

Coral Conspiracy

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Pull Quote: “The night closed in, the only sound the hum of the distant generators belonging to the resort and the steady rhythm of the waves.”

Evelyn was supposed to be on her honeymoon. Instead, she stood alone in the lobby of the luxurious Palm Ayana Resort in the Maldives, breathing in the salty scent of the ocean nearby. She could hear the waves peacefully crashing in the distance, so vastly different from the concrete jungle she’s from.

“Welcome to the Palm Ayana, Mrs. Langford,” a beautiful woman with an orchid tucked behind her ear said in a delicate voice.

Evelyn paused, feeling the sting of the name she so recently abandoned.

“Actually, I’m not Mrs. Langford anymore. I’m Wood, Evelyn Wood.” Her voice stronger than how she actually felt, she was suddenly reminded of her life back in New York City as an environmental journalist who wrote investigative pieces exposing big corporations and their unsustainable practices. She loved her job and had a powerful presence in the journalistic world, but her short-lived marriage with Oscar that ended in catastrophe was a sign that she needed a change of scenery. It had been an extremely last minute decision for her to keep the hotel reservation and come here alone instead of canceling the trip altogether. The Maldives had been Evelyn’s dream destination for years, but the purpose behind this trip had drastically changed.

There was no romantic getaway with the man she thought would be her partner for life. Now it was just her— and the work she had thrown herself into to avoid confronting the mess of her personal life.

As an environmental journalist, Evelyn had spent years reporting on the impacts of climate change, both domestically and around the world. Her job had taken her to many beautiful and remote places around the world, but her stories rarely celebrated the beauty of the places. Almost always, they were about the slow unraveling of local ecosystems at the hands of climate change, industrial and foreign exploitation of local resources, and unchecked tourism. The Maldives had long been on her radar, a prime casualty of climate change. The islands faced the looming threat of being completely submerged within the century, and the situation with the coral reefs was even more critical. Rising sea temperatures have transformed the once vibrant and biodiverse reefs into lifeless skeletal remains.

The Palm Ayana was one of the most costly and celebrated resorts in the archipelago, located on its own private island. Evelyn had previously chosen to stay there for her honeymoon with Oscar because she wanted to explore the nearby reefs and take advantage of the close proximity to the ocean. Nevertheless, she came here alone, having repurposed her trip into an assignment. She was here to investigate rumors about the environmental impact of the resorts, the truth about sustainability practices, and the coral restoration programs. The research she briefly conducted in New York uncovered wavering doubts about the actual effectiveness of these programs, shady dealings with the local government, and the immense profit corporations were making from these resorts. The Palm Ayana was one of the resorts advocating for themselves as being eco-conscious, funding a coral restoration program on the island that

allegedly minimizes the ecological damage of their bungalow construction and energy consuming operations.

Evelyn constantly felt the pull for something far more complex, a feeling that she couldn't articulate but knew she needed to act upon. There was a whole world out there unraveling, and her work demanded that she bear witness. She made her way to the bungalow that had been reserved for her and Oscar, feeling an odd mixture of luxury and the loneliness that comes with it. Large glass windows opened out to a private deck with a jacuzzi and direct access to the ocean. From where she stood, Evelyn admired the beauty of the island. It was breathtaking, even at dusk. The water was clear and reflective, the starry sky vast. Sitting by the desk facing out onto the deck, she brought out her laptop from her carry-on, the familiar weight of it bringing her some comfort. The screen immediately flickered to life, casting a soft white glow across her face, blending in with the pale moonlight spilling through the window. She opened her research notes, a collection of data from scientists, locals, and activists about the coral bleaching crisis in the Maldives. The rising sea temperatures continued to magnify each year, significantly affecting marine life such as fish and turtles, while also taking away valuable resources from locals. Evelyn was just about to look up the particular island she was on in an environmental research database when she heard the doorbell of her bungalow ring, indicating the arrival of her suitcase. She opened the door, revealing a stout young man dressed in all white apart from his copper name tag which displayed the name *Aziz*.

"Just leave it by the bed, thank you," Evelyn murmured, unsure of what an appropriate greeting would be. The bellhop quietly obliged, placing the luggage down gently by the bed. But as he turned to leave, his movement hesitated just for a second long enough for Evelyn to notice.

She sensed something and looked up just in time to see Aziz's gaze lingering on her laptop where the screen illuminated the bold title of an open file: *Coral Bleaching Cover-Up: Maldives' Disappearing Reefs*. As Evelyn and Aziz made eye contact, his eyes quickly darted away, but not before Evelyn had noticed the fleeting look of recognition. Something about that article had resonated with Aziz, and clearly startled, he straightened out and forced a cordial smile. "Enjoy your stay, ma'am," he muttered stiffly, retreating from the room as silently as he had arrived.

The next morning, Evelyn made her way to the resort's oceanside restaurant for the complimentary breakfast buffet, mentally preparing herself for a long day of island exploration and scuba diving. As she stood at the buffet, torn between indulging in cinnamon pancakes or a full English breakfast, her phone buzzed with an email notification from an anonymous source. The contents of the message made her instantly forget her internal debate between sweet and savory.

Evelyn's pulse quickened as she stared at the email on her screen. It was titled *URGENT* with one attachment: *Confidential_CoralProjectX*. The email was brief but packed with startling information.

"The Palm Ayana's coral restoration program is a front. They've been damaging the reef for years now with their reckless construction and usage of toxic chemicals, all while bribing the local government to look the other way. Meet me at the docks tonight at 10 PM, and I'll tell you everything I know."

The email was signed with one letter: *A*. As Evelyn clicked open the document attached to the email, her breath caught in her throat as she began to look through the internal memos and

documents of raw data. She looked at documents indicating the resort's bribery of officials, as well as offshore accounts that indicate untraceable amounts of money. The resort was not just neglecting the corals they proudly advocate for; they were actively participating in coral bleaching and the destruction of the marine environment. She glanced out the restaurant window to view the pristine ocean beyond her. The very resort that was selling paradise was, in fact, a machine slowly dismantling it, piece by piece, coral by coral. This wasn't just another story, Evelyn realized. The stakes were much higher. This wasn't just environmental degradation, it was a web of corruption and conspiracy, and her instincts told her that she needed to be careful.

Evelyn stared at her blank plate, her appetite suddenly gone. The scent of tropical fruits and decadent pastries engulfed the room, but all she could think about was the email from *A*. *Meet me at the docks tonight at 10 PM and I'll tell you everything I know.* Who was *A*? Was it the bellhop Aziz, who had clearly noticed the article on her laptop?

The rest of the morning Evelyn walked around dazed, her mind taken away by the ominous email. She had hoped to get a few hours of peace, a brief respite before diving headfirst into her work; now all of that was impossible. The weight of the message weighed upon her, the urgency of *A*'s cryptic words gnawing at her. What was she really walking into here? Later that morning, she attempted to participate in a guided snorkeling tour, where she found herself incapable of taking any pleasure in the experience. The other tourists were giggling and gasping over the coral beneath them, completely oblivious to the silent destruction being caused. Evelyn's goggles fogged up, and she swam back to the surface too quick, her chest tight with anxiety. The opaque and shining water beneath her had seemed an elaborate fabrication.

Back in her bungalow, she opened her laptop once more and delved into more detailed

research. As she sifted through page after page of environmental reports and studies related to coral bleaching, one name cropped up over and over: Dr. Nisa Thakur, an environmental scientist specializing in coral ecosystems, who for many years had been documenting the degradation in the Maldives. According to her papers, Thakur was one of the few scientists to openly criticize the large resorts' so-called "sustainability initiatives". She made the case that most such programs were either ineffective or downright harmful, more often than not little PR stunts to placate wealthy tourists.

Yet, a ray of hope somehow drilled its way into Evelyn's thoughts. Maybe Dr. Thakur was the one who could help her piece together the bits of this jigsaw puzzle. If there was any person who knew the real story, it would be her. Evelyn scrolled down an academic directory with incredible speed to find any contact details for the scientist. A couple of minutes later, she found them: an email address and a phone number listed for Dr. Thakur at a small research institute in Malé, the capital of the Maldives.

Her fingers teased over the phone number for a moment, her instincts on high alert. Could she trust this? Was she being watched already? After all, she was a well-known journalist; her mere presence might already ripple in more ways than she could see. Pushing the doubts aside, Evelyn dialed the number. It rang twice before a sharp voice answered, "Yes?"

"Dr. Thakur?" Evelyn said, trying not to sound too anxious. "My name is Evelyn Wood. I'm a journalist. Currently, I'm at the Palm Ayana Resort. I've been investigating the coral restoration efforts, and I believe there's more going on here than the public knows. I'd really like to speak with you about your research."

There was a pause on the other end. For a second, Evelyn feared that Dr. Thakur might

hang up.

“You’re at the Palm Ayana, you say?” Dr Thakur’s voice was confident but cold. “You realize they’re one of the worst offenders?”

“Yes,” Evelyn hastened to say. “That’s why I need your help. There are some things I’ve uncovered, documents that suggest they’re actively harming the reef, not just failing to protect it. And I’ve been contacted by someone here—an anonymous source who seems to know more.”

After another moment of silence, Dr. Thakur spoke again, and this time her voice was much softer and reserved. “You are not the first person to try to get to the bottom of this, Ms. Wood. Be careful. These resorts... They have money and connections that run deep. If you’re looking for answers, you might not like what you find.”

“I’m used to that,” Evelyn replied. “Can we meet?”

“I’ll be in Malé tomorrow. If you’re serious about writing your article, I’ll be at my office in the university there. Noon. And bring whatever documents you’ve uncovered.” Before Evelyn could get another word in, the line went silent.

The rest of the afternoon lagged on as Evelyn felt the weight of evening’s coming rendezvous hang over her. She had an eerie feeling that she was being watched. Every time she turned to the windows of her bungalow, looking out into the central area of the resort, the same disquieting view awaited her: a man, sleekly attired in a cream colored suit, either by the pool or by the bar, his eyes obscured by dark sunglasses. He never approached her, but still, he made her nervous just by lingering. Was he an executive of the resort? Or something worse?

After getting a quick dinner, Evelyn went back to her bungalow, her nerves stretched taut.

Feeling that she needed a walk to clear her head, she headed down to the beach. The sun was setting over the water, casting an orange sheen across the waves, but she couldn't appreciate its beauty. Walking, Evelyn found herself unable to think of anything except the bellhop from the day before—Aziz. The look on his face when he had seen her laptop—it hadn't been simple curiosity. He knew something. And if he knew something, could he be *A*?

When she returned to the bungalow later that evening, a slip of paper had been shoved under her door. She hastily unfolded it, revealing a note from Aziz.

“Sorry for the abruptness, but you have to understand. It's not about the coral alone. It's about the people here, too. My sister—she's just thirteen, but she's already getting sick. The chemicals they're dumping in the water next to our village contaminate everything. She isn't the only one, but the resort makes sure no one talks about it. Please meet me tonight at the docks. I'll make sure to tell you everything.”

It was Aziz. His younger sister—was this all connected with the resort's reckless environmental practices? The stakes had just gotten even higher, and Evelyn knew she couldn't back out now. She had to meet him even if the whole situation felt slightly like a trap. She glanced at her watch—9:30 PM. She had only thirty minutes to decide whether to trust the bellhop who tumbled into her room—and a little too much of what he saw there.

At exactly 10 PM, Evelyn arrived at the docks, her footsteps quiet on the soft sand. The sea lapped softly against the boats, and the warm night air hummed with tension. A figure stood at the end of the dock, pacing nervously. Aziz, she realized as he turned towards her, eyes widening in recognition.

“Ms. Wood,” he whispered. “Thank you for coming.”

“Tell me everything,” Evelyn said, trying to sound firm even as her heart raced. “I want to know what’s really going on.”

Aziz swallowed hard, his head twitching over his shoulder as if expecting someone to pop into view at any moment. “It’s worse than you think. The coral restoration program? It’s a cover-up. They’re using it to make you look the other way while they are causing the damage. They fill the water with chemicals to keep it looking pristine for the resort, but those same chemicals are destroying the coral and poisoning the fish. My sister—she is one of many who got sick from eating the contaminated fish. People are dying, Ms. Wood. The government knows but gets paid off. Nobody speaks out because they are afraid of what will happen when they do.”

A cold knot began to twist in Evelyn’s stomach. “And what about those documents you sent me? The internal memos?” Aziz nodded. “They’re real. I have more evidence that the resort’s been bribing officials and falsifying environmental reports. I was hoping you could help. I looked your reservation up after I delivered your luggage—you’re a journalist, right? You could—”

Suddenly, there was a loud shuffle, and Evelyn’s heart stopped for a second. From behind a stack of crates near the edge of the dock, the man in the cream-colored suit she saw lurking outside of her bungalow earlier emerged. His face was cloaked in shadow, but Evelyn could see his calculating eyes.

“Aziz,” he said with a deadly tone. “What do you think you’re doing?” Aziz froze and fear flickered across his features. “I-I wasn’t—”

The man took a step closer, and Evelyn’s muscles contracted. She saw it now: the cool

power of his gaze, the dominance he had over Aziz, he was indeed a hotel executive. “This little conversation is over,” the man said. In an abrupt flash, before Evelyn could even blink, two heavy set men in dark uniforms stepped out from behind and firmly laid hands on Aziz’s arms. He struggled for a second, but even he knew there was no use. “Wait!” Evelyn exclaimed, stepping forward. “What are you doing?”

The man in the cream-colored suit smiled icily at her. “Ms. Wood, I suggest you don’t get involved in matters with which you have no familiarity. Enjoy your stay at the Palm Ayana. The island is especially beautiful this time of year.”

Aziz was dragged off the dock, and his pleas of help were eventually drowned out by the sound of the waves. Evelyn stood in stunned silence, almost in complete disbelief. As the man began to disappear into the darkness, he turned back over his shoulder, voice low and threatening.

“You might want to reconsider writing your story, Ms. Wood. Some truths are better buried.”

And with that, he was gone, leaving Evelyn standing all alone in the darkened dock, the ocean stretching out before her. The night closed in, the only sound the hum of the distant generators belonging to the resort and the steady rhythm of the waves.

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Reflection

For this project, I knew I wanted to write about an environmental issue I was passionate about such as climate change, but I also wanted to challenge myself as a writer and explore this issue using a genre that is out of my comfort zone, so I decided to write a short mystery story about an environmental conspiracy. My goal was to inform my readers, people who are interested in learning more about environmental issues, about the marine degradation going on in the Maldives through an entertaining and engaging narrative. I utilized a lot of my research to frame my story, which influenced the structure of my writing. One of my characters in this story, Dr. Nisa Thakur, is partially inspired by Naff Asim, who wrote the UNICEF article “We’re Being Swallowed by the Ocean and Running out of Freshwater.” I was also influenced by Lisa Abend’s article, as it informed me about coral bleaching and also inspired my main character, Evelyn, who is also an investigative journalist. In addition to the influences from my sources, I was also inspired by both classic and contemporary mysteries/thrillers, specifically those that blend suspense with societal issues and conspiracies such as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. I was also deeply inspired by your email suggestion of writing a short story similar to the noir film *Chinatown*, which I researched and even read a “How-To” on noir-fiction. However, because of my lack of exposure to noir, I do not think I successfully fulfilled the conventions of the genre, and therefore think that my story is more of a mystery/thriller. Although I did try my best to incorporate noir elements, I consider the audience of this piece to be readers who enjoy mystery and thriller stories but also care about broader societal issues such as the environment. My story fit the conventions of a mystery/noir because of the moral ambiguity of the many characters,

other than Aziz. While the hotel's immorality is clear, Evelyn is also a bit morally ambiguous because she is investigating this issue as an American woman staying at a luxury resort, who has thrown herself deeper into the investigation to escape her own emotions about her recent divorce. I also added a conspiracy involving the resort, setting up a facade and layers of deception which are common tropes in mysteries. In traditional noir, there is also usually a femme fatale, and I tried my best to make Evelyn a modern femme fatale character whose mission is to reveal the truth. Additionally, I wanted the readers to be as aware of the conspiracy as Evelyn was in the story, so I chose to let the plot unfold at a natural pace without exposing too much information at first. Because my story did not offer any actual useful information that can help combat marine degradation, it is not necessarily written to educate but rather to spread awareness about an environmental issue that I believe isn't talked about enough.

I structured my story so that it would progress in three stages and steadily increase in suspense. The first part of my story introduces Evelyn's backstory and what brought her to the Maldives, and the second part steadily increases in suspense and introduces the potential conspiracy. The third part is where the truth is revealed, and Evelyn meets Aziz at the dock, only for the story to end in a cliffhanger. I made the decision to not write a complete and satisfying conclusion because I wanted to leave room for a possible continuation of the story. Additionally, I wanted my ending to tie back to the overall issue of marine degradation. In order to achieve this, I connected the hotel's energy consumption to the ocean it destroys by writing about the hum of the generators and sound of the waves. I also aimed for clear and concise language throughout my story, as I wanted the focus to be placed on the plot and environmental information rather than the prose. I avoided using overly descriptive language and tried to be as

straightforward as possible to depict the urgency and suspense of certain situations in my story. For example, using words like “ominous” and “foreboding” exemplify the feelings of suspense and urgency that I was trying to convey. I also wrote the dialogue with the goal to reflect tension, especially in the scenes involving Evelyn and Aziz.

During the process of writing “Coral Conspiracy,” I aimed to intertwine mystery, thriller, and noir elements with my overall theme of environmental degradation caused by corporate greed. My ultimate goal was to create a story that was entertaining to read, fun to write, and also had meaningful depth. By writing about the very real issue of coral bleaching, I wanted to raise awareness about an issue that many people may not know much about. Writing this story significantly challenged my persistence and adaptability as a writer, but I am proud of my overall work and the depth of my story.