but I can still taste it in the back of my throat, like sour cherries.

“I’m loving it. It’s hard work, but I’m learning so much.”

“Like what?” Kie sounds genuinely curious. She gets me in ways JJ and John B don’t.

“Like, I always thought that your hair and nails kept growing after you die.”

“They don’t?”

“Nope,” I answer. “What actually happens is the human body dries out, so that nail beds and skin on the head retract, making it look like your nails and hair are longer.”

“That’s interesting,” Kie says, so I keep going.

"And you pee and poop a lot—like *a lot*—when you're dead for a while."

That's when JJ jumps in. "I don't want to think about pooping when I'm dead."

"You won't be thinking about *anything* when you're dead, silly, because you'll be dead," Kie says reasonably. She turns back to me. "What else have you learned, Pope?"

"Some dead bodies make really loud groaning noises."

JJ makes a *wooooo* sound like a ghost, but I shake my head.

"It's not creepy! It's science. It's because of all the gases trapped inside the body."

"How does that make it less creepy?" JJ responds incredulously. "That gives me the creepy-crawlies all over my skin!" JJ scratches his arms fiercely like a little kid who just got a taste of his first horror movie.

"Want to know one more fun fact about death?" I ask.

"No!" JJ and John B shout, but Kie shouts, "Yes!" even louder.

"There's a legit chance one of us could die by spontaneously combusting at any moment," I say. "It's terrifying, but also really, really cool, right?"

JJ and John B shake their heads like crazy, but Kie smiles at me. "It all sounds very . . . Pope-ish. I'm glad you're enjoying it." I love Kie's smile. It's one of the best ever.

"Moving on to something less freakin' gross . . . You guys ever name stars when you were a kid?" JJ asks all of us. I roll my eyes good-naturedly.

"I can't say I have," Kie says.

"Same," I add.

"I did once," John B answers. "But I didn't know you did, JJ. I've known you since the third grade, and I'm just now learning this?"

"I'm a man of many mysteries," JJ replies. "John B, even you don't fully get all of my layers. Even you, my friend."

"Shut it," John B tells him. "I know you like the back of my hand."

"You see that really big star right there?" JJ says, pointing up high.

We all mumble some variation of "yeah," even though we don't know which star exactly he's referring to.

JJ says, "I named that star Taco Cat when I was nine."

"Taco Cat?" I say. "Why'd you name it that?"

"I liked that Taco Cat is also Taco Cat spelled backward," JJ says, and laughs.

"That's called a palindrome."

"What did you just call me?" JJ says, looking offended.

Kie explains: "A palindrome is a word or phrase that reads the same backward as forward, like *radar*, *poop*, *kayak*."

"Palindromes can also be numbers," I offer. "Also, aibohphobia is the irrational fear of palindromes, but aibohphobia is a palindrome itself!" I laugh a little at that fact.

JJ groans. "It's supposed to be summer break, not Mrs. Walter's English class."