

TIM SHOEMAKER

THE DEEP END

A HIGH WATER NOVEL



The Deep End

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*I believe a story is stronger when I picture my target audience as I write.
And when I write for those I love, the story grows even more powerful.*

So . . .

*Lily, Caleb, Norah, Claire, James, Miles, Daniel,
Grace, Sierra, Ethan, and Gabriel . . .*

This one is for you.

*“You’ll never go off the deep end if you’re clinging
to the One who keeps you from falling.”*

*Every person has a push-point. Something
that—if given enough pressure—has the
power to send them someplace dark. Deadly.
Someplace they never want to go.
Off the deep end.*

—

CHAPTER 1

Friday, August 5, 5:30 p.m.

IT STARTS TODAY. **YOUR WORLD WILL CHANGE.**

The words were painted on a cardboard circle the size of a medium pizza. All caps. The letters were thick—in a dark red that had wept and run before it dried. Paint, or something else?

Creepy. Parker Buckman felt his stomach slowly twist. He turned the corrugated cardboard over. The other side was blank. “So, this was it? No other explanation?”

“Not a thing.” Harley Lotitto nodded toward the entrance of the Rockport Dive Company. “I found it taped to the glass door when I opened this morning.”

It could be nothing. But, to Parker, way too many *nothings* had turned into really big *somethings* in the past. He read the sign again. “*It starts. As in a motor? What about your motorcycle?*”

Kemosabe. Harley’s 1999 Harley Davidson XL Sportster. The bike Harley had rebuilt as a father/son project just months before

his dad's death. The bike he wasn't even old enough to legally ride yet. But he was getting close. "Is Kemosabe in the repair shop?" Parker asked.

Harley snickered. "You think a mechanic might be leaving me a progress update? No, the bike is locked up tight in the Hangar where it belongs."

The Hangar was Harley's name for the shed behind the dive shop where he stored Kemosabe—and everything else he wanted to keep away from his Uncle Ray.

"And the bike is running just fine."

No surprise there. Harley started it up nearly every day just to be sure. Kemosabe was the one thing that tied him to his dad's memory more than anything else. "So, what are you going to do about this?" He tapped the cardboard sign.

"Nothing. This stupid sign doesn't change a thing," Harley said. "I've been looking forward to tonight all week."

Parker scanned the inside of the Rockport Dive Company for the owner, but it looked like Harley was manning the shop alone again. "What did your uncle say when you showed it to him?"

"Be sure you get every bit of tape off that glass."

Parker laughed. That sounded about right. "Seriously, he wasn't concerned at all?"

"All he cares about," Harley said, "is getting the boat so we can take dive charters."

"Tell me he's not still trying to get you to sell Kemosabe."

Harley cut him a look. "He's obsessed with the idea. Like I'm his personal *Go Fund Me* page. 'Sell the bike. Invest in the boat. I'll cut you in on the profits.' Like that will ever happen.

"Selling Kemosabe—or your uncle sharing the profits?"

"Both."

Parker didn't doubt that. He focused on the sign again. The letters looked like something from an old horror movie poster. "Any other weird things happen today at the shop?"

Harley shook his head. "We actually had a great day for a change. Some geezer came in here with his lady friend and bought a complete rig for both of them. Wetsuits. BCD vests. Tanks. Regulators. Everything. Paid in cash. I got \$3,500 sitting in the register right now."

"Bet that made your uncle happy."

"He was all grins. Went out to get a drink to celebrate."

"So maybe he'll stop riding you so hard."

"I wish." Harley boosted himself up on the counter. "He's getting worse. It's like I can't do a single thing right." He glanced at the front door, as if he wanted to make sure his uncle wasn't right outside. "Sometimes, when he's grouching at me, I want to hit him. So. Hard." He held up one hand with his thumb nearly touching his forefinger. "Like, I'm this close."

It was something Parker hadn't heard Harley say before. And he'd never seen his friend look so on edge, either. "You hit your uncle, and your world will definitely change," Parker said. "Next time you get the urge to smack him—call me. We'll take the *Boys Bomb* out in the harbor or something."

"My dad and uncle never got along," Harley said. "Fought all the time, the way my dad told it. Sounds like my dad beat the tar out of him whenever they did." Harley's eyes narrowed slightly, like he was picturing it. "Maybe if I'm lucky I'll get out of here before he comes back. I'm locking the door the minute it hits six o'clock."

"I'll give you a hand cleaning up." Parker said. He had helped

Harley close up the dive shop plenty of times before. He knew the routine.

Harley nodded. "I just want to get away from him."

The front door opened—but Parker's back was to it. Harley didn't look at all happy to see whoever it was. Parker instantly felt the need to be busy so it wouldn't look like he was keeping Harley from his work. He straightened a Rockport Dive Company T-shirt on the rack.

"Gatorade . . . so *not* nice to see you." There was only one person who still called him that: Bryce Scorza. Rockport High's star quarterback. Harley's ex-best friend. Arrogant, pompous—

"This guy bothering you, Lotitto?" Scorza wore his football jersey with the big number '8' on it, like the shirt was the master key to everything. He also had a stupid habit of carrying around a regulation football almost everywhere he went. "I'll just throw him out if you want."

Parker held his ground even as Scorza stepped way beyond his comfort zone. Scorza gave Parker a quick jab in the gut with the tip of the football. "Just messing with you, Gatorade. Don't pee your pants."

"Whew," Parker said, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand in an exaggerated way. "Glad you cleared that one up for me. That was *close*."

Scorza's eyes narrowed, like he wasn't expecting Parker to push back even a little. And Parker had surprised himself a bit too. Mocking Scorza wasn't exactly the Christian thing to do but—

"What do you want, barf bag?" Harley asked. He still hadn't left his perch on the counter.

For the second time in the last minute a hint of surprise registered on Scorza's face. "Barf bag. That's new."

It was the first time Parker had heard Harley use that kind of language when referring to Scorza, too.

“What are you doing in the shop?” Harley asked. He had never talked to customers like that. Not that Parker had ever heard. “You don’t dive.”

“But maybe I like your uncle’s taste in clothing.” Scorza held up one of Rockport Dive Company’s *Don’t Drink and Dive* T-shirts that Uncle Ray designed—and Harley hated. “I was thinking I’d buy one.”

“Well, it’s nice to hear you’re thinking for a change.” Harley still hadn’t left the counter. “I’m closing soon, so pick one out fast. Fourteen ninety-five—plus tax.”

Scorza grabbed a shirt. Balled it up and stuffed it in the pocket of his cargo shorts. Pulled out a twenty—along with a key ring with a Jeep logo fob. He dropped the keys on the counter with the cash. “Keep the change. Oh, and did you hear my dad got me a Wrangler?”

Everybody had heard—even Parker. It was gorgeous. Harley didn’t say a word.

“I’ll have my license next year. Dad wanted me to practice with the car I’d actually be driving later.”

Harley faked a yawn—and his acting was horrible. “Congratulations.”

“My dad is going to work on it with me,” Scorza said. “We’ll fix it up even better than it is now. Bigger tires. Add some chrome.”

Parker was pretty sure Scorza wasn’t stupid enough to get physical with Harley. But that didn’t stop him from giving Harley a verbal gut-jab. “Just spending time with my dad . . . kind of looking forward to that,” Scorza said. “Maybe you’ll want to drop by sometime. You know . . . since you don’t have a dad around anymore.”

Harley boosted himself off the counter. He looked like he wanted to rip Scorza's head off. Parker hustled to get between the two, sure he was going to have to break up a fight. And he might have had to if the bell on the shop door hadn't jangled at that moment.

Angelica "Jelly" Malnatti and Ella Houston tumbled in—Jelly wearing a Rockport T-shirt and jeans, Ella wearing one of her loose gypsy dresses. The dress hung just below Ella's knees, almost down to the tops of her cowgirl boots. The girls stopped dead when they saw Mr. Football Jersey.

And suddenly Scorza seemed to forget all about Harley. He tucked the football under one arm and hustled to the door to meet them. "Black Beauty and Everglades Girl. It always amazes me how my fans show up wherever I go."

"You're delusional," Ella said. "You got no fans in this store."

Jelly walked right up to him. "Everglades Girl. Yeah . . . I'm strong like a gator." She jabbed the football loose. "And I strike like a snake."

Scorza chased down the football and scooped it up, laughing as if in disbelief.

Jelly held the door open for him. "Looks like you have some *real* fans waiting for you outside."

Sure enough, a handful of other guys in Rockport High football jerseys stood out front, peering through the display window. Scorza trotted out the door, grinning like he'd just made some brilliant play. He held out the ball to Jelly as he passed, then tucked it in tight before she could react. "I'll be ready for you next time, Everglades!"

"Doubt it." Jelly closed the door behind him and leaned against it. "Much better," she said.

“So,” Parker said, doing his best to hold a straight face. “Were you two really following him?”

“Watch it,” Jelly said. “Or this Everglades Girl will teach you a lesson, too.” She nodded toward Ella. “We both will.”

Harley grinned like he’d already forgotten about Scorza’s comments.

“We want to see that note you found on your door,” Jelly said.

Parker held the cardboard circle out to them.

Jelly gave Parker an incredulous look. “Wait. You’ve been touching the thing . . . without gloves? How can the police check it for prints now? This was *evidence*.”

“Evidence of *what*?” Harley asked.

A fair question, Parker thought.

Harley slipped back behind the counter where the register sat and swept his hand in an arc that covered half the narrow store. Displays of neoprene wetsuits. A row of scuba tanks. Regulator kits affixed to the wall just above. A case of dive knives. A pretty impressive inventory of masks. Fins and snorkels and all other sorts of dive gear. Racks of Rockport Dive Company’s *Don’t Drink and Dive* T-shirts in every size and color. “Does anything look out of place?” Everything was neat and in order. Harley was good about that.

“Out of place?” Ella smiled. “Well, actually, the guy working the shop seems kind of strange. But nothing new there.”

“So, you’re saying my Uncle Ray is weird?”

El gave the shop a quick scan—obviously fearing the guy was within earshot. “I was talking about you, and you know it, Harley Davidson Lotitto.”

Harley grinned. Ella Houston could trash-talk him all day, but Harley never seemed to mind the teasing. Parker was pretty sure he was just happy to have her attention.

Jelly stepped closer to inspect the sign—still in Parker’s hand. “This could be written in *blood*.”

Exactly what Parker had thought.

“I can’t believe you waited all day to text us about this.” She ducked to look at the blank underside of the sign. “And nothing else out of the ordinary has happened today?”

Harley shook his head. “Just another Friday.”

Ella glanced out the window as if she thought whoever left the sign might be watching the place. “Make any new enemies?”

“You mean,” Harley said, “since Steadman disappeared?”

Nobody had seen or heard from the man after he’d tried to kill them in the quarry back in June. Parker silently thanked God for that.

“What about Scorza?” Ella nodded, like she was answering her own question.

“You said *new* enemies,” Harley smiled.

“Well, *excuse* me, Mr. Lotitto,” Ella said. “I should have been clearer. You were friends until early this summer. But now you’re at each other’s throats. So, could the sign be from him?”

Harley thought for a moment. “He gave me some trouble at football camp. But I gave worse back. He knows what will happen if he messes with me.” He picked up the twenty-dollar bill Scorza had dropped on the counter—and stopped. Underneath sat Scorza’s keys. Harley held them up, a wicked grin on his face. “Well, lookee what Mr. My-Dad-and-I-are-gonna-work-on-my-Jeep-together left behind.”

Parker caught the girls up to speed on the conversation they’d missed.

Ella turned to the door. “Want me to see if he’s still out there?”

“No,” Harley said. “Definitely not.” He tossed the keys into a

box under the counter. “He probably won’t even remember he left them here. I’ll find something special to do with these.”

Jelly still looked absorbed with the cardboard sign. “I don’t like this. No strange customers today? Besides Scorza?”

Harley hesitated. To Parker, it didn’t look like he was trying to remember the day so much as he wasn’t sure how much to say.

“So, there *was* someone.” El gave Jelly a nod.

“Actually, there were two.”

El stepped up to the counter. Jelly joined her. “Two?”

“They came together. Asked a lot of questions—but nothing about diving. And they didn’t look at any gear—or T-shirts. So, it was like . . . why are they coming in here, you know?” Harley shrugged. “At first, I didn’t think anything of it, but now . . . I’m not so sure.”

“Harley.” Jelly looked more than a little exasperated. “What if the only reason they came in was because of the sign—did you ever think of that?”

Harley shrugged. “I hate to say it, but I think you’re right.”

“Girls are always right.” El thumped his head with her knuckle. “Remember that. Can you describe them?”

Harley looked like he wasn’t sure where to start.

“Picture them. Their faces. The clothes they were wearing.” Jelly said. “Could you identify them in a lineup?”

Ella reached forward and massaged his temples. “Think, Harley. Anything you remember about them that was, you know, weird or something?”

“Yes, and yes,” Harley said.

“Well, come *on*,” El said. “You’ve got to get the details down while they’re still fresh.”

“I don’t have to write anything down.” He closed his eyes like

he was replaying the footage of the two strangers walking into the shop. “I’ll never forget them ‘til the day I die.”

El and Jelly looked at each other—like someone had just offered them a free pizza.

“Hey, let’s forget about it, okay?” Harley shook his head like he didn’t want to think about it anymore. “Whatever the sign was about, it’s over now. Nothing happened. I’ll lock the door in ten, and then we’re all off to Rockport House of Pizza. Somebody was just trying to spook me.”

“Harley Davidson Lotitto,” El said. “We are not forgetting about *any* of this.”

“Nothing happened, okay? Whatever was supposed to start today obviously never got off the launchpad. Let’s drop it.” Harley shot Parker a partner-in-crime look.

Wait a sec. Parker forced himself not to smile.

Jelly locked arms with Ella. “We are not going anywhere. We’re not closing the store. We’re not going out for pizza. Not until you tell us more.”

Parker sensed Harley was going to draw this out until closing. Even longer if he could.

“Let’s get back to the two strange customers.” El stared at him. “What did your uncle say about them?”

Harley shrugged. “He left before they came in—and hasn’t been back since.”

“But you *will* tell him.” Jelly wasn’t asking.

“I really don’t see the poi—”

“The *point*, my dear football friend who has obviously taken too many hits to the head to think clearly,” El said, “is that you could be in some kind of danger here. Did you think about that? ‘It starts today.’ *What* starts today . . . that’s the question. ‘Your

world will change.’ This is personal, Harley. Somebody is targeting you.”

Harley shook his head. “It could have been meant for my Uncle Ray.”

“Maybe,” El said, “but anybody with an ounce of observance knows you open the store—so you’d be the one to see the note first . . . not your uncle.”

Could Harley really be a target?

“What if this *is* Steadman?” Jelly asked. “What if he’s back—out to even the score? I’m telling you; I don’t like this.”

Steadman was a long shot, right? Even the falling out with Bryce Scorza seemed like ancient history. Why would the guy do something now and not two months ago?

“Actually,” Harley looked from Jelly to El again, “the more I hear you two the more I’m feeling it. Not Steadman . . . but . . .”

Relief swept over El’s face. “Okay, then. At least you’re talking sense now.”

“Tell us about the two strangers.” Jelly whipped out her phone, swiped to a recording app, and held it close to Harley. “Talk to us. Tell us everything that comes to mind about them.”

Harley closed his eyes. “They seemed all keyed-up about something. Antsy. Like they were on a mission.”

Jelly and El exchanged knowing looks. “Good, Harley. That’s it. You said they were strange. How so?”

“When they came in, they stayed super close to each other, you know? Like they were attached. Most people spread out when they get in the store. Not these two. In fact, I’m pretty sure they were locked at the elbows—like arm in arm or something.”

Jelly nodded. “So, they were definitely together. Husband and wife, maybe?”

Harley shook his head. “Too young for that. That was the thing . . . more like they were really afraid to let go of each other. Super insecure.”

“Weird,” El said.

Harley nodded. “That’s what I thought.”

“Did they say anything suspicious?” Jelly leaned in. “Something that made you think—even for a fraction of a second—that they were the ones who left the sign on your door?”

“Sometimes they were talking so fast I couldn’t catch everything they said. I don’t see how they could be the ones who left the note, but they definitely knew about it.”

“Sheesh, Harley!” Jelly shook her head. “And it’s taken you this long to tell us that little detail? Tell us what time they got here—and what they looked like. Then we’re calling Officer Greenwood.” She checked the screen on her phone as if to make sure it was recording okay.

Harley’s eyes darted to Parker’s for just an instant. “Well, they were girls . . . so I’m not sure I want to go into all kinds of physical details about how they looked—okay? I’m trying to be a decent guy here.”

Jelly gave an exasperated groan. “Were they pretty? Ugly?”

“Were they pretty ugly?” Harley screwed his face into a look of total confusion. “I just told you, I’m trying to be—”

“I’m being serious, Harley. And you should do the same.”

“Okay.” Harley held up both hands. “Okay. I had a feeling when they walked in that they would give me trouble somehow.”

Jelly nodded, like she was coaxing him on.

“My first impression? The two of them were just weird. Strange. Borderline freaky.”

“How so?”

Harley shrugged her question off. “Just a sense I got.”

El looked frustrated. “You’ve got to give us more details. What time were they here? Let’s start with that.”

“About,” Harley checked the clock on the wall below the vintage neon Dacor sign. “Ten minutes ago. They overlapped with Scorza for a few minutes.”

Jelly stared in disbelief. “That was about when *we* got here. We probably walked right past them. Which way did they head when they left the store? What were they wearing?”

“The shorter one wore a pair of jeans. T-shirt. The taller one wore a dress.” Harley grinned. “And cowgirl boots.”

Jelly’s eyes narrowed. “*You . . .* are a jerk.” She nodded at El. “Time to teach mister funny-guy a lesson.” She balled her fist and stepped around the counter.

El scooted around the display case from the other end—cornering Harley in the middle.

“This,” Jelly slugged him in the arm, “is for calling us *weird*.”

El punched his other arm. “And strange.”

Harley laughed so hard he could hardly breathe.

Jelly hit him again. “And what’s this about us talking so much?”

“And talking over each other?” El let him have it.

Harley tucked in, forearms over his face like a boxer taking a beating. “Parks—you gonna help me out or what?”

“Oh,” El said. “Look who is *super-insecure* now.”

Harley peeked out from between his forearms. “Parks?”

Parker took a step back. “Get in the middle of *that*? No thanks.”

“*That* was the right answer.” Jelly glared at him, but there was no hiding the smile in her eyes. “If I find out you knew what he was doing the whole time, you’re next. Was the sign on the door for real—or was that part of the joke too?”

“I can answer that,” Harley said. “If you two would stop beating me long enough to let me talk.”

“You don’t deserve it,” Jelly said. “Right, Ella?”

The wall phone rang. Harley held up both hands in mock surrender. “The note was legit. Now stop long enough for me to grab this call.”

Jelly and Ella both gave him some space, but still didn’t look like they’d finished with him yet.

Harley took a couple of deep breaths and picked up the receiver on the fourth ring, still grinning. “Rockport Dive Company.” He listened for a moment, and his eyes changed. Got wider. The smile melted, fear growing over his face. “The shed right *here*—behind the dive shop?”

“No!” Harley shouted. He dropped the phone, zig-zagged past El like she was an opponent on the field, and raced for the back room.

“Parks—help me! The Hangar is on fire!”

he would find Kemosabe. And most definitely a fool for thinking God cared—even though Harley would be the first to admit he wasn't really good enough for God to care about. Somehow, he'd hoped God was different. *You're definitely the fool, Harley.*

The question now was what Harley was going to do. Uncle Ray made it clear before he left for the lawyer's that he was done. He'd be turning Harley over to the state, however that worked. Uncle Ray would do it, too. With the assault and battery charges, breaking the restraining order, and grand theft auto charges? Harley wasn't going to be placed with some nice family who just wanted to help him out. He'd be in a juvenile detention center somewhere. Or he'd get stuck in the home of some family that was only interested in helping themselves to the money the state would offer . . . not helping Harley.

One way or the other, he'd be leaving this town he loved . . . and moving to Hell. And he'd make that visit to Scorza's house before he left. Not to find out what he did with Kemosabe. Even Harley had to admit the bike was probably long gone. But he'd let the rage out of the cage when he got Scorza alone. He'd live to regret the day he messed with Kemosabe . . . but he wouldn't live long.

Harley had always dreamed that Kemosabe was his ticket away from Uncle Ray. That somehow it was his dad's way of helping him escape. There would be no escaping on Kemosabe now. No music from those straight pipes. No comfort from the vibrations flowing through him that made him one with his bike.

But Harley couldn't become part of the system. Maybe he could run. Make his way south. To Florida. Where he could live outside all year around. He had some money . . . but how long would it last? Maybe he could make it all the way to the Everglades. Where

Parker had lived before. Maybe he could find the friend Parker and Jelly left down there. Maybe he could call Wilson if he really needed some help.

If he ran, at least he'd be calling the shots. He wouldn't be the new kid to target at some detention center. And he wouldn't be sent to another home with a beer-guzzling man running the place like a dictator.

How long before he got sent away? Harley had no idea. But he wouldn't just let it happen. He needed to disappear—and do it in a way where he'd never be found. There really was no other way out of this. Maybe come back in ten years and see if there was anything left of his trust fund.

“You're alone, Harley.” So incredibly alone. There was no light at the end of this tunnel. For there to be light, the tunnel would have to end. But there was no end to the tunnel he was in. Right now, all he could see was the dark.