

The Others

T. C. Weber

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Maps



Chapter 1

Will

Will Myers inched his pickup past the downed trees and powerlines scattered along U.S. 1 in the Florida Keys. The drive home had already taken four hours, but he was used to it. The price of living in paradise—albeit a dying paradise—was the yearly onslaught of tropical storms and hurricanes.

Will had left his friend's place in Fort Lauderdale, just north of Miami, as soon as the road re-opened. He hoped his house was okay. It had survived prior hurricanes, though, and this one had unexpectedly veered further west, sparing the Keys a direct hit. Besides, when the mandatory evacuation was announced, he'd packed his most important possessions—his fishing and diving gear—in the 29-foot boat safely hitched to the back of the truck.

He drove onto the low concrete bridge heading into Long Key, where he'd lived since his PhD days—over seven years now. Still roiled by the storm's aftermath, the choppy water was strewn with seaweed, palm fronds, and fragments of wood. The sky was milky gray, the color of rotting fish.

The old-fashioned ringing of a rotary phone sounded over his car speakers. The number on the display wasn't in his contacts, but had a local area code. Will tapped the phone button on the steering wheel. "Hello?"

"Will?" asked a faintly Bahamian-accented voice. "It's Eloise."

Eloise Clark was a friend from the dive club—and the Medical Examiner for Monroe County. Will's fingers tightened on the steering wheel. The aftermath of a hurricane wasn't a time to discuss diving. In her official capacity, she'd only call if she had terrible news. His mind raced through a list of relatives and friends who might have ignored the order to evacuate.

"Are you there?" came her voice.

He swallowed. "Um, yeah, what's up?"

"You're okay?"

"Yeah." He kept his eyes on the road.

"Are you back in the Keys?"

"Almost home." Traffic was speeding up. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I need your opinion on something."

Will exhaled and his fingers relaxed. “Can I call you back when I get to the house?”

“Sure.”

The bridge turned into a causeway, which widened into the beginnings of Long Key. After another minute or so, he reached the ‘City of Layton’ sign and turned left. Layton was tiny—about 200 residents. But he could walk to work, there was no crime to speak of, and best of all, he could keep his boat in the water next to the house.

Will pulled into his lot, which was littered with debris. Fronds from the palm trees lay across the gravel, and part of the balcony railing had been ripped away. But the sand-colored house itself—a two-bedroom living section atop an open carport and enclosed utility room—looked okay. The solar panels on the roof were intact and the steel accordion shutters still snugly fastened over the windows. Will exhaled in relief.

He hopped out of the truck and walked around the house. The air was fetid and muggy. His first impression was correct—no major damage—and he started clearing a path between the road and the garage.

It was getting harder and harder to live here. By mid-century, the sea would be two feet higher, most of the island submerged, and hurricanes more intense. The coral reefs, the focus of his studies and his playground since childhood, would die completely, and the economy of the Keys would follow. *And there’s nothing I can do to change it.*

Will trudged up the external stairs with his phone. With the windows shuttered, it was dark and stuffy inside. He switched on the lights—his solar kit included a rack of batteries—and was greeted by memorabilia of happier times. His eyes lingered on the wedding photo on the wall. Yoselin, the love of his life since college, holding his arm and smiling. Him, a head taller than her, sweltering in his tuxedo, his brown hair slicked back by the stylist, completely at odds with his normal look.

Yoselin had been gone two years now, victim of a Covid variant and a chain of complications. Every reminder hollowed out his chest and filled it with hopelessness.

I need a drink. But first, he had to call Eloise back.

“Hi, it’s Will again.”

“Any damage?” she asked.

“The house is fine, more or less. Haven’t been to the lab yet.” The Keys Marine Laboratory, where Will conducted his research, was a five-minute walk from the house. “We moved everything we could to the top floor,” he

added, “so hopefully, it’s just a matter of cleaning up and putting things back.”

“That’s good. Listen, can you come over to my office? There’s something I’d like you to take a look at.”

It took a second for the strange request to register. “Something? Not someone?”

She paused before answering. “It’s a someone—a male teenager. No ID.”

Not someone he knew. At least, not someone she knew he knew.

“Police found him washed up near mile marker 75,” Eloise continued.

Islamorada, Will translated subconsciously. An overdeveloped island he’d passed through on his way home.

“Why me?”

“There are... oddities you might be able to shed some light on. Since you study marine animals and, uh, perform a lot of necropsies.”

Will studied sea turtles, five species of which were endangered. Once grown to adult size, they were mostly immune to predation. Their usual cause of death, when someone brought in a corpse, was ingestion of plastic trash—humanity’s #1 contribution to the ocean.

He asked, “What do marine animals have to do with... Was he bitten by a shark?”

“No shark damage. Anyway, you’re nearby, and I could use your expertise.”

“What do you want me to look at, then?”

“Easier if you come and see for yourself. That way I’ll get an objective opinion.”

Will’s coursework at the University of Miami had included comparative anatomy and physiology. But he’d never examined a human corpse. An unappealing prospect. He wasn’t the sort to make excuses, though. “Give me a few minutes to unload and I’ll head over.”

* * *

The Monroe County Medical Examiner’s Office was on Grassy Key. With the slow traffic, it took Will nearly half an hour to get there.

He’d never been to Eloise’s office before. Two single-story, green-roofed buildings sat connected by a breezeway and surrounded by battered scrub. The hurricane had toppled the electric and floodlight poles, which

had been bulldozed out of the way, along with piles of plant debris. The rumbling of a diesel generator sounded from the far side of the buildings.

Will met Eloise in the lobby. She was older than him—about forty—with dark brown skin and close-cropped curly hair, and wore a white lab coat with huge pockets.

“Thanks for coming,” she said.

She led him down a hallway and opened a door with a keycard. They entered a tiled room with stainless-steel cabinets, sinks, and equipment trays. Frigid air blew from ceiling ducts, raising goosebumps on Will’s forearms. The room reeked of formaldehyde and alcohol.

On the metal autopsy table in the center lay the body of a teenage boy, clad only in swimming trunks. Will recoiled at the sight. He forced himself into scientist mode, and noted no visible damage—at least at first glance.

“I took photos and fluid samples,” Eloise said, “but I haven’t opened him up. We’re hoping to find next of kin, but he didn’t have an ID.”

The boy had an oval face, large almond-shaped eyes, a slightly broad nose, shoulder-length dark hair, and smooth, golden-bronze skin. He had a thick chest and muscular legs, like an athlete. But his most distinguishing features were large feet, elongated toes, and thin webbing between the fingers and toes.

Real or fake? Will stepped closer to look.

“Gloves on.” Eloise passed him a pair of latex gloves. “You might want to take the ring off.”

Will twisted off his wedding band, feeling naked and alone without it. He secured it in his pocket, then slipped on the gloves and approached the body.

The feet were wide, especially in front. The toes were at least twice as long as normal—almost like fingers. Bad for endurance running, but advantageous for swimming. The webbing looked and felt like real skin, like that between his own fingers, only reaching all the way to the top joints.

“Take a look at this.” Eloise shone a penlight into the boy’s nostrils.

Inside the hairless interior, the flesh bulged noticeably. Will poked it. It was pretty solid. “Strong-looking nasal musculature. I bet he can—could—close his nostrils easily.”

Eloise handed him an otoscope. “Check out the ear.”

The lobe was a little smaller than normal, with an enlarged tragus—the flap people pressed to block loud noises. The ear canal was short and wide. Through the magnifying lens of the otoscope, the tympanic membrane—the

eardrum—was also big. It was undamaged—no signs of rapid pressure change.

“Have you ever seen ears like this?” Will asked.

“Never.”

The eyes were closed, but seemed a little on the large side. “Do you mind if I lift the eyelids?” he asked Eloise.

She pushed them up herself. The pupils were fully dilated, pools of black staring unseeingly at the ceiling. And there was something strange about the iris.

“Do you have a magnifying glass?” he asked.

She pushed over a hefty magnifying glass mounted on a swing arm, and flipped on its ring light, illuminating the boy’s face. Seen close-up, the iris muscles bulged upward, forming a raised berm around the wide pupils.

“It looks like his iris muscles are thicker,” he said.

She peered through the magnifying glass. “Agree. Why would that be?”

Will wasn’t exactly sure. “Maybe some adaptation to see underwater? I’d have to look into it.” He pulled out his cell phone. “Mind if I take some pictures?”

“Go ahead, but you can’t share them anywhere.”

“I know.”

As Will took photos, Eloise asked, “So what do you think?”

He stared at the oversized webbed feet again, one of the most bizarre things he’d ever seen. “He’s evolved flippers, either by chance or genetic tinkering.”

“At least he doesn’t have gills.”

“Gills can’t provide enough oxygen for warm-blooded animals. You’d need 50 gallons of sea water per minute passing through the gills to keep a human alive.” He’d calculated this while an undergrad. “The gills would have to be bigger than the body. That’s why dolphins and whales breathe air.”

Eloise picked up a data pad and started typing, her fingers a blur.

“What’s the cause of death?” Will asked.

“Don’t know yet. Drowning, perhaps. No froth around the mouth or nose, but I’m going to check for water in the lungs. Only marks I found on the outside were postmortem, probably from when he washed ashore.”

“Did you estimate a time of death?”

“Around the time of the hurricane. The body’s past the rigor mortis stage, so it’s been more than 24 hours. Sheriff’s deputy found him against a house on Sunset Drive. He hadn’t been exposed to air long, but the decay

rate in salt water is considerably slower. It's hard to tell how long he was in the water until I run some tests. But decomposition's minimal, and nothing's fed on the body, so he died either during the hurricane or shortly before. My guess is, he's a hurricane victim."

"Could have come from Cuba," Will mused. *Although that's 90 miles away.* "Or a boat."

"That's what I was thinking too. The hurricane passed between Florida and Cuba."

"Does Cuba have genetic engineering labs?"

Eloise shrugged. "Not my area of expertise. I'm going to open him up now." She looked at Will. "You don't have to stay, but it might be helpful."

Seeing the dead body hadn't been as bad as he'd feared. It was almost like examining a dead marine animal, which he'd done a thousand times. "I'm fine," he said. *So far.*

Eloise donned a surgical mask and hair net, and instructed Will to do the same. She switched on an overhead video camera and narrated, "Resuming examination of unknown male teenager," and added the current date, time, and other official details.

With a long-handled scalpel, she cut a deep 'Y' incision from the front of each shoulder down to the pelvis. Eloise peeled back the skin, pulling the top flap over the face.

Will felt stirrings of revulsion. He told himself, *it's no different from dissecting a sea turtle.* He noted the subcutaneous fat layer was thick for someone in such good shape.

Eloise switched instruments and snipped the ribs in half. She set aside the severed sternal plate, revealing the internal organs. With scissors, she cut out the body organs individually and placed them in enamel kidney-shaped pans by the sink at the foot of the long table, narrating her findings as she went.

Next, she sawed open the skull and removed the brain. Will had never seen a human brain before, only props. The bulging folds were yellowish and coated with thick, congealed blood. His stomach turned queasy and he found himself backing away.

Eloise glanced at him. "There's some Vicks over on my desk. It can help mask the odor."

Will flushed with embarrassment. "That's okay." He forced himself to approach the table again.

Eloise proceeded to weigh the organs and narrate the readings. "They're all within the normal range for someone his height and weight," she told

Will afterward, “except the lungs, which are slightly larger, and the spleen, which is twice the normal size.” She looked at him as if waiting for feedback.

“The lungs are obvious,” he said, “to store more air.” He tried to remember what he’d been taught in biology classes about spleens. *It filters blood... Holds white blood cells for fighting infections...* “I’ll have to get back to you about the spleen,” he said.

Eloise resumed her examination, removing and fixing small fragments of each organ for later testing. “There’s water in the stomach, but no food material,” she spoke to the camera. “Intestines empty.”

“So he hadn’t eaten for more than a day before he died?”

“Correct. Bodies typically release stool from the rectum after death, but without muscles pushing it along, whatever’s in the intestines remains.”

She dissected the lungs next. “There’s water in the lungs. Quite a bit.”

“So he drowned?” Will asked.

“Apparently.”

“Isn’t that strange for someone with so many... um, swimming adaptations?”

She met his eyes. “If he was caught in the hurricane, it wouldn’t matter.”

Plausible explanation, but... “Why would he swim in hurricane conditions? It couldn’t have been by choice. Even dolphins and sharks leave the area when hurricanes approach.”

Eloise shrugged. “That’s a question that can’t be answered in the lab.”

“So what happens next?”

“I write a report and send a copy to the sheriff’s office. The remains stay here until claimed by next of kin. If no one claims it, it’s delivered to the anatomical board, and I predict a big fight over who gets to use it for research.”

* * *

After leaving the Medical Examiner facility, Will drove to the Keys Marine Laboratory, crossing his fingers that the damage wouldn’t be too bad. It had survived Irma, after all.

The pastel green, two-story administrative building was still intact. The power lines were down, though. And debris lay everywhere, deposited by the waves. It smelled like dead fish and seaweed.

He parked in front of the building. The only other vehicle was a red pickup with a covered bed and mirrors secured with duct tape. It belonged to David McGee, the facility manager.

Will hopped out and noticed the whine of an engine and intermittent scraping noises. He went around back and saw David driving a Bobcat, pushing debris into a pile by the seawall. Seagulls circled, landed, and gorged on dead fish. Will waved, but McGee didn't notice, too focused on his work.

Will unlocked the lab's back door. The air inside smelled musty and briny, and the industrial carpeting was damp. At least the building itself looked fine, and all the computers, books, and files had been moved upstairs.

He flicked on the lights—the lab had installed solar panels and a sizable array of batteries to keep the refrigerators and aquariums running at all times—then opened all the windows and internal doors to air out the building. His office was upstairs. It looked as he'd left it, every available space packed with chairs and boxes from the ground floor.

He returned downstairs. The lab had a cleaning service, but keeping busy was his key to staving off gloom about Yoselin and the sorry state of the world. It might take weeks to purchase and install new carpeting, and nothing could be moved back downstairs until it was dry. He hunted through closets until he found a shop vac, and started sucking water out of the carpet.

David burst in with the satisfied look of a man who had just cleaned out his garage. He had dark skin and a short, graying beard, and was dressed in a T-shirt, shorts, and a Miami Dolphins cap. He stopped and stared. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Drying the carpet,” Will said. “What does it look like?”

“I called the cleaning service. They'll be here tomorrow.”

“Mildew sets in quick.”

“You are a man for whom every silver cloud has a black lining, Will. Don't worry about it, my man! Taking care of this place is my job.”

Will shrugged. “I like to keep busy, you know that. How's everything look?”

David recited a litany of minor damage and tasks to complete. “Made a lot of progress today.”

“Looks like the Tequila Sunrise is open. The sign's on.” The Tequila Sunrise Bar & Grill was the only bar in Layton, and was conveniently located next to the lab. Will was a regular there.

“If it weren’t for the mandatory evacuation,” David said, “I bet they would have stayed open during the storm.”

Will chuckled. “Grab a beer?” It was just after four, the beginning of the three-hour Happy Hour.

“Now, wanna finish as much as I can here, then heading back to Marathon. Told the wife and kids I’d be there for dinner.”

“Next time, then.” They bumped fists.

“Next time.”

Will headed to the bar. The Tequila Sunrise was a small aquamarine wood structure in front of the identically-painted Key Lime Hotel. Like the morgue, it was running off a noisy diesel generator. Will entered the covered patio bar, which hosted local talent on weekends but was nearly empty today. He greeted the other customers—all locals—and sat at the blue-tiled bar.

The bartender, a tanned 34-year-old blonde named Cookie, hailed him with her usual uplifting greeting. “Well, if it isn’t the good-looking guy next door!” She was attractive, Will admitted, but married—not that he was interested, anyway.

“Channel Marker?” she offered.

“You know it. Got anything to eat?” His refrigerator was mostly empty—he’d consumed the perishables before evacuating.

“Out of almost everything. Fish sandwich and fries okay?”

“What kind of fish?”

“Whatever’s left—I don’t know.”

He shrugged. “Sold.”

Cookie poured him a pint of Channel Marker IPA, a beer brewed in nearby Islamorada, and passed the check through the hatch to the short-order cook in back. Johnny B, the deep-brown, heavyset Bahamian owner and occasional chef, strode out of the kitchen. “Will Myers!”

“Johnny B Good! I’m guessing you stayed again, sitting out front with your shotgun and a bottle of booze?”

“Had to keep an eye on things. Sheriff’s department gave me a pass, being an essential pillar of the community and all. Hell, where do you think they eat when everywhere else’s closed down?” He grinned.

The owner went to greet other customers, and Will’s attention drifted to the TV screen above the bar. A meteorologist was discussing the hurricane’s impending landfall in Louisiana. Driven by warm water in the Gulf of Mexico, it had increased to Category 4, with 150 mph winds. *Someone’s*

gonna get it bad, Will thought, feeling both sympathy for Louisiana and relief that the Keys had escaped the worst of it.

The channel cut away to a blonde anchor in the studio. “This breaking news,” the anchor declared in a no-nonsense voice. “Explosions have been reported throughout Saudi Arabia tonight. We have exclusive video.”

On the screen, a massive orange fireball lit the night sky across an expanse of calm sea, followed by a low boom. It was followed by another fireball, then another, then another. Will’s stomach sank the way it always did when he was confronted with bad news.

The screen split into two windows, blazing fires on one side and the blonde anchor on the other. “That’s footage from just minutes ago,” the anchor said. “I want to go to our correspondent in Riyadh, Badawi Wazir. Badawi, what have you heard?”

The right window switched to a dark-haired man standing on a balcony overlooking a brightly-lit city. “Judy,” the man said, “social media is literally ablaze.”

Will grimaced at the cheap pun.

“There have been explosions all along the Ras Tanura waterfront,” the correspondent continued, “which handles 75 percent of Saudi Arabia’s oil exports.”

Judy the anchor returned. “We’ve got more live video from the scene.”

A low-resolution camera panned from left to right, showing massive fires burning everywhere. It wobbled as it switched to selfie mode, showing a young, nervous-looking Arabic man. “I am Uzair. I study here in Al Jubail.” He cut back to the front camera and zoomed in on one of the distant blazes. “That’s King Fahd Industrial Port, where the first explosions happened.”

The anchor and correspondent reappeared on the left side of the screen while Uzair the student occupied the right, fires burning in the background.

“That’s one of the busiest oil loading facilities in the world,” the correspondent said.

“What time did the explosions start?” the anchor asked.

Uzair’s face returned. “About eleven. Maybe fifteen minutes ago.”

“Any word on casualties?”

Uzair scratched his dark hair. “Not that I’ve heard.” He spoke to other people off-screen in Arabic.

The anchor’s eyes shifted, then she faced the camera again. “We’ve just received word that the Port of Yanbu on the Red Sea Coast has also caught fire. Badawi, what can you tell us about that?”

The correspondent bit his lip, then shook off whatever he was feeling. “I.. Well, this could be some sort of attack. Yanbu and Ras Tanura account for almost the entirety of Saudi export capacity. It can’t be an accident, not on the Persian Gulf and Red Sea at the same time.”

“Attack by who?”

“I couldn’t tell you at this point. But everything looks normal here in Riyadh.”

“How many people would be working at the docks at night?”

The correspondent blinked. “I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

Will noticed Cookie was also glued to the TV. “Israel?” he asked her. “Iran?”

She shrugged. “It wouldn’t be us, that’s for sure.”

As if on cue, the network put one of its retired generals on camera. The chisel-faced man had traded his Army uniform for a dark suit and plaid tie. “With us now,” the anchorwoman said, “is Lt. General Tom Hatch. General, do you think this is an attack, and if so, who’s behind it?”

“Well, Judy,” the former general replied, “so far, no one has taken credit for the explosions, and the Pentagon is still assessing the situation. The scale of the destruction appears to be massive, though, and if indeed it was deliberate, those responsible will be held to account.”

Judy the anchor asked the ex-general to speculate who might have carried out the attack, and how, but to his credit, he continued to state there wasn’t enough information yet.

The retired general was replaced by a gray-haired man with glasses. “We now turn to economist Ben Stuhl,” the anchor said. “Let me ask you what’s on everyone’s mind. How will this affect gas prices?”

Will groaned, his dislike of corporate news amplified yet again.

“Petroleum futures are certain to spike...”

On the right-hand screen, behind the Saudi student, a giant fireball—dwarfing the others—exploded into the sky with a loud boom. It was eclipsed by a massive dome of seawater and debris that blew high into the air and expanded rapidly toward the camera. The student screamed something in Arabic. The picture jolted and went black.