

SOMETHING FISHY by Lois Schmitt

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

“Something bad happened to Sam. I know it.”

Katie Chandler’s sea green eyes filled with tears. A sea lion trainer at the Clam Shell Cove Aquarium, Katie had been my daughter’s college roommate.

“Maybe Sam worked late and forgot to call,” I said.

Katie shook her head, her chestnut hair flying in the bay breeze. “No. He hasn’t answered my texts or phone calls. I stopped by his house twice too. No one’s home.”

Silence. I tried thinking of something helpful, or at least hopeful, to say.

“I called the police, Mrs. Farrell. The officer said being stood up for a dinner date isn’t enough for a missing persons case—that maybe it was Sam’s way of breaking up.”

I shifted my gaze to the whitecaps on the bay while Katie’s statement sank into my brain. Perhaps the officer was right. I knew from my daughter Abby that the relationship between Katie Chandler and Samuel Wong had hit a rough patch.

The conflict: Katie, who served as executor of her late grandmother’s charitable trust, was donating six million dollars of this money to the aquarium’s expansion project, which included the acquisition of twenty acres of adjacent land. Sam worked as executive assistant to multi-millionaire developer Lucien Moray who wanted to buy the bay front property for luxury condominiums. What started off as friendly bantering between Katie and Sam had escalated into explosive arguments that had become increasingly personal.

But Katie and Sam weren’t the only ones embroiled in this controversy. The community at large had become like the Hatfields and McCoys. Environmentalists wanted the property to go to the aquarium where it would be used for breeding grounds for endangered species, an aquatic animal rehabilitation center, and a research camp for marine scientists. Local business owners sided with Moray, hoping high end condo owners would bolster the area’s economy. I was writing an article on this for *Animal Advocate Magazine*. That’s why I was at the aquarium today.

Katie continued, “No matter what happened between us, Sam would never stand me up. He’s my fiancé not someone I picked up a few hours ago at a bar. Besides, Sam came around to my point of view. He had it with Lucien Moray. He hadn’t told anyone but me yet, but he was quitting his job at the end of the year.”

“I’ve an interview later this morning with Moray,” I said. “I’ll check around and see what I can find out. Someone in Moray’s office may know Sam’s whereabouts.”

“What if no one does?”

“Let’s take it one step at a time.” I glanced at my watch, then pushed myself off the rock where I’d been sitting, a task that would have been easier if I were ten years younger and twenty pounds lighter. “Speaking of interviews, my appointment with your aquarium director is in five minutes, so I better head inside. I’ll call you tonight.”

Katie sighed. “Thanks. I should get back to my sea lions too. We’ve a show at eleven.” She rose and stretched her small wiry body. “After the show, I’ll stop at Sam’s house again.”

Katie, shoulders slumped, wandered off in the direction of the outdoor sea lion amphitheater. I stood for a moment, inhaling the salt air while watching a seagull dive into the bay and zoom back to the sky with a fish in its mouth. As the autumn wind sent a sudden chill down my spine, I wrapped my arms around my body, thinking back to when Katie and my Abby attended college. Abby often acted impulsively, out of emotion, but Katie had always been levelheaded, never someone to jump to conclusions. What if Sam is really in trouble? The thought nagged at me as I trekked up the sandy beach and stepped into the building that housed the indoor exhibits.

I made my way down a long corridor, surrounded by floor to ceiling glass tanks housing ocean life from around the world. I paused at the shark tank and marveled at the grace and beauty of these fearsome predators gliding silently through the water, causing hardly a ripple. I would be back here soon. In addition to my article on the land expansion, I was writing a story on ocean predators.

I veered down the administration wing. When I came to a door marked *DIRECTOR*, I glanced again at my watch. Ten-thirty. Right on time. I knocked.

“Enter,” a booming voice responded. I pulled open the door and stepped inside.

Standing in front of me was a man who appeared to be in his mid-fifties. Noting his polished wingtips, sharply creased trousers, navy blazer, crisp white shirt, and perfectly knotted tie, I wished I’d dusted the sand off my shoes.

We stood face to face. Actually, it was more like face to chest. I was only five feet tall and this man towered over me by at least a foot and a half.

“Commander Conrad West,” he said, extending his arm. His handshake was firm and strong. “You must be Kristy Farrell, the reporter from *Animal Advocate Magazine*.”

Conrad West stood ramrod straight, probably a throw-back from his military training. A former naval commander—the youngest African American to be appointed a commander in the navy’s history—he had started his career as a medical corpsman. He had been director of the Clam Shell Cove Aquarium since his retirement from the navy last year.

He walked behind his desk and positioned himself in a large swivel chair.

“You may sit,” he said, pointing to a straight back chair facing him.

I slid into the chair, suppressing the urge to playfully salute.

He went straight to the point. “I understand you’re writing about the land acquisition. Have you seen our expansion plans?”

“Yes, and they are impressive. But how will the aquarium come up with the money to buy this land?” I asked, fumbling through my bag for my pad and pen. “You’re competing with the bottomless pockets of Lucien Moray.”

Commander West leaned forward, his hands clasped in front, as if praying that what he was about to say would come true. “The current property owner, Stuart Holland, is a business man who’s not about to forgo a profit. But he’s also an active conservationist and a lifelong resident of this area who would like to see the land used in an environmentally friendly manner. He’s kept it vacant until recent financial losses forced him to put it up for sale.”

The Commander leaned back. “There’ll be no bidding war. He set a price—ten million dollars. The land is worth more, but Stuart wants it to go to us, so he set a price he feels we can reach. If we can raise the money by next summer, the land is ours.”

“Ten million is a high goal.”

He nodded. “More than half of the funding will come from a trust set up by Alicia Wilcox Chandler. We also have one million in reserve that we accumulated during the past few years. Of course, we’re still three million short, but our new development officer is planning an aggressive fundraising campaign with—”

A loud knock on the door interrupted the conversation.

Commander West scowled. “Enter.”

A plump woman with a bad case of acne barged into the room. She wore jeans and a light blue shirt with an aquarium patch on the upper left pocket identifying her as Madge.

“Commander,” she said, slightly out of breath. “We have a problem. The sea lion show is in ten minutes, and Katie just ran out.”

“What do you mean she ran out?”

The woman shrugged. “She took a call on her cell phone, then flew out of the amphitheater.

“Didn’t she say anything?” The scowl hadn’t left his face.

The woman paused, furrowing her eyebrows as if deep in thought. “Oh, yeah. But I don’t know if it had to do with why she left.”

“What did she say?” He appeared to be talking through gritted teeth.

“She said two fishermen found a body floating in the inlet.”