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CHRISTY BARRITT



THE

BUNGALOW

ON

SHADOW

ROAD

# **the bungalow on shadow road**

beach house mystery series

book four

# Christy Barritt



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# prologue

ALICE ALABASTER PAUSED as she stepped inside the owner's suite at The Bungalow on Shadow Road.

Outside, a thunderstorm raged across the ocean. The low-pressure system was downright violent with its never-ending lightning and deep, threatening thunder.

Ever since dinner, she hadn't felt well.

Was it something she'd eaten?

Or was it the emotional turmoil roiling inside her that made her feel ill?

Her head swam with dizziness.

Something was definitely wrong.

Not bothering to turn on the lights, she stepped forward. As she did, a terrible pain ripped through her chest.

She lurched forward and grabbed her dresser to catch her balance.

She'd spent so many years here with her now-deceased husband, building the inn into the place it was today. People came from all over to enjoy the beauty as well as the luxury it offered.

Now danger threatened everything.

Alice still couldn't believe what she'd stumbled upon only a couple of days ago.

She pressed her eyes closed at the memory of the discovery.

What she'd learned couldn't be true.

But she knew it was.

Someone was plotting against her. This person wanted this inn. Wanted her fortune.

Wanted her life.

The aching pressure in her chest intensified.

She bent forward, hardly able to breathe.

Was she having ... a heart attack?

But she was healthy. This didn't make sense.

Unless ...

The truth smacked her in the face with absolute clarity.

She'd been poisoned.

Had something deadly been mixed in with the hearty vegetable soup? The sweet raspberry and mint lemonade?

Those would have been the easiest things to slip something into when she wasn't looking.

Only one person could be responsible.

She gasped as the pain moved from her chest. It pinched her shoulder and then traveled down her left arm.

*Call 911.*

Time was of the essence right now. She needed to act!

She reached into the pocket of her beige slacks to grab her phone.

It was gone.

Had she left it somewhere?

At once, pain traveled down her arm and up her neck.

She bent forward.

The quick motion threw her off-balance and sent her to her knees.

It was too late to stumble into the hallway and get someone's attention.

Instead, she dropped to the floor, her shoulder hitting the dresser on the way down.

One of the porcelain dolls on top clattered to the floor beside her.

Betsy.

One of her favorites.

The doll landed beside her, and they lay there face-to-face. Betsy stared at her with unblinking eyes, almost as if the doll was confused about what was happening.

Alice turned onto her back, still clutching her chest.

Then her door creaked open.

Bright light from the hallway filled the otherwise dark room.

The person standing in the door was only a shadow.

But Alice knew exactly who it was.

The monster who'd poisoned her.

*Think, Alice. Think!*

*Don't let your enemy win.*

Using her elbows, she tried to scoot back but couldn't.

As she moved, her fingers skimmed the wooden floor beneath her dresser. Dust coated her fingertips.

Carlotta—one of the housekeepers—never ran the dustmop beneath the furniture as Alice requested. The fact had driven Alice crazy.

Now, maybe Carlotta's carelessness would also be her saving grace.

Using her finger, Alice carefully began to write the name of her killer.

"It'll all be over soon." Her killer stepped closer, voice gravelly with malice.



“Why?” Alice whispered, the words cracking with tension.

Darkness swallowed her peripheral vision.

This was it, wasn't it?

Death lingered close, calling her name.

“You should have left things alone.” The growl floated across the room like a ghost bent on tormenting her.

Alice tried to take a deep breath but couldn't.

More darkness closed in. Her lungs tightened. Pain continued to flood her body.

“I'm sorry it had to end this way, that you had to find out like you did,” the killer continued.

*Finish writing the name, Alice told herself. Write it!*

Her hand remained just out of sight, her fingers moving slowly and carefully.

Would someone find the name? Would they understand that Alice had written it there for a reason?

She prayed that would be the case.

“Goodbye, Alice.” The shadow stood over her now, sounding almost satisfied. “You've done a great job here. Now I look forward to continuing what you've started. This place is going to be very profitable for me, thanks to you.”

“No ...” Her voice came out raspy.

“I have big plans.”

Big plans? Tear it down? Build it larger?

Or something sinister?

Her throat tightened at the thought.

She opened her mouth, desperate to say more. To accuse. To get answers.

But death crept closer, ready to claim her. To take her home.

She wasn't ready.

But she had no choice.

*Please, Lord. Don't let the person who did this get away with it. Please!*

Everything went still as if life itself had flatlined.

Because it had.

# chapter **one**

AS MELINDA MARX watched her driver pull away, she couldn't help but feel as if her one and only lifeline was disappearing, leaving her stranded and helpless here in this secluded beach town.

She stood on the sandy road with a paper in her hand and a suitcase beside her.

The historic inn with its cedar siding, wooden dormers, and never-ending porches stood high on the dune in the distance, the sun setting behind it. Random bursts of light escaped through the otherwise dark clouds. The display created an eerie, haunted atmosphere.

The Bungalow on Shadow Road. That was the name of the luxurious oceanside resort.

One thing was certain: this place was no bungalow.

Had it been named such for the sake of irony? As a conversation starter?

Because, as Melinda remembered coming here on vacation as a child, there were at least twenty guest rooms, not including the grand ballroom, dining room, library, game room, and screened-in porch. In a separate building, there was a spa for massages, pedicures, and facials.

The inn was located on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, in the small town of Carova, North Carolina. The sandy beach town was situated in the most northeastern corner of the state, surrounded on two sides by water: the ocean and the Currituck Sound. The unincorporated community nestled up to Virginia,

but an impassable fence separated the states, meant as a way of keeping wildlife—namely the wild horses the area was known for—in place.

The remote town seemed something straight out of the last century, at least in part. The only way to travel to Carova by vehicle was to drive up the beach in a 4X4. Normal paved roads didn't exist in this town—they were all sand.

Essentially, all of the seven hundred plus homes—most of which were summer rentals—were built on rolling sand dunes.

To say the place was unique was an understatement.

One of the best features of this town were the wild horses roaming the windswept landscape. They were the original inhabitants of the area. The horses were protected by law—everyone had to stay at least fifty feet away, and it was illegal to feed them.

But the horses' presence added a magical touch to an already enchanted area.

Some of Melinda's best memories had taken place on these shores.

Now, she'd been invited back for some mysterious reason.

She remembered the letter she'd received.

*Please join us October fifteenth through nineteenth as we honor the historic legacy of The Bungalow on Shadow Road. Your presence is requested as pertaining to the future of the inn. Accommodations will be complimentary, and transportation will be provided. More instructions will be given upon your arrival. Come for an extended weekend you won't forget.*

The whole thing sounded so mysterious.

And possibly a mistake.

Why in the world would Melinda get an invitation to do this?

If her life had continued as she'd expected, she would have never considered coming here. But everything had fallen apart, and she'd needed to get away. The invitation had come at the perfect time.

She was freshly divorced after Jim, her husband of eight years, had an affair he hadn't wanted to end.

Since Melinda had worked for Jim's company, she was also jobless.

In the final act of lunacy, Melinda had told Jim to keep the house they'd had custom-built three years ago in the suburbs. Too many bad memories haunted those walls. She'd rather have a fresh start.

All the details had been settled in court. She hated the fact it had come down to that. But it had been necessary.

Melinda hadn't walked away with nothing. She'd still receive alimony and her fair share of the life they'd started together.

Yet, in so many ways, she felt like a nomad without a home and a future.

Now another woman was living with her husband in the house Melinda had designed and decorated. Not only that, but the very same woman had taken over as the manager of her husband's heating and cooling company.

The business Melinda had helped build.

She'd put her own aspirations aside in order to work full-time there, plus a part-time job in order to raise the capital he'd needed to get his business off the ground.

Had he really been working all those late hours? Or had he spent them rendezvousing with other women while she was working?

Melinda thought she knew that answer.

This other woman probably wasn't the first he'd cheated on her with. She had little doubt he'd cheat on the new woman as well.

Once a cheater, always a cheater.

There had been no need for Melinda to attempt to remain working with him. The last thing she wanted was to see Jim every day.

So now, at thirty, she was starting from scratch.

With a sigh, she gripped her suitcase. The handle already felt sandy as the wind picked up the grains and spread them across everything in sight, like nature-aided bullets. Melinda had a key and a room number in her hand, both of which her driver had given her before he left.

The man had been gruff and hadn't said much. Had he been instructed to stay quiet? Or was that aloofness simply his personality?

Melinda wasn't sure. At the moment, being here felt like a terrible idea.

She gripped her suitcase tighter as she started up the rustic wooden walkway leading to the inn.

A few people milled on the outside deck or on the balcony above. But none of them seemed especially friendly. They merely glanced at her with fleeting curiosity before turning back to whatever they were doing—playing cornhole, reading, chatting with fancy drinks in their hands.

Melinda swallowed hard, pushing down a tremble of anxiety.

Although one part of her thought this was a terrible idea, another part was intrigued.

She wasn't trapped here at the inn, Melinda reminded herself. If anything felt too weird, she could leave whenever she wanted.

Provided she could find a ride, of course.

That was the one thing she didn't like about this arrangement—the fact she hadn't been able to drive. She supposed she *could* have. But she'd tried traversing the roads in the area once as a teenager in her father's Jeep Wrangler.

Five minutes into her journey, she'd gotten stuck coming over a particularly soft sand dune. She'd had to wait hours to get pulled out. Ever since then, she'd had no desire to attempt the drive again.

Currently, Melinda strolled along the deck, searching the room numbers until she found hers.

Room seven. First floor.

All the entrances to the guest rooms were on the outside of the building, and Melinda was thrilled to see her room faced the ocean. She couldn't wait to watch the sunrises. The inn was just high enough on the dune that she could see the ocean.

She took the thick, golden key and slid it into the lock. She twisted the handle, and the door let out a long, mellow creak as it slowly opened.

A dark room stared at her. The lights were out, and the shades drawn.

Almost desperately, she reached along the wall to find a light switch. Quickly, she flipped the lever.

Her room flooded into view.

The place was just as she remembered from her childhood. Antique mahogany bed frames with spindly posts rising like royalty from the corners. Matching nightstands and dressers. Delicate bedspreads and curtains. A cabinet full of curios.

Everything was outdated now, of course. But the familiarity—even down to the scent of eucalyptus—brought her a rush of comfort.

Maybe coming here *had* been a good idea.

She pulled her luggage inside then shut the door behind her. She glanced at the time on her phone.

In thirty minutes, she was to attend a meeting in the lobby.

Maybe the meeting would explain the subterfuge behind the mysterious invitation.

She had just enough time to freshen up a bit.

She strode across the room toward the bathroom, but as she passed the curio cabinet, she paused.

Numerous books were there. Some seashells. An old compass.

And a doll.

Alice Alabaster, the owner, had always loved dolls.

Personally, Melinda thought they were creepy.

Despite that, she opened the cabinet and gingerly lifted the doll out.

As she studied it, she squinted.

Strange.

The doll had dark curly hair and green eyes, just like Melinda.

Coincidence?

It had to be.

No one would put this doll here just because it looked like her.

Still, a shudder rushed through her. How strange. The similarities left her feeling off-balance.

Quickly, she put the doll back on the shelf and closed the cabinet.

Enough of that.

As she turned toward the bathroom, a paper on top of the cabinet caught her eye.

More instructions?

That was Melinda's best guess. Whoever had arranged this weekend had gone to great lengths to set everything up.



Or this paper could have been left by a previous guest and housekeeping had somehow missed it.

Either way, she was curious.

Melinda carefully unfolded it and read the words.

*You're not welcome here.*

The stark message hit her like a sucker punch.

Her heart pounded harder.

Was this some kind of joke?

Was there any place where she was truly welcome anymore?

Lately, it didn't feel like it.

Melinda glanced around the room, suddenly chilled.

If she was smart, she might heed the note's warning and leave.

But she was tired of other people dictating what she did.

She was taking back control of her life—for better or worse.



Sheriff Deputy Micah Warner stared at Louann Chapman. “So nothing was taken?”

The woman, in her late forties, shook her head and frowned as she stood in the center of the living room and rubbed her arms. “No, nothing’s missing. But my files have definitely been gone through. I’m particular about how I organize them.”

Louann had called him to report a break-in. The filing cabinet in the corner of her bedroom had been ajar when she’d returned from a quick trip down to Corolla to get her groceries for the week.

“Any reason why someone might want to go through your files?” Micah asked.

“I can’t imagine any reason,” she said. “It’s not like I have anything of value in there. Grew up poor—just me and my mom—and I’m still poor to this day. As far as my files? Just some receipts and old tax returns.”

He glanced around her small, simple house. The furnishings were probably twenty years old, the walls dark with synthetic wood paneling, and the carpet a dark-blue high pile.

The only thing that stood out was the upright piano against the wall.

Louann was the resident piano teacher and occasional entertainer here in town.

Micah jotted down more notes. “I’ll take a look around and write up a report. It is curious that someone broke in like this but didn’t take anything.”

She pulled her chin back and let out a snorting chuckle. “I’d say.”

He glanced down the hallway to the three doorways. “Did I hear you have someone renting one of your rooms here?”

The locals liked to talk, and Micah knew Louann had rented rooms before to seasonal employees mostly.

“I do,” Louann said. “Carlotta Lopez . But I think she’s at work right now. She’s a housekeeper over at the inn.”

“Yes, I’ve met her before.”

The twentysomething woman had moved here from Spain and seemed nice enough the few times Micah had interacted with her. She had a bit of a wild streak, like she was looking for something—or someone—to sweep her away.

In fact, Carlotta had even asked Micah out once. He’d politely declined.

“Any reason to think this might have something to do with Carlotta?” Micah asked.

Louann seemed to think about it a moment before shaking her head. “I can’t imagine why. She’s a little flighty and

messy, but otherwise quiet and fairly responsible.”

Micah nodded. “I’ll swing by the inn and talk to her, just to be certain.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it. You can imagine how shaken I am when I think about someone invading my home.” Louann rubbed her arms as if chilled.

“Understandably.” Micah stood, curious about why the break-in had occurred.

Usually, the larger houses in town were targeted. But Louann’s place was less than eight hundred square feet and worn down. Plus, nothing had been taken.

“I’ll be touch. In the meantime, lock your doors.”

That was the first thing Louann had told him—she never locked up behind her. She’d lived here for twenty years and hadn’t ever had any problems.

Until now.

After searching her house for any additional clues, Micah hopped in his truck and headed toward the inn. Talking to Carlotta was next on his agenda.

He parked in a lot beside the building and climbed out.

Micah paused a moment and glanced at the inn with its cheerful pumpkins and mums. Autumn-themed flags hung near the entrance, and wreath with orange and yellow leaves hung on the front doors.

The place definitely looked festive.

He couldn’t help but wonder what was going on here.

Throughout the day, numerous people had been dropped off. They didn’t, however, look like typical beachgoers.

Most of them were dressed as if they’d just come from work. There were no boogie boards. No fishing poles. No coolers.

He walked across the deck at the front of the inn toward the lobby. Before he reached it, one of the guest’s doors

opened, and someone burst outside.

Micah nearly collided with the person but stepped back just in time.

The woman, however, teetered as if thrown off-balance by his presence.

Micah grabbed the woman's arms to steady her.

He hadn't meant to scare her, but why was someone exiting their room like a bank robber fleeing the police?

As the woman's face came into focus, his eyes widened, and the breath whooshed from his lungs. "Melinda?"

"Micah?" Her lips parted in matching surprise.

As they stared at each other, shock coursed through him.

What was Melinda doing here?

Was this really her?

Yes, it had to be. Despite the years that had passed, he'd recognize her anywhere. She'd gotten older, of course, but she looked even more beautiful. Her features were more defined now. She'd filled out in all the right places. Her green eyes held years of wisdom and experience in place of mischief and adventure.

Melinda ... the woman who'd broken his heart so badly that Micah had never been the same.

He wanted to hate her, but he couldn't. He did, however, remind himself to keep his distance.

Finally, after several moments of gawking, Melinda laughed softly—almost self-consciously—and pushed a strand of her curly brown hair behind her ear.

"I didn't expect to see you here," she murmured, her voice as soft and songlike as ever. "Did you get an invitation also?"

"An invitation?" Micah squinted. What was she talking about? "I work in Carova."

She blinked several times. "What? You stayed here all these years?"

“I did. I love it here, and I didn’t want to leave.”

At his words, Melinda’s cheeks flushed.

Probably because the last conversation they’d had was about staying versus going.

Micah had loved Melinda, and he’d been nearly certain Melinda had loved him too. But she didn’t see a future for herself here in Carova.

Yet this place was the *only* future Micah saw for himself. He never wanted to leave.

His family had been here for more than a hundred years, and no place made him happier. Melinda, on the other hand, couldn’t see herself ever living in such a small town.

So they’d parted ways on that day and hadn’t spoken in at least twelve years.

He swallowed hard, shoving those memories aside. “I’m a sergeant with the sheriff’s department here now.”

Her gaze slowly seemed to focus, and she glanced over his uniform for the first time.

“That’s ... great.” Melinda absently shoved at the piece of hair again, the one that was already behind her ear. “Do you still live next door?”

He pointed to his little yellow cottage located beside the massive inn. “I do. My dad moved down to Florida, where medical help is a little more readily available if he needs it.”

Carova wasn’t ideal for people with health problems since first responders—and ambulances—had to travel across the beach and then on sandy roads. Those arteries into the town were sometimes cut off during storms. In dire emergencies, people could be life flighted to the nearest hospital up in Norfolk, Virginia—but that process still took time, something people didn’t always have during emergencies.

In many ways this town wasn’t a great place for retirees. Mostly people in the tourism industry worked here as well as real estate agents and a few work-from-home people. The rest

did the long commute farther south or across the water to work.

Take Mrs. Alabaster, for example, the owner of the inn. She'd died a month ago, and by the time help had arrived, it was too late. She was gone.

Micah still missed their daily chats. The woman was lively and friendly, and she'd almost taken on a grandmotherly role in the absence of Micah's own mother, who'd passed away from cancer when Micah was only four.

"I can't believe you're still here." Melinda shook her head and stared up at him, shock still rippling through her gaze. "What a surprise."

Was there an edge of judgment in her tone? Or was that admiration?

He wasn't sure.

Melinda had always been driven. She'd loved the big city, and she'd had lofty aspirations, a desire to see people, to go places. She'd wanted to start her own public relations firm and follow in the footsteps of her aunt.

He shifted his thoughts. "I sure am. Speaking of which, what are *you* doing here?"

The way her cheeks reddened made him realize there was *definitely* more to the story.

Melinda glanced at the time on her phone and frowned. "I'd love to fill you in. But I have to get to a meeting in two minutes. I have very clear instructions not to be late."

"Meeting?" Micah squinted. "Instructions?"

He liked the sound of this less and less. Tarquin Osterman, the lawyer handling Mrs. Alabaster's estate, had been tight-lipped about what would happen to this place now that Alice was gone. Micah knew Alice only wanted the best for this inn, and he'd been on pins and needles as he waited to hear about its fate.

Melinda's frown deepened as if she were uncertain also. "It's a long story. Maybe we could catch up later."

“I’d love that.”

A grin stretched across Melinda’s face. “Great. You know where I’m staying, so come find me. I mean it. I’d love to hear about your life since we last spoke.”

Micah would love nothing more than to catch up also.

But recent developments in the area unnerved him.

Strange things had been happening in Carova lately. Micah couldn’t pin them on anyone in particular. But with each new incident, the crimes seemed to be escalating.

Break-ins. Vandalisms. Strangers acting strangely.

Even the island’s wild horses seemed spooked at times.

Maybe it was nothing.

But maybe it was a sign that something bigger was to come.

# chapter two

SEEING Micah had made Melinda feel a little better. He'd always had that effect on her.

He looked even more handsome now if that was even possible. His hair was light brown with blond highlights, and it was still thick, cut neatly and professionally. Yet when the wind had blown and strands scattered across his forehead, it gave him a boyish look that brought back a flood of memories.

At one time, Melinda had been perfectly content to stare into those warm, brown eyes for hours on end. He was tall with broad shoulders. He had an easy smile. But he was also protective and tough when he needed to be.

For the longest time, she'd thought he was the perfect guy.

Her family had come here every summer for vacation when she'd been growing up. Her dad had been able to run his computer startup company from here, and her mom didn't work. Melinda was an only child, so they rented one of the rooms and, while her father worked, Melinda and her mom enjoyed the beach.

The summers here had been idyllic.

She and Micah had met through the children's programming the inn offered. She had been eight at the time, and Micah ten. While the adults were off to play, the kids were entertained on the beach or with games or crafts.

Micah had been the sheriff's son, who lived next door. Some kind of special arrangement had been made with the inn's owners, Piers and Alice Alabaster. Micah had been



allowed to come here when school was out to participate in the children's activities while his father was on duty.

Melinda and Micah had become fast friends.

She'd looked forward to spending the summers hanging out with him.

Once they were older, Melinda's parents had begun to fight. Whenever Melinda had needed to get away, she'd find Micah. The two of them had spent hours learning to surf, collecting shells, and watching dolphins.

But that was all before life got complicated.

Any of the comfort Melinda found after running into Micah quickly disappeared when she stepped into the lobby and saw five other people there.

Were they all summoned here the same way she'd been?

With a mysterious invitation? And what about the warning note in her room? Had they gotten one of those also?

Maybe they were all confused as well.

There wasn't exactly an air of festivity around her.

No, the tension in the room was as thick as the summer's humidity.

Her unease wasn't fading.

Plus, she was still shaken by the note and doll.

And seeing Micah.

Truthfully, running into him had left her feeling off-kilter.

"Ms. Marx ..." A fortysomething stout man with thinning hair, a neat brown mustache, and a square face glanced at her from the front of the room. "I'm Tarquin Osterman, and I'm glad you could make it on time ..." He glanced at his watch. "Though barely."

Her cheeks flushed as everyone turned to stare at her.

She glanced at her phone again. She was one minute early. That still counted as being on time, despite what her dad might have said. *On time is late.*

He'd had so many opinions on everything. So many strict rules. And he'd expected everyone to comply without question. He was still like that to this day.

Strangely enough, Melinda had gone on and married a man just like her father.

Her mother and father had divorced ten years ago. Her father still lived in Raleigh, where he'd gotten remarried. Her mother was single but had moved to Maine to start a bakery with her new boyfriend.

"Please, everyone, head into the library and have a seat," Osterman said with a slightly aristocratic tone.

Melinda glanced in the direction he pointed.

Five white wooden chairs—probably used mostly for weddings—had been set up in a semi-circle in the library. A podium stood at the front of the room, the surly man in charge behind it.

Quickly, Melinda found a seat on the end—the perfect place to make a quick escape if needed.

"I'm sure you're all wondering why you're here." The man glanced around them, a dour expression on his face.

"If you haven't met me yet, I'm Tarquin Osterman, and I was Alice Alabaster's attorney," he continued. "She asked me to invite you all here."

*Was her attorney? Had the man misspoken?*

Melinda truly had no idea what this was about, and Osterman was doing nothing to put her at ease. Her lungs tightened as she waited for him to continue.

"As I'm sure most of you have heard, Mrs. Alabaster passed away a month ago."

Melinda sucked in a breath. No, she hadn't heard. What had happened?

She'd had so been looking forward to catching up with Mrs. Alabaster.

“She had hoped, before she left this world for her eternal home, to find someone to pass this hotel along to,” Osterman continued. “Many people throughout the years have offered to buy the inn, but she said no one felt right. She wanted this to be a privately owned business, not something a big corporation took over.”

Melinda could understand that. Small businesses could be a breath of fresh air.

“Of course, Mrs. Alabaster wasn’t expecting to die suddenly the way she did, before she was able to choose her successor.” Mr. Osterman frowned. “Thankfully, she and I had talked about a plan as to what to do if she were to ever suffer a sudden death.”

Melinda’s hand shot into the air.

Osterman glanced at her with narrowed eyes. “Yes?”

He clearly sounded annoyed, but she didn’t care.

“I’m sorry, but what happened to Mrs. Alabaster?” She needed to know before she stayed here any longer. She hated being taken by surprise. “I hadn’t heard until just now.”

Osterman’s eyes softened. “Unfortunately, she had a heart attack. A housekeeper found her. It appears she went quickly, and she died here in the place she loved.”

Melinda’s heart beat harder at the thought.

Poor Mrs. Alabaster. Melinda remembered her as such a kind woman. She’d loved this place so much and had gotten to know each guest who’d stayed here as if they’d been personally invited. She’d wanted to let them know they were welcome into her home.

She and her husband, Piers, had built this place themselves sixty years ago, and it had gone on to become one of the leading resorts on the East Coast. Celebrities and politicians even came here on occasion.

A picture of the Alabasters hung above the fireplace mantel. Alice with her black hair— hair she’d kept colored

well into her sixties last time Melinda had seen her. She was a lovely, gentle woman. Pretty, slender, intelligent.

Piers was handsome—very handsome—with thick, light-brown hair and a movie star smile. He'd covered the business side of the things while Alice handled hospitality.

The two had no children. She'd heard her mom say once that they weren't able to.

Together, Piers and Alice had made quite the team.

A man sitting two chairs over rose. "I don't understand why we're here."

Osterman narrowed his eyes with annoyance again. "Hello, Tom. I'm getting to that if you'll just be patient. Please, take a seat."

"I don't want to take a seat. I want to know what's going on."

The obstinate man, probably in his late thirties, carried himself like someone who thought he was important. He wore expensive clothes, and his haircut even looked costly with its precise edges. But his tone distinguished him the most.

He spoke as if everyone else was beneath him.

That made him one of Melinda's least favorite kind of people.

"I won't sit down. Not until I have some answers." Tom raised his chin audaciously, daring Osterman to defy him.

"Then feel free to show yourself to the door." Osterman nodded behind him to the set of double glass doors leading back into the lobby. "I'm not forcing anyone to remain here. If you have qualms with anything I've said thus far, I take no offense to your departure. However, Mrs. Alabaster might be looking down at you from heaven and having some not-so-kind thoughts. I can do nothing about that."

Melinda wanted to smile at his dry humor.

It was humor, right?

But Osterman didn't grin, so she wasn't sure if the man was joking or not.

His words lingered in her mind.

She *could* leave right now. Forget this whole invitation.

Coming here had been crazy anyway.

But she couldn't force herself to move. She wanted to know more. Besides, did she really want to go back to the cramped apartment in Raleigh she'd rented until she could figure life out?

Absolutely not.

She hated that place. Hated it *so* much.

She was determined to make a new life for herself, one that made her look forward to getting out of bed every morning. No more living in a trance-like state.

"You were each handpicked by Mrs. Alabaster as potential owners of this property," Osterman continued. "All of you knew her or had met her in some way before."

The woman at the opposite end of the row raised her hand almost shyly and shook her head. "I only met Mrs. Alabaster once at a charity event. I don't really know that I'm qualified to be here. Are you sure my name was supposed to be on the list?"

"Robin Flattery ... I want to assure you that if you're here, it is because you're supposed to be here." Osterman lifted both his nostrils and eyebrows at the same time in an uppity, annoyed manner.

But Melinda understood the woman's question.

She felt it herself.

Why in the world would Mrs. Alabaster have asked Melinda to come? Twelve years had passed since she'd last visited, and she'd only been a teenager back then.

Had Mrs. Alabaster seen something in Melinda that had led her to believe Melinda might be a good candidate for taking over this place?

Melinda had always wanted to start her own PR firm. That was what she'd studied in college, and she'd eventually used her skills at her husband's company. It hadn't been her original plan, but she and Jim had decided it would be for the best.

The idea that Alice had seen that kind of potential in her seemed far-fetched.

Yet intriguing.

"I have nothing planned for you this evening, although dinner will be served," Osterman said. "Please, enjoy yourselves and get settled in. Tomorrow, we will begin the process of interviewing everyone to see who might be the best fit to take over."

"Like, what does this interview process mean?" One of the men narrowed his eyes as if confused.

Melinda studied the man, who stood out from the rest of the group in his shorts, T-shirt, and flip-flops. He was probably in his mid-twenties, and he appeared to be more of a surfer than a businessman, with his shaggy blond hair, deep tan, and laid-back attitude.

"Mrs. Alabaster has certain tasks she'd like for you to complete, Fletcher James."

"Then *you* judge us and decide who is the best?" snotty businessman Tom piped in.

"Why would she trust that decision to you?" the third man asked.

"Richard Powell . . . there are some things I cannot be specific about, but Mrs. Alabaster and I discussed these details ad nauseum before she passed. You're going to have to trust me on this." Osterman glanced at all of them, irritation remaining in his gaze.

Was the man making a point of saying each of their names? Was that his way of saying he'd done his homework?

Maybe.

But Melinda still remained quiet.

“I would ask if you had any questions, but I think we’ve established that everyone here has *many* questions.” His nostrils flared again. “Most of them I’m not prepared to answer right now. You’re not supposed to be privy to everything. That said, I’m going to call it a night. Dinner has been set up in the dining area, so please proceed and enjoy yourselves.”

What did she want to do? Melinda asked herself.

She had to admit she was intrigued by the prospect of staying here and learning more.

Then she remembered the note she’d found in her room.

Had anyone else received the same warning?

That idea seemed too far-fetched, too paranoid. In fact, this whole scenario felt like the setup for a TV movie where most of the invitees were called together for a more sinister purpose and ended up dying.

Melinda tried to laugh the thought off, but she couldn’t.

Because it wasn’t funny. Especially when she remembered that note that had been left, presumably for her.

Stay or go?

Remain or run?

Those were her options.

The same options she’d faced when she had to decide between her career or Micah.

The same options she’d faced after she found out about Jim’s affair.

Melinda frowned.

She needed to figure out what exactly she would do soon. That note had shaken her up, and she was no longer sure that coming here was a good idea.



Micah's thoughts remained on Melinda as he patrolled the island in his truck.

She was the *last* person he should be thinking about.

She'd already crushed his heart once. The last thing he wanted was to go through that again.

He *had* glanced at her ring finger as they talked and had seen it was bare.

Yet he knew she'd been married.

So what happened?

Truthfully, he'd checked her social media on occasion. He'd seen she had gotten married about eight years ago to a man who owned an HVAC company. They had looked happy together in the pictures.

When Micah discovered the news, he'd wanted to be happy for her.

He supposed in his own way he was.

However, once she was gone from his life, he'd never expected to see her again. She'd become someone who only existed in his past.

Since they'd broken up, he'd dated other women, a couple rather seriously.

But none of those relationships had worked out.

No other woman had been Melinda.

As far as people on this island were concerned, Micah was a certified bachelor.

He glanced at the ocean in the distance and the horses standing near the surf.

A nor'easter lingered off the shore, and forecasters said it could be here as early as Sunday.

For many communities, nor'easters were a hassle but not really a big deal. Here in Carova, they could be a threat to both property and life.



With streets made of sand and the whole town built on dunes, the low-lying areas filled with water. During some storms, the ocean pushed itself all the way up to the dunes, making shore driving impossible.

When that happened, the entire area closed until the water receded like an attacking army withdrawing from war.

The wild horses on the island knew what to do when the storms came. They sensed the change in the weather and retreated to higher ground in the wooded areas of Carova.

But people didn't often seem as smart. They drove on the beach even as the rising waves lapped at their tires. Micah had seen vehicles get swept into the ocean, the people inside taken with them.

Others decided to try to swim or surf in the ocean during storms, only to have rip currents pull them out into deep waters. First responders would then put their own lives at risk to save the foolish risk-takers.

There were so many dangers, so many things that could go wrong. Half of Micah's job seemed to be educating people about how to stay safe on the island and why they needed to stay away from the wild horses—for both their own protection and for the horses.

The county he worked for was located partly in Carova and partly on the mainland across the Currituck Sound. He lived on this side of the water, so Carova was his jurisdiction. Another sheriff's deputy patrolled the area of Corolla just south of Carova but also located on the water.

Micah drove toward a patch of woods to check it out.

Sometimes, it was the perfect spot for people who wanted to do things in secret. The only audience out here usually was a wild horse or two. Once, a fugitive from the mainland had somehow made it over here. He'd lived in those woods, eating berries and drinking rainwater, for an entire week.

Yesterday, someone had heard gunfire out this way. Likely, it was a hunter illegally looking for deer or one of the locals trying out a new rifle.

Micah had searched the woods for evidence of anything illegal but had found nothing.

Still, he wanted to keep his eyes wide open.

He parked his truck and started toward the woods on foot. He wouldn't venture in between the trees too deeply. People tended to keep to the outskirts of the woods if they were just trying to find some privacy.

Only four steps in, he paused.

Was that ... ?

He took a step closer.

It was.

A small arm protruded from some underbrush.

His heart rate quickened.

But that didn't look like any ordinary arm.

Slipping a glove on, he knelt and carefully touched the stiff hand.

Micah lifted it from the ground.

It was attached to a body.

But not human.

A doll—one that looked fairly clean and new—stared back at him.

Just like one of the ones Mrs. Alabaster had collected.

But what in the world was a doll doing out here?

## chapter **three**

PART OF MELINDA didn't even want to go to dinner. Another part of her was curious about the other people here and their connection to both the inn and Alice Alabaster.

There were five candidates all together, and a table for that precise number had been set up in a private dining area. Several other guests were using the inn this weekend, but this group's activities seemed to be insular.

A waiter instructed them to be seated, and they found their name cards at their place settings. Melinda found herself beside Tom.

Everyone seemed uncertain as a server poured water in their goblets before serving salads.

Only afterward did they begin to talk.

"I guess we should introduce ourselves." Tom curled his nose as he said the words. "I'm Tom Gleeson. I'm from New Hampshire where I already own a successful resort. I'm not really sure why I'm here, except for the fact that I offered to buy this place two years ago and was turned down."

He turned to the woman to his left.

"I'm Robin Flattery." Her voice sounded soft and a little shaky. "I ... I don't know exactly why I'm here either. It's like I said, I did meet Mrs. Alabaster at a charity event in Washington, DC, about four years ago. We had a really good conversation, and I certainly thought she was a wonderful woman. But this is my first time here. I almost didn't come."

"Me either." Richard lowered his eyelids impatiently.

“I’m an art curator up in Northern Virginia,” Robin continued. “Married with two kids. I just got here, but I miss them already. But I knew Mrs. Alabaster had good taste in art, so I was curious as to what this was about.”

When she finished, Richard sat up and rolled his shoulders back.

The man had fiery red hair and an equally fiery look in his eyes. He appeared to be in his forties and based on the aggressiveness in his tone, Melinda was surprised the man hadn’t spoken up earlier.

“I’m Richard Powell. I live in South Carolina, where I own a successful chain of gift shops.” He paused. “I came here once when my father got remarried after my mom passed. I remember meeting Alice, and I thought she was a lovely woman. I never expected this, however.”

Next was the surfer. “I’m Fletcher James. What’s up?” He offered a hang loose sign. When he saw no one responded, he lowered his hand. “I live down in Nags Head. Grew up in the area. Came to Carova a few times with my friends, but never stayed here. Never even met Mrs. Alabaster or her husband or anybody. This place is too high class for my tastes.”

“And what do you do for a living?” Tom asked, curling his nose again.

“I surf. Repair surfboards sometimes. Work at a restaurant on occasion. Just living my best life, man.”

What an interesting group that had been brought together ...

Then everyone’s eyes were on her.

Melinda cleared her throat. “I’m Melinda Marx. I’m from Raleigh, and my family used to vacation here. In fact, my parents even vacationed here before I was born. But it’s been about twelve years since I was here last.”

“And what do you do for a living?” Tom seemed obsessed with that question.

Her airpipe tightened. “I used to manage my husband’s HVAC company. But I’m freshly divorced and trying to figure out my future.”

Tom grunted. Apparently, he didn’t approve of Melinda’s presence here either. Perhaps he thought she was in a different—less affluent—league than him.

Melinda wasn’t going to let his opinion worry her.

“What exactly are these interview tasks that they want us to do?” Tom stabbed a piece of lettuce. “I’ve already put in my time. Done the work. I don’t appreciate being left in the dark and treated like a peon. The only reason I came was out of curiosity, but I can see that might have been a mistake.”

“It does seem as if this was almost a game for Mrs. Alabaster, doesn’t it?” Robin frowned and only played with her salad.

“I hate games,” Richard muttered.

“I say he throws us all out into the ocean and we surf it out,” Fletcher said with a rambling laugh.

“You’d think Alice would want someone who would know how to run a place like this,” Melinda muttered, still trying to make sense of things.

Tom would be the most logical person to take the inn over. Robin the art curator had no experience, and Fletcher didn’t even seem to know how to take a shower properly. At least Richard had experience owning retail stores.

Melinda? Well, she’d run her husband’s company. This inn would be a whole different story. This entire setup didn’t make sense.

“You know what? I have better things to do with my time.” Tom suddenly stood and threw his napkin on the table. “The more I think about this arrangement, the more I don’t like it. I’m out. I’m returning to New Hampshire where I know my business is a sure bet. I wish you all the best.”

His scowl made it clear he *didn’t* wish them all the best. He thought they were all idiots for staying.

Maybe they were.

Silence fell around the table as he stormed out.

Finally, Richard murmured, “And then there were four.”

It sounded like a line from an Agatha Christie novel.

Only people always died in those novels.

Melinda shivered at the thought.



The rest of dinner remained tense.

The group had little in common and even less to talk about.

Melinda tried to enjoy her tile fish, cheesy grits, and grilled vegetables. The food *was* very tasty.

Yet she didn't feel as if she could finish dinner quickly enough.

All she really wanted was to go back to her room and have some quiet time. To maybe listen to the waves crash. To smell the salty air.

She needed to figure out how to proceed with this.

Just as she took her last bite, she glanced through the doors and into the lobby.

Micah was here ... again.

He'd come here earlier for some reason, but she hadn't asked him what.

This could be the perfect excuse to leave.

After wiping her mouth, she placed her napkin beside her plate. “If you don't mind, I need to run.”

No one said anything as she hurried from the room.

She stepped into the lobby just in time to see Micah hold up a plastic bag, the type usually meant for evidence.

She sucked in a breath when she saw the face pressed against the plastic.

No, not a face.

Not a real face, at least.

Just a doll.

A doll?

What was going on?

With more caution in her steps now, she approached the front counter where Micah stood talking to the clerk.

He did a double take when he saw her. “Melinda ...”

She nodded at the bag, unable to get the sight of it out of her mind. “Everything okay?”

He glanced at the object in his hands, seeming to snap back to reality and remember what was inside.

Micah nodded. “Yeah, it’s fine. I’m just trying to figure out if this is one of Alice’s and how it may have ended up in the woods.”

She glanced at the doll again and shivered. “The woods, huh? Sounds creepy.”

“Most likely, it was accidental. I’m pretty sure these dolls aren’t worth much. They had a lot of sentimental value to Alice, however.”

“I was curious about them.” Melinda rubbed her arms. “They’re everywhere around here. I thought there were a lot when I used to come here, but now her collection seems to have tripled.”

“Alice was definitely quirky. She never really talked about why she loved the dolls. But she named each one of them.”

She thought about the one she’d found in her room and considered mentioning it. She ultimately decided not to. What good would it do?

“Mr. Williams isn’t available to speak with you right now,” the clerk behind the desk, a twentysomething, dark-haired

woman with tanned skin said, “He’ll be back in an hour. Can you come back then?”

Micah turned his attention back to the woman who was wearing a nametag that read Nikki. “Of course. And has Carlotta been in yet?”

Nikki shook her head. “Not yet. I’ll let you know when she arrives, however.”

Micah thanked the woman and then turned back to Melinda. “It looks like I have some time to kill.”

“Any interest in taking a quick walk?” Melinda wasn’t sure where the question had come from. It just popped out, and now she wanted to take it back.

Though part of her wanted to catch up with Micah, she knew the best thing she could do was keep her distance.

But right now, she also felt as if she needed a friend. Why not Micah? He was certainly a better fit than the strangers vying to win this inn.

But she would need to be careful. She knew she’d hurt him when she left all those years ago.

The last thing she wanted to do was to hurt him again.



## chapter **four**

MICAH STEPPED OUTSIDE onto the deck with Melinda and held up the bag with the doll in it. “Let me just put this in my truck. I’ll be right back.”

He hurried toward his gray F150, stored away the doll in a locked compartment in the back, and then met her again.

She looked just as beautiful as ever as the wind swept around her, sending tendrils of curls swirling in the air.

Her gray linen pants and pale green shirt accentuated her eyes and made her appear as if she belonged here. He’d always thought she did, but she hadn’t been convinced that small-town living was for her.

“So ... I know this is nosy, but who is Carlotta?” Melinda asked as they started toward the ocean.

“She’s one of the housekeepers here. The house where she’s renting a room was broken into, and I’m trying to talk to her about it. Her shift didn’t start until dinner, and apparently, she’s running late. From what I’ve heard, that isn’t unusual.”

“So that’s what crime is like on the island, huh? Late employees and dolls found in the woods?”

He chuckled, though the sound quickly faded. “Sometimes. Thankfully, there aren’t usually too many serious felonies taking place here. Occasionally some drugs or disorderly conduct.”

He remembered his suspicions that trouble was brewing on the island, but he didn’t mention it to her. It was better to keep that to himself.

Melinda glanced toward the ocean again as they ambled in the sand toward it. “I always knew there was something peaceful about this place.”

“I can’t imagine how anyone wouldn’t want to stay here.” As soon as the words left his lips, he realized what he’d said.

Micah instantly wanted to apologize. He hadn’t been trying to make a dig at Melinda.

But apologizing might draw too much attention to their past.

Maybe it was best if he didn’t do that.

“You got to ask me one question,” Micah said instead, hoping the subject change worked. “Is it my turn now?”

Melinda cast him a fleeting smile. “Sure.”

Seagulls danced in the air around them, and the aroma of the ocean filled their nostrils with a salty scent as they continued to pace forward.

“What was that meeting about?” he asked.

Hesitation flooded her features.

She didn’t want to say, did she?

Interesting.

Micah had been trying to fathom what it might pertain to, but he hadn’t had any guesses.

She drew in a deep breath before starting.



Melinda filled Micah in as they walked down the shoreline. It felt good to bounce everything off him, even if she should be keeping her distance.

He shook his head, his eyes wide as if surprised. “Wow. I didn’t expect that.”

“None of us did.” She held her shoes in her hands, trying to avoid the waves. Every once in a while, one seemed to run

away from the rest and rise higher on the beach than the others. “It’s all very strange. I don’t understand why Mrs. Alabaster didn’t simply pick someone. Or, if she was going to do this, why didn’t she at least pick people who might know what they’re doing? I haven’t a clue how to run a place like this.”

“Like I said, she was quirky.” Micah gently gripped Melinda’s arm and pulled her away from an incoming wave. “She liked to do things her own way.”

“Clearly.”

Slowing down, Melinda studied his face another moment and saw something brewing in his gaze. “What are you thinking?”

He shrugged as if trying to brush it off. “Nothing.”

“Micah ...”

He let out a long breath. “There’s just something about that whole setup that I don’t like.”

“Me either.”

Melinda looked out over the ocean again. The waves looked angry as they crashed and withdrew only to crash again. The sun was quickly setting, and soon darkness would cover the town.

She wanted to be back in her room before that happened.

If someone truly didn’t want her here, then she didn’t want to make it easy for them to run her off.

And that’s probably what this was. Empty threats. Someone trying to scare her.

All so they could win the inn instead?

Maybe.

It was the most reasonable explanation.

Micah glanced back at the inn. “That place is worth millions. Do you know how many people have tried to buy it over the years?”

“I don’t know an exact number, but the attorney who’s in charge of this whole song and dance said in the meeting that many people had. Mostly corporations, and he mentioned that Mrs. Alabaster did *not* want a corporation to own it.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that too. I know this is just town scuttlebutt, but rumor has it the profit she made on this place was amazing.”

Melinda tilted her head. “Why do I feel like you’re getting at something?”

He shrugged. “I feel like this has been set up as a competition and whoever wins is going to be a millionaire. Do you realize how high the stakes are going to be for some people?”

“I don’t even care about money.”

Micah gave her a pointed look. “I’m not talking about you. I could see you running this place because you’ve got a business sense, and you’re good with people. Money has never been your motivator. But for other people ... they’d do anything in their power to get their hands on that kind of wealth.”

A shiver ran through her, and she crossed her arms over her chest. “I didn’t think about it like that.”

She considered telling him about the doll in her room. About the note.

But she hated drama. The doll could be a coincidence. The note could have been left by a past guest.

No, she’d wait and see if anything else strange happened. If she thought this situation could turn serious, she’d talk to Micah about it. The last thing she wanted was to be the girl who cried wolf.

As they paused, Micah’s gaze locked with hers. “Are you sure that you want to stay here?”

Melinda thought about it a moment before shaking her head and admitting with resignation, “To be honest, I’m not sure about anything anymore.”

Just as the words left her lips, a rustling came from some bushes farther up the dune.

She froze.

Who was out there?

# chapter **five**

MELINDA FROZE, anticipating the worst.

Micah seemed to sense her apprehension, and stepped in front of her, ready to shield her from anything.

Was it the person who'd left the note? Was he watching her, ready to teach her a lesson?

She held her breath.

Part of her wanted to run. But it didn't matter. Her legs refused to move.

More rustling sounded.

A moment later, a horse stepped from the brush.

She let out a laugh as she watched him mosey farther down the shore, looking as if he owned the place. Probably because he practically did.

The horses were the original inhabitants and well protected by the county.

"Just Sir Steve-io," Micah muttered.

"Sir Steve-io?" She glanced up at Micah, curious about the name.

"Most of the horses have names," he told her. "I can't identify all of them, but Sir Steve-io has that white patch on his chest. He's a stallion. Probably fifteen years old. I see him around a lot."

She watched the majestic horse another moment as it sauntered away.

Then her thoughts turned back to the conversation she and Micah were having before the horse emerged.

*I'm not sure about anything anymore.*

Those were the most honest words Melinda had muttered in a long time.

She *wasn't* sure about anything anymore.

The life she'd set up for herself was now gone. Disappeared. Vanished into thin air.

Part of her felt like the challenge of coming here could be fun, something to get her mind off of the grief she'd experienced over the last couple of years.

But maybe Micah was right. Maybe doing this wasn't a smart idea.

However, it was just a few days. What could it hurt to see how things worked out in that time? It wasn't like Melinda was committing a month of her life to this. Not even a week, for that matter.

She'd seen this as an adventure when she first got the invitation.

Maybe she should continue trying to think of it like that.

Micah's radio crackled, and he stepped away to answer.

As Melinda stood on the shore, the wind continued to whip around her, sending her curls into her face. She pushed them back, forcing them to retreat, only to have them attack again.

A moment later, Micah returned. "I've got to help a driver stuck in the sand. Let me walk you back to your room first."

Melinda waved a hand in the air. "You don't have to do that. But I appreciate the thought."

His gaze lingered on her a moment longer. "I'd like to hear about the past twelve years sometime."

Her throat burned for some unexplainable reason. "And I'd really like some time to sit and talk to you about it. We have a lot to catch up on."

Melinda had so many questions about him. Did he ever marry? Did he have kids yet?

He was handsome and kind—husband material. Certainly someone had grabbed him up by now. But she glanced at his hand and didn't see a ring there. Still, sometimes cops didn't wear them in the line of duty. She shouldn't assume anything.

It didn't matter to her. After the way her marriage had ended, she had no desire to ever date again. No, the risk wasn't worth the reward.

Micah didn't change any of that.

Their gazes remained on each other another moment until Micah finally stepped back. "If you're sure you'll be okay, I'll get going."

She paused and offered him a smile. "I look forward to seeing you around."

"Same here."

She watched him walk to his 4x4. Then she climbed back up the wooden boardwalk to the inn, taking a moment to stare at the building in the near darkness.

The place was impressive. What if it really could be hers one day?

The thought was crazy.

But it was a real possibility. She had a one in five—actually, four now—chance of this inn becoming hers. Osterman had shown them the paperwork during dinner to confirm this wasn't some kind of joke.

Could this be the fresh start she was looking for?

At one time in her life, living in a place like this was the last thing Melinda wanted. But now ... it seemed like an oasis from her otherwise crazy life. In fact, it seemed like an answer to her ever-repeated prayers for guidance.

She wondered sometimes if God got tired of her asking the same thing over and over. But she prayed so fervently because she also believed fervently that God could change things.



And He was.

Slowly.

In His timing.

As the wind gusted again and sand pelted her, Melinda picked up her pace as she hurried back to her room. She pulled her key from the pocket of her linen pants and slipped it into her door.

She should sleep on this before making any big decisions.

But as soon as she stepped into her room, she froze.

Something felt different.

Had someone been in here? Gone through her things?

Her throat was tight as she stepped farther into the space. She quickly checked beneath the bed, in the closet, and in the bathroom.

No one else was in here right now.

But she needed to be sure someone *hadn't* been in here.

She hesitated by the dresser before finally pulling it open, sucking in a deep breath.

Then she let out that very breath when she realized everything looked as she'd left it.

So why did she feel so spooked?

She wasn't sure.

But she checked the locks on the door again as a precaution.



After Micah helped a tourist dig his all-wheel-drive vehicle from the sand, he went back to the inn.

He wished his time with Melinda hadn't been cut off. There were so many more things he wanted to talk to her about, to ask her.

But duty had called.

However, he still needed to talk to Carlotta, and he hadn't gotten any phone calls back yet from his friend Trent, the manager at the inn.

He stepped inside the lobby, listening the happy sounds of someone playing the piano in the dining room. He glanced through the doors and saw Louann there.

He knew the inn hired her sometimes to come play, to add "atmosphere." He was glad to see that hadn't changed after Mrs. Alabaster passed.

He turned back to the front desk. The same clerk was working. Nikki was a transplant to the area, originally from Arizona, if he remembered correctly.

She'd always seemed pleasant whenever Micah had spoken with her.

Her expression seemed to flood with realization as soon as she saw him.

"Deputy Warner. I didn't totally forget about you. I promise. It's been a little hectic around here with everything going on."

He paused near the desk, curious about her words. "Oh, yeah? What's been happening?"

She let out a nervous laugh. "I'm sure you've heard about this whole challenge Mrs. Alabaster set up before she died."

"I have."

"The staff calls it 'The Bungalow Games.' We never say that in front of the guests, of course. Anyway, all of it seems rather silly to me. But if those were her wishes ..." She shrugged.

"I did hear about it. And it does seem crazy. Is that all that's been going on?"

"No, there's more. Remember earlier when you came in wanting to talk to Carlotta?" She looked around as if to be sure

no one else was listening. “She never showed up for work today.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Is that right? Is that unusual for her?”

“Not showing up at all? Yes. Being late and slightly flighty? No. But I’ve been trying to call her, and she hasn’t answered.”

He pressed his lips together a moment before nodding slowly. “I’m sorry to hear that. Do you want to file a missing person report?”

“Don’t you have to wait forty-eight hours or something?”

“No, that’s just a myth. We can file one if you’d like.”

Nikki shook her head. “I don’t know. She did meet this new guy a couple of weeks ago, and it wouldn’t surprise me if she just blew off her responsibilities so she could spend time with him.”

Micah kept listening. “When you say someone new, I’m assuming you mean a man?”

Nikki rolled her eyes. “If that’s what you want to call him.” Then she straightened as she realized what she’d said. “I mean, maybe he’s perfectly nice. But he didn’t come across that way. He had a cocky look in his eyes and a bit of a rough edge to him.”

“So you’d never seen him before?”

“No, my understanding is that he lives farther south, but he likes to come up to this area sometimes, though I’m not sure why. He doesn’t seem like the type who wants to look for dolphins or shell hunt. He’s more like the gangster type who wears leather and has tattoos. Not a beach guy.”

“Remember anything else about how he looks?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s Asian. Couldn’t tell you from which country, though.” She startled. “Am I allowed to say that or is it profiling?”

“You’re allowed to use descriptors.”

She let out a nervous laugh. “Whew. I don’t want to be offensive.”

Micah shifted back to the subject at hand. “So you really think that she might have run off with this guy?”

Nikki shrugged. “It’s a good possibility.”

“I’ll look into it, just to be sure.”

“Thanks.” Nikki’s gaze fluttered up to his. “That would make me feel a little better at least. Is there anything else I could help you with?”

“I’m still waiting to talk to the manager.” Trent and Micah had actually become friends several years ago after volunteering together for a fundraiser for the wild horses.

Though people largely left the horses alone, if one of them became injured, there was a group that could help take care of them.

“Mr. Williams just stepped into his office,” Nikki said. “I’m sure he won’t mind if you stop by.”

“Thanks.” Micah stepped beyond the desk and down the administrative hallway.

There were two offices down here as well as the owner’s suite.

He paused by Trent’s office. The door was cracked just slightly.

He started to knock when he heard someone talking on the other side. “I know! I’m doing my best. I don’t know what you want me to say!”

What was that about?

Whatever it was, it sounded heated.

Maybe Trent and his wife were having an argument.

Before he could eavesdrop anymore, he knocked on the door and pushed it open. “Trent?”

His friend glanced up from his desk. The man was Micah’s age—thirty-two—but he appeared older with his nearly bald

head. He was tall—well over six feet—and he had moved to the area right after high school.

Right now, he looked exhausted with his slumped shoulders and heavy lids.

“Micah ... one second.” He muttered something into the phone before disconnecting and turning back to Micah. “Sorry about that.”

Micah took another step inside. “I didn’t expect you to be working this late.”

He stood and shrugged. “Running this inn isn’t for the faint of heart. But I’m sure you don’t want to know all those boring details. What can I help you with?”

Micah shut the door behind him and then reached into the duffle he’d grabbed from his truck. He pulled out the evidence bag with the doll in it. “You recognize this?”

Trent blinked several times in surprise. “This wasn’t what I expected. Do you mind?” He reached for the bag but didn’t touch it, not yet.

Micah handed it to him. “Be my guest.”

Trent took the bag and studied the doll more closely through the plastic. Then he let out a grunt. “I don’t know what to tell you. This looks like the same type of doll that Mrs. Alabaster collected. As far as I know, she didn’t put her name on them or anything.”

“Do you have a list of all of them?”

“I don’t. She kept some dolls in her suite and in her office. Obviously, she kept them around the inn. But to tell you the truth, she had so many of them that one of them could disappear, and there’s a good chance I wouldn’t notice—nor would anyone else. Plus, there were the ones she donated.”

“Donated?”

“She bought dolls for kids in children’s hospitals. In poor communities. She thought everyone needed a doll. It was her way of being charitable, I believe.”

Interesting. Micah had never heard that before. But he could see Mrs. Alabaster doing that. She was that kind of person.

“Was there a certain brand Mrs. Alabaster liked?” Micah asked.

“Westermann. It’s a German company. There were a couple of others she did order from on occasion also, however.”

“What’s the mystery with this doll?” Trent nodded at the bag again.

“I found it in the woods,” Micah said. “It might not be anything. But just to be on the safe side, I thought I would find out.”

Trent nodded slowly. “I understand. I wish I could help you. But I can’t. But you’re free to talk to any staff members or I can talk to them for you.”

“You don’t have to do that. Not yet. But if anyone comes to you or if you notice any more dolls missing, could you let me know?”

“Of course.” Trent offered a single but confident nod.

“Also, do you know if Mrs. Alabaster was still getting new dolls in before she died? Or had she stopped collecting them since she already had so many?”

“I remember that every once in a while a new doll would catch Mrs. Alabaster’s eye, and she’d purchase it. That’s all I know.”

“Do you think Mr. Osterman might know something?”

Trent’s expression made it clear he wasn’t happy the man was here. “I doubt it. He didn’t even know Mrs. Alabaster that well. He was her husband’s attorney before he passed away two years ago. In fact, I got the impression that Mrs. Alabaster didn’t even really like him, but she put up with him as a way of honoring her husband’s legacy.”

Micah let that soak in and nodded. “I understand. Thanks for your help.”

“Of course. Let me know if you need anything else.” Trent nodded in affirmation.

Micah exited the office and closed the door behind him.

Part of him wanted to believe this was nothing, the product of him being overly cautious.

But the other part of him felt something ominous floating in the air ... and he needed to be on guard in case that gut feeling turned out to be true.

# chapter **six**

MELINDA TURNED over in bed again. She couldn't sleep.

Was it the wind rattling the shutters?

The suspicion that someone had been in her room?

The fact that creepy doll was staring at her from the curio cabinet?

She wasn't sure.

After an hour of tossing and turning, she finally sat up.

As she glanced around the dark room, she shivered. After her divorce, she'd felt alone. But right now, she *really* felt alone. Isolated. Like if danger arose, she'd have no one to help her.

No, that wasn't true. There was Micah.

Though she felt a wall built on past hurts standing between them, she knew he'd be there for her if needed. His cottage was within sight of the inn, so that should bring her comfort.

Despite that, she trembled again.

Try to get some sleep, she told herself.

But as she scooted back down under the covers, voices sounded from somewhere in the distance.

Loud voices.

Almost as if someone was arguing.

Her heart pounded harder.



The argument continued several more minutes. She couldn't make out what was being said. She only knew it sounded heated.

Finally, she climbed from bed and pulled on a sweatshirt and slipped on some flip-flops.

Careful to keep the lights out, she cracked the door open.

The argument became louder.

Was someone in danger? Did they need help? One of the voices was clearly a woman.

After a moment of hesitation, she opened the door wider and stepped outside. Instantly, a chilly wind hit her.

She ignored it.

Remaining in the shadows, she stayed along the wall and crept toward the voices.

As she neared the lobby, she spotted two people on a dune in the distance.

She couldn't make out their features. It was too dark.

But it was clearly a man and a woman.

Wait ... did one of those voices belong to Osterman?

She was nearly certain it did.

Then who was the woman? Robin?

Melinda listened, desperate for answers. Maybe she was being nosy. She wasn't sure.

But she couldn't stop thinking that maybe someone needed help.

"You're going to ruin everything!" Osterman's voice rose above the wind.

"I want out!"

Were these two dating? Was the woman trying to break up with Osterman or something? Melinda didn't know if the man was married or not. She hadn't checked, and he hadn't mentioned it.

She'd definitely be looking at his ring finger later.

Or were they talking about something else entirely?

“What are we going to do about Tom?” Osterman asked.

Wait ... Tom? Why were they talking about Tom?

“You should have thought about that earlier,” the woman said.

Melinda's heart pounded even harder.

As the two turned as if ready to walk back to the inn, she realized she was exposed.

She needed to get back to her room.

Now.

Melinda turned to leave. As she did, a board beneath her released a loud groan.

She froze, trying to subdue her panic.

The voices went silent.

They'd heard the sound too.

What would they do?

She held her breath as fear swept over her, and she remained out of sight ... she hoped.



Micah was patrolling the town the next morning when he spotted Tarquin Osterman scurrying from a black Land Rover in the parking lot toward the inn.

Before the guy got away, Micah pulled his truck to a stop beside him and tried to sound casual as he leaned out the window and said, “Good morning.”

The man paused as he headed toward the wooden steps leading to the front door and turned back toward Micah. That ever-present scowl captured his face.

Not only that, but the man always wore dress pants and button-up shirts. At least he had the decency to leave his jacket and tie off. But it wasn't the kind of town where people wore suits unless to a wedding or funeral.

But this guy seemed to be determined to prove he wasn't like everyone else. He was a little better. Maybe a lot better, depending on the day.

Micah had met Osterman a couple of times, and he'd never cared for the man. The guy wasn't a local, but he came often to visit Mrs. Alabaster over the past several months. That was how Micah had met him. He liked to stay current on the regulars in town.

"I hear you have some guests here," Micah said as the wind whipped through his window.

"That's correct. As I'm sure you've probably heard, this little competition was Mrs. Alabaster's final wish. She wanted these people to compete in order to win this inn. I'm surprised she didn't suggest a camera crew as well." He let out a skeptical laugh.

"I always knew Mrs. Alabaster was a bit eccentric. But that seems a bit much even for her."

Osterman's expression remained stern. "These are not my wishes. They're hers. I'm simply seeing them through as trustee of her estate."

"I understand." As Osterman took a step back, Micah hurried to keep him talking. "By the way, did you hear the latest storm update?"

"I haven't checked the weather this morning." He raised his chin, curiosity gleaming in his gaze. "What's going on?"

"It looks like that nor'easter is headed this way. Could get here by tomorrow night, maybe Sunday morning, depending on how fast it travels."

"Good to know."

"There are no evacuation orders from the county since it's a nor'easter. But nor'easters can be worse than hurricanes

sometimes.”

“I’m sure it will be fine.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “This beautiful inn has withstood much worse.”

Micah followed his gaze and nodded at the Bungalow. “You’re probably right. I just thought you should be aware, as should your guests.”

“Let me worry about them. You just worry about the rest of this little town.”

Micah didn’t like the way he said “little town” with an almost mocking tone.

Nor did he like the implications of his words—especially since Melinda was one of those guests. But it was too early for Micah to take any further action.

“Have a good day, Deputy.” Before Micah could say anything else, Osterman hurried inside.

Micah frowned.

He was liking this less and less all the time.

But for now, Micah would keep searching for answers about Carlotta.

# chapter

## seven

MELINDA HAD ALREADY DOWNED two cups of coffee.

Last night still replayed in her mind.

Thankfully, Osterman and whoever he'd been talking to had scurried away after the board on the deck had creaked beneath her weight.

Melinda had made it back to her room without being seen and locked the door. She'd even wedged a chair beneath the handle just to be extra careful.

Still ... what was going on here at the inn? Or was she reading too much into things?

She sat in the private dining room right now. Various small tables had been set up throughout the space with two or three chairs at each.

She'd found an empty one by the window where she could watch outside.

Everyone else should be getting here soon ... everyone but Tom.

She raised her gaze as Osterman stepped into the room.

Though part of her wanted to keep her distance from the man, he might be the only one who had the answers she needed. But the fact that he'd mentioned Tom last night ... it raised some red flags in her mind.

Before she could second-guess herself, Melinda rushed toward him.

He raised his eyebrows as she approached. "Mrs. Marx ..."

“Good morning,” she started. “I was wondering ... did Tom end up leaving?”

He shrugged. “So it seems.”

“Did he drive here?”

“No.”

“Did your guy give him a ride?” The questions kept firing from her.

His cheek twitched, a subtle sign of annoyance. “No. He must have found another way to leave.”

Melinda’s jaw hardened. “He must have.”

But a bad feeling lingered in her gut as she returned to her table.

She was probably overthinking this. The challenges of the past several months toyed with her thoughts right now. Tom could have easily left without anyone noticing, without any fanfare. Something just felt off about it, however. Plus, Osterman had said his name last night when he was arguing with that woman.

She leaned back in her chair. She’d wait to find out what Osterman’s first challenge was. Then she’d make her decision about whether to stay or go. She’d be lying if she said she wasn’t spooked.

Just then, Robin stepped into the dining area. Her gaze met Melinda’s, and she smiled, seeming to relax after seeing a familiar face.

She hurried toward Melinda and nodded toward the chair. “Is anyone sitting with you?”

“You are.”

With a smile of relief, Robin sat down. “I was hoping I’d run into you. You’re the only one who seems remotely normal in this group. Is that a terrible thing to say?”

Melinda smiled. “No, I totally understand. How did you sleep?”

“Not well.” She offered a little eye roll. “Every creak woke me up.”

“Me too.” Melinda decided not to mention the argument she’d overheard. Right now, it was better if she kept that to herself. “I still can’t believe we’re here. Can you?”

“It’s the craziest thing.” Robin paused as a server poured her some coffee.

“I know! I keep thinking I should just leave. I mean, why am I even here?”

“I’ve wondered the same thing.” Robin’s cheeks turned red. “Not about you. About me, of course.”

“It’s okay if you’ve wondered the same thing about me.” Melinda let out a little laugh.

They chatted several more minutes, and the rest of the gang filed in. After they finished eating, Osterman clanged his spoon against a glass goblet. “May I have your attention?”

Everyone turned toward him.

“Good to see you all survived the night.” He let out a stiff laugh. “Kidding, of course.”

But was he?

The fact that Melinda was uncertain left her feeling unbalanced.

“We do have a full day, starting with interviews,” he continued. “I’ve posted a schedule on the wall. A team of Mrs. Alabaster’s most trusted employees would like to talk one-on-one with each of you this morning. Please, check your time and show up in the lobby when you’re scheduled. In other words, don’t be late. Understand?”

Everyone nodded.

But Melinda couldn’t stop thinking about that conversation she’d overheard last night.

Just who was that woman Osterman had been arguing with?

What was their disagreement about?

Did it have anything to do with what was going on here this weekend?



As everyone stood to leave before the interview process started, Robin stepped toward Melinda.

“Look, I need to walk back to my room to grab a sweater,” Robin said. “Any chance you want to get some fresh air? The more I’m alone, the more anxious I get.”

Melinda nodded. “Sure. I’d love to stretch my legs.”

A smile of relief swept over Robin.

She was clearly the nervous type, but Melinda couldn’t blame her. This situation was tense and unusual. There was no handbook on how to act when competing to win an inn.

The thought sounded ridiculous.

“So, you’re married, right? That’s what you said earlier.” Melinda asked as they stepped outside.

As soon as the sun hit her eyes, she sneezed. Something about bright lights always did that to her.

A fresh, rain-tinged wind whipped around them as they began to walk.

“That’s right. I have two children. Cara is three, and Daniel is six.”

Robin had struck her as the family type. “I know you probably miss them.”

“I do. But my husband is a big help.” Robin turned toward Melinda. “And you?”

Her throat tightened. Melinda should have known better than to bring up the subject. Because conversations were like a volleyball game. Everyone took turns serving and returning the serve.



“I was married. No children, though.” Her voice sounded strained at the words. “My divorce finalized earlier this year.”

Robin cast her a sympathetic glance. “I’m sorry.”

“I am too, but my husband met someone new and chose her over me.” There was no need to sugarcoat the truth.

“Ouch.”

“Yes, ouch. I guess you could say that I’ve tried marriage, and now I know that it’s not for me.”

“Don’t give up on it so easily. Marriage can be a wonderful thing when you meet the right person.”

“Maybe for some people. But I personally have a hard time ever seeing that.” Melinda hadn’t meant to say the words out loud, but they were true. She regretted not only the fallout from her divorce, but also the marriage itself.

How had she made such a poor decision? She had no one to blame but herself.

They paused by the room next door to Melinda’s, and Robin pulled a key from her pocket.

“Looks like we’re neighbors,” Melinda murmured.

“Good to know you’re close!” Robin jammed the key into the lock before twisting the door open. Then she glanced back at Melinda. “Feel free to step inside with me. I’ll only be a moment.”

Melinda did just that, but she remained close to the door, not wanting to intrude.

She quickly scanned the place.

Robin’s room looked much like Melinda’s.

Except for ...

Her gaze stopped on the curio cabinet across the room.

Without invitation, Melinda walked toward it, almost in a trance.

“Melinda?” Robin paused by the closet. “What’s wrong?”

Still not saying anything, she opened the cabinet door and pulled out the doll.

Melinda could hardly breathe as she looked at it.

Because this doll looked just like Robin.

# chapter eight

MICAH CONTINUED to patrol the island, searching for Carlotta and talking to locals to ask if they'd seen her.

There was a good chance the woman had just decided to leave, and there was no crime in that. However, he wanted to know for sure. Everything would be so much easier if the woman would simply answer her phone. The fact that she hadn't raised some red flags.

Because there was the possibility that she wasn't able to pick up her phone. That maybe something had happened.

Crime in this area usually consisted of vandalisms, domestic disputes, or people illegally approaching the wild horses. On occasion, there were fender benders or people arrested for public intoxication. But overall, the community was peaceful.

However, the seclusion of the town made it an ideal place for people who wanted to get away from it all. Sometimes those reasons for getting away weren't entirely honorable.

As far back as a hundred years—more really—the Outer Banks had been frequented by pirates. It was still used by people who wanted to smuggle things or start illegal operations—like drugs.

Memories of when Carlotta had asked him out filled his mind. She'd flagged him down while he was patrolling the beach and invited him to a party one of the locals was hosting.

She was nice enough but simply not his type. Micah had convinced himself he was better off remaining single anyway.

Most days, he stood behind that thought.

But on occasion, he wondered if his life would be fuller and richer if he had someone to share it with.

Before his thoughts could take him to Melinda, he reminded himself he had a great life here in Carova and nothing to complain about.

He enjoyed his job—for the most part. But sometimes it was frustrating.

So far today, his search hadn't turned up anything.

He would go talk to the housekeeping staff at the inn a little later. Maybe one of them knew something—or knew where to find this new guy Carlotta was hanging out with.

As his phone rang, his foot pressed on the brake pedal.

He didn't recognize the number.

He answered anyway. "Sgt. Warner."

"Micah?"

Melinda's familiar voice sent shockwaves through him—especially when he heard the concern in her tone. "Melinda? Everything okay?"

"I'm ... I'm not sure. I'm safe—don't worry about that—but can you come to the inn?"

His pulse kicked into a higher gear.

"I'm on my way there now." He ended the call and eased off the brake, pressing the accelerator harder as worry thrummed through him.



Melinda paced inside her room.

Maybe she shouldn't have called Micah. But she needed to bounce her thoughts off someone and figure out if she was losing her mind or not.

And Micah seemed like the best option to help her with that.

She might have talked more to Robin, but Robin was the first one scheduled to be interviewed so the woman didn't have time to chat anymore.

When Robin had asked Melinda about her reaction to the doll, Melinda had simply told her it looked an awful lot like Robin—so much that it had taken her by surprise.

Robin had laughed it off.

Melinda had tried to set the thought aside so she could continue her day without raising any more suspicions. But she was finding it nearly impossible.

Out of all the people she'd met just this weekend, Robin seemed the most trustworthy.

But there was something about the rest of the group here that made her uneasy.

Melinda reminded herself to be cautious.

She could be overly trusting at times. Case in point was Jim.

She had trusted him entirely when she shouldn't have.

The result of that had been total devastation.

Finally, Melinda heard someone knock at her door.

But instead of feeling relieved, she froze.

Who was on the other side? Micah?

Or someone else?

Then she heard, "Melinda. It's me. Micah."

The air left her lungs in a whoosh.

She hurried toward the door, undid all the locks, and let him in.

He paused just inside the doorway and stared at her as if trying to figure out what was wrong.

At once, she felt silly asking him to come here. This could all be for nothing.

But maybe Micah could help her distinguish if that were true or not.

“Are you okay?” His gaze locked with hers.

She ran a hand through her hair and nodded before sitting on the edge of the bed. “Thank you for coming.”

He lowered himself into the chair across from her. “Of course. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know where to start ...” Melinda glanced around the room, and her gaze stopped at that doll. “Actually, maybe I do.”

She walked to the cabinet and grabbed the figure. She could hardly look at it as she headed back to Micah and showed him.

“Do you see anything strange about this?”

He studied it a moment, his eyes narrowing. “She looks a little bit like you. Is that what you’re talking about?”

“She *does* look like me, even down to her green eyes.”

“Okay ...” A wrinkle formed on his brow. “But I’m still not sure why that would concern you.”

“I tried to brush the similarities off and think it was a coincidence. Then I walked into Robin’s room—she’s another one of the invited guests this weekend—and she just happened to also have a doll that looks just like her.”

Micah’s eyes widened as he processed her statement. “Is that right?”

“It is. I think it’s eerie, to be honest.”

He nodded slowly. “I can see why you might think that.”

“There’s more.” Melinda told him about the note she’d found on top of the cabinet, as well as the conversation she overheard last night.

As she spoke, Micah's gaze remained on her, unblinking as he listened intently to every word. He'd always been so good at giving her his undivided attention.

"First of all, I don't like the sound of that note," Micah said. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

She shrugged. "I was hoping I was reading too much into things."

"Maybe. But maybe not. You still have the note? I'd like to keep it, just in case. I can check for prints as well."

"I can give that to you. Yes. I'm sorry—I just don't want any unnecessary attention."

"I understand. But better safe than sorry." He ran a hand over his face. "And about that conversation you overheard ... you think those two people were up to something?"

"I don't know. I have no idea what's going on. But something about this entire situation just feels off." Melinda studied his face. "Does it feel off to you? Or am I losing my mind?"

She held her breath as she waited for his answer.

# chapter **nine**

MICAH LISTENED to Melinda's words, soaking in all the details.

While he didn't have any reason to be overly concerned, he could see why Melinda felt apprehensive.

The dolls *were* strange.

Had Mrs. Alabaster arranged for them to be created before her death?

Creating personalized dolls seemed like a lot of hoops to jump through.

But Mrs. Alabaster was the type who liked to jump through hoops, so that *was* a possibility.

The note ... well, that bothered him. Maybe it was accidentally left.

But he doubted it.

What if someone had targeted Melinda for being here? Was she a front-runner to win? Would someone want to scare her away?

The conversation Osterman had with a strange woman last night really made him curious. There was something sketchy about the man.

Micah's gaze went back to Melinda. "You have no idea who that woman was with Osterman?"

Melinda shook her head. "I have no idea. It was dark, and I couldn't make out any details."



He nodded slowly. “I understand. And you said they mentioned something about Tom?”

She nodded. “He was the participant who left yesterday. It was out of the blue, but he seemed upset and like he’d wasted his time by coming here. So he quit and stormed away.”

“I assume he’s gone now ... ?”

Melinda shrugged. “That’s everyone’s assumption.”

Micah continued to think everything through. “So, right now, there are four participants?”

“That’s right.” She glanced at her watch. “Speaking of which ... my interview starts in twenty minutes, and I’ve been given careful instructions not to be late.”

“They’re interviewing you?” He narrowed his eyes as he tried to understand what this process was like.

“Apparently, there will be multiple challenges this weekend, but this is the first one.”

He studied her face, curious about her feelings on this. “Are you nervous?”

“I don’t know that I’d say I’m nervous. I don’t really have anything to lose. This inn isn’t mine. Though part of me thinks it would be fun to have a place like this, I can’t mourn for something I never had either. I guess maybe I would just go home except ...”

Micah waited for Melinda to finish, anxious to know where she was going with that thought.

Instead, she shrugged. “I just don’t have anything there for me anymore. I feel like my life has been turned upside down, and I thought maybe this could be a fun opportunity.”

Micah had so many more questions about that. But this didn’t seem like the time to ask. Not with everything else going on.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “I’ll ask some questions and see if I can find out anything. I needed to come by the inn

anyway since one of the housekeepers seems to have disappeared.”

Melinda’s eyes widened. “Disappeared?”

He shrugged, careful not to get Melinda worked up about it. “Her name is Carlotta, and she has a history of being flighty—plus, she met a new guy. There’s a good chance she simply left with him. But I’m trying to find out some answers instead of assuming things.”

“That makes sense. I heard you mention her last night.” Melinda nodded, but that nervous look remained in her eyes. “I hope you’re able to find out something.”

Micah stood, wishing they could talk longer. But they both had things to do. “Me too. And in the meantime, I want you to be safe.”

Melinda stood also and nodded, almost a little too quickly. “I will be. Thank you for coming by.”

“Anytime you need me.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out his card. “Here’s my direct line so you don’t have to go through dispatch.”

She took it from him and held it close to her chest. “Thank you.”

Micah’s gaze lingered on her a moment longer. There was so much more that he wanted to say.

If only they had the time and opportunity.

But right now, Micah needed to keep his eyes open for anyone suspicious who might have left that note for Melinda.

He wondered if anyone else had received one. No one had mentioned it.

Plus, the note was typed, so he couldn’t trace the handwriting. He would send it off to check for prints, however.

He also needed to figure out what had happened to Carlotta.

His job here in Carova was suddenly feeling very busy.



Melinda stepped into the office just as she'd been directed and spotted Osterman sitting in a chair there, along with a man introduced as the inn's manager, Trent Williams, and the financial manager, Caleb Cartwright.

At least Melinda could get this formality over with. She hadn't prepared for the interview, so she didn't know what she would say, nor did she know what they might ask.

But maybe it was better that way.

All of this ... it seemed like a lot.

Probably because it *was* a lot.

She couldn't stop thinking about those dolls, about the note she'd found warning her not to stay, about that secret conversation last night, about the fact the housekeeper was missing.

So many things.

Melinda wasn't usually prone to worry. But right now, anxiety thrummed inside her.

She ran her hand over her jeans. She hadn't chosen the dressiest outfit, but she'd paired the jeans with a dark blouse and some cute sandals. Casual but elegant.

She hoped that was the look she'd achieved, at least.

As she sat across from the interview team, she studied Osterman a moment.

The fight she'd heard him having with a mystery woman last night flooded back to her mind. What had that been about?

She supposed it wasn't any of her business. People argued and fought all the time.

Except her and Jim. They hadn't argued.

But maybe that was their problem.

She'd had no clue her husband had been seeing another woman behind her back.

How could she have been so naive?

She asked herself that question every day.

“Thank you for meeting with us,” Osterman started, gripping the legal pad in his hands. “Since we have multiple interviews to get through, we’ll jump right into our questions. Melinda Marx, why do you think you would be a good owner of this inn?”

The interview team stared at her, almost as if trying to look intimidating.

The question raced through Melinda’s mind, and she tried to formulate an answer. “I don’t know that I would be.”

Osterman raised an eyebrow. “Why not?”

“I mean, I’ve never run an inn before. If you’re looking for someone with that kind of experience then you need to look at someone other than me. In fact, I’m not sure exactly why I’m here or what I even bring to the table.”

“Why *do* you think you’re here?” Trent stared at her so intently it was like his gaze burned into her.

A question that had no obvious right or wrong answer. So it should be easy ... right?

Melinda shifted. There was no reason for her to feel intimidated by any of these people. “Quite honestly, I have no idea. I haven’t seen Mrs. Alabaster for years. There are people here who are far more qualified than I am. But I always got positive vibes from Mrs. Alabaster when I came here as a child. I enjoyed speaking with her.”

“If you have no idea, then why are you staying?” Trent asked.

He was much gentler than Osterman and probably closer to her age.

*Then why are you staying?* That was an excellent question. “Maybe I’m just curious. Maybe I want to find out why my

name was on this mysterious list. Maybe I've already committed to being here so I might as well stay a while longer."

Melinda tried to read everyone's expression, but it did no good. Their faces remained unreadable.

Caleb—a pale blond with neatly styled hair and stiff mannerisms—shifted in his leather chair. "Do you think you'd be capable of running this inn if you were taught the ins and outs?"

"I ran my husband's business for the past several years, so I suppose I have some managerial skills," Melinda said. "I feel like this place has so much potential. The location is unbeatable. The design of the inn is remarkable. And I love the way you guys have kept all of your old school programs like the ones you used to have when I was a child. I think that makes this place very unique."

Again, everyone's expressions remained unreadable.

"Very well." Trent recrossed his legs. "And what about the dolls?"

Melinda nearly froze at his words. "The dolls? What about them?"

Trent locked gazes with her. "If you were to become owner of this place, would you keep the dolls?"

Now *that* question hadn't been expected ...

"I haven't thought about it." Melinda shrugged, trying to be honest. "I don't know what I would do with the dolls. Having them here does add to the atmosphere, I suppose. But something about them feels a little creepy also, if I may be honest."

"Mrs. Alabaster saw them each as pieces of art." Caleb waited patiently for her response.

"I can appreciate that." She shifted. "Speaking of those dolls ...the ones that were placed in the rooms of the participants ..."

Osterman cleared his throat before speaking. “What about them?”

“Who put them there?”

The three men looked at each other.

“I asked a member of housekeeping to put them there,” Trent finally said. “Why?”

“Because Robin and I were each given a doll that looks just like us. I can only assume Mrs. Alabaster intentionally had those designed.”

They looked at each other again.

Osterman appeared not to have any idea what this was about.

“We got a shipment of dolls in here at the inn about three weeks ago,” Trent started. “Along with the dolls was a note from Mrs. Alabaster. She said in the event of her death, those dolls were supposed to be placed in certain rooms during the competition to see who would take over the inn. I was just following directions.”

“Why would she do that?” Osterman stared at Trent, almost as if he didn’t believe him.

Trent raised his hands. “I have no idea. I thought it was eerie myself.”

“It was almost like Mrs. Alabaster thought she might die soon ...” Melinda’s voice trailed. “But her heart attack happened out of the blue, correct?”

Osterman shifted as if uncomfortable with the conversation. “Yes, it did. Now, our time is almost over so we really need to wrap this up.”

Her eyebrows shot up. She’d expected more.

That had almost seemed too easy.

Melinda stood and ran a hand over her jeans.

She paused and glanced at the interview team again. “I’m curious about how the rest of this weekend will go. Much like

this? Interviews and eating? Being silently observed from afar?”

Osterman’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly as if he didn’t appreciate her asking. “I’m not at liberty to say. Everyone will find out what’s going to happen next at the same time.”

“I see.” Melinda stepped toward the door, not surprised by his answer. “Well, good luck with the rest of your interviews.”

But before she exited the room, a scream cut through the air.

Everyone rose to their feet and rushed outside.

Melinda prayed everyone was okay.

# chapter ten

AS MICAH HEADED BACK to the inn, he couldn't stop thinking about what Melinda had told him.

The doll thing ... it was creepy but not necessarily criminal.

The argument she'd overheard? Again strange, but there was no crime in what had been said.

But the note ... was it a way of trying to scare people away?

His gut told him something possibly illegal was going on here.

Just as he pulled up, a scream sliced through the air.

He threw his truck in Park and jumped out.

As he reached the back side of the inn, he saw a woman on the ground.

He reached her just as Osterman, Trent, Caleb, and Melinda did.

"Robin, are you okay?" Melinda rushed, kneeling beside her.

She rubbed her ankle. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle everyone. But I was walking along the deck when one of the boards gave way. It was loose, and it sent me toppling into the sand. I screamed before I could stop it."

"Are you okay?" Micah asked as he stepped closer.

Robin nodded. "I'm fine. Just embarrassed now."



Trent helped her to her feet. It took her a moment to steady herself, but she was able to put pressure on her ankle. Everything appeared okay.

“I’ll have someone check out that board,” Trent said. “I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

As Trent helped her back inside, Micah and Melinda remained there a moment.

They exchanged a look that spoke volumes.

Another incident.

When would they stop?

Each instance was so subtle, things that could easily be explained as an accident.

“What brings you here?” Melinda asked.

Micah nodded toward the lobby. “I need to ask a few more questions.”

They walked inside together, and Melinda went to grab a drink.

As she did that, Micah paused by Nikki’s desk, and the woman smiled warmly at him.

“You again.” She leaned back in her chair. “I get the pleasure two days in a row.”

He offered a friendly grin in return. “I wish I was here just to chat. I’m actually still looking for Carlotta.”

Nikki frowned at the mention of her name. “She didn’t come in again today. Mr. Williams has pretty much written her off. He’s not very happy to be left in a bind like this.” She paused and tilted her head. “Is something wrong?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Who are her friends here? I need to talk to them.”

Nikki drew in a deep breath. “Bonnie Fairhaven is probably your best bet. She’s another housekeeper. I see them talking all the time.”

“Can you get her for me?” He’d seen the woman a few times, but she was a newcomer in town. She and Micah hadn’t actually met.

“Of course.” Nikki picked up her phone. “Let me see where she is.”

She dialed a number and said several things into the phone. Then she ended the call and turned back to Micah. “She’s cleaning room 207. Could you meet her there? Since Carlotta’s out, we’re short-staffed. Otherwise, I’d ask her to meet you here.”

“Sure thing. Thanks.”

Micah walked outside and climbed the exterior stairs. The door to the room was open and a blonde in her twenties was inside cleaning. She wore a black housekeeping uniform, and her hair was pulled back in a messy bun.

She looked up as he knocked, unaffected by his presence. “You’re the cop, right? You have questions about Carlotta?”

“That’s right.” He stepped inside. “I’m trying to figure out what happened to her.”

Bonnie continued to make one of the beds as they talked. “I wish I could help, but I have no idea where she is.”

“Did Carlotta mention any trouble lately? Any reason why she might have disappeared?” Micah leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed as he waited for her answer.

She paused and let out a long breath that ruffled her bangs. “I know she started dating a new guy.”

“Name?”

“Hmm ... not sure. She was kind of secretive about him. I do know he wasn’t from around here. At first, she seemed as happy as a clam.” Bonnie continued to smooth the white comforter on the bed. “But the last time we worked together, she seemed edgy, like something was wrong. I asked her what was going on, but she said nothing. I didn’t believe her.”

Maybe they were finally getting somewhere ...

Micah shifted. “Any guesses?”

“Trouble in paradise? That’s my best guess. I mean, this guy she was talking to looked like trouble, you know? I told her I didn’t think dating him was a good idea. But she was the type who always liked to have a man with her.”

“Can you remember anything else about him?”

“I haven’t seen him in a while. But I think he was a mechanic or something.” She paused and juttled her hip out. “Now that I’m thinking about it, the last time I heard them talking on the phone, Carlotta mentioned going for a hike in the wildlife refuge.”

Alarm raced through Micah. The area was remote and full of dangers—especially for people who didn’t know what they were doing.

And Carlotta didn’t seem like the hiking type.

“Did that surprise you?” Micah asked.

Bonnie nodded. “Totally. I told her it wasn’t a good idea. A friend of mine saw wild boars out there once. But she didn’t listen. She thought it would be an adventure.”

“When was she planning on taking that hike?”

“A couple of days ago.”

A couple of days ago? That would be the same time that gunfire had been reported in the area.

Coincidence?

Micah needed to be sure.

“Thank you for your help. If you think of anything else, please give me a call.” He stepped closer and handed her a business card.

Before he turned to leave, Bonnie spoke up. “There is one more thing ...” She glanced around as if making sure they were alone—which they clearly were. Then she lowered her voice. “Have you investigated whether Mrs. Alabaster’s death was truly natural?”

Micah paused as his cop instincts kicked in. That wasn't a question someone normally asked without cause. "Why would you ask that?"

"She was acting peculiar in the days before she died. Always looking over her shoulder. I went into her room once to clean—I didn't think she was inside—and she nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw me. Then she quickly put something away." Bonnie shrugged. "I don't know. I just have a bad feeling about her death. I have from the start."

"Any other reasons you can pinpoint?"

She nibbled on her bottom lip before shrugging. "Not really. Her heart attack just never rang true to me. She was always so healthy."

Micah nodded slowly. "I'll look at that autopsy report again, if it makes you feel better."

Her face brightened. "Actually, it would."

Micah wasn't sure he should act off the gut instinct of a housekeeper.

But the truth was ... Mrs. Alabaster's sudden death had never rung true to him either.



As Melinda stepped outside again, she ran into Micah as he came down the exterior stairway at the inn.

She'd wondered where he'd gone.

The expression on his face indicated he wasn't happy.

She squinted as she observed him. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing really. Just a lot on my mind. I need to head over to the wildlife refuge."

The knot on her brow grew tighter. "Why would you go there?"

Micah shrugged. "Long story."

“Any chance I can go with you?” Melinda wasn’t sure how the words had slipped out, but they did. And she didn’t regret them.

After everything that had happened, she wanted to get away from this place.

Maybe she even wanted to spend more time with Micah.

He twisted his head skeptically. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Disappointment nagged at her. “Why not?”

He studied her, a contemplative look in his gaze. “Don’t you have things to do here?”

“I just finished my interview. I’m free until later this afternoon.” Melinda glanced behind her. “And I’d really like to get away. Sometimes, you just need some space, you know? Besides, you said we needed to catch up sometime. Why not start now?”

Micah seemed to think about her idea another moment before nodding. “I suppose it can’t hurt if you come. But put on some tennis shoes first.”

Melinda nodded, a thrill of excitement rushing through her.

Micah waited outside her room while she changed. She emerged five minutes later in casual jeans, a sweatshirt, and sneakers.

He straightened when he saw her and cleared his throat. “You ready?”

“I am.” She nodded, the ocean behind him catching her gaze. The white-capped waves churned and crashed for as far as the eye could see. “It looks really rough today.”

He followed her gaze. “There’s both a surf and a small craft advisory. It will get worse before it gets better.”

Something about the sound of his words sent a chill through her.

*It will get worse before it gets better.*

He was talking about the storm, right?

So why did Melinda feel like he could be talking about her entire stay here?

## chapter eleven

MICAH PULLED to a stop near the wildlife refuge and put his truck into Park. The maritime forest stared back at him with its low, shrubby trees. Some areas had foliage so thick that not even animals could maneuver through the terrain.

Anyone traversing this area had to keep their eyes open for snakes and other wildlife that called this home. He'd seen too many clueless people enter these woods, only to get hurt.

Right now, since it was mid-October, some of the leaves had started to change to oranges and yellows, a sure sign that autumn was in full swing. The horses liked to frequent the area, and Micah fully expected to see some today. No doubt they could sense the approaching storm and would take shelter here as they usually did.

"You sure you want to do this?" Micah glanced at Melinda, halfway expecting her to change her mind.

But there wasn't even a hint of hesitation on her features.

In fact, she'd finished her lunch—a sandwich and chips that she'd offered to share with him—in record time. He'd turned down her offer. He wasn't hungry, but he had a protein bar in his glove compartment if that changed.

"I'm positive." She reached for the door handle and opened it. "Let's go."

Maybe she needed to put on the brakes just a little.

But before he could mention that, Melinda was already out of his truck and waiting for him.

Micah hid a smile.

This was the Melinda he remembered from their childhood.

The one who was so bright and alive with energy and curiosity.

The Melinda who'd arrived here yesterday seemed broken, a shell of who she'd once been.

Even though she had broken him, Micah hadn't realized how much it would hurt him to see the hope gone from her eyes.

He grabbed some gear before heading toward her and, as they started into the woods, he gave her some instructions, just in case.

He didn't foresee running into any trouble, but it was always a possibility.

They started between the trees, the scent of brackish water, drying leaves, and horse scat filling the air.

"Do you remember when we came out here to explore when I was probably fourteen years old?" Melinda asked as she ducked below a branch.

He hid his smile. How could he forget? It was the first time they'd ever kissed.

"You were determined to find Bigfoot," he murmured. "And I kept telling you that Bigfoot didn't live in this area."

"But how do you really know? Just because no one's ever seen one here ..."

That smile wanted to emerge again, but he held it back.

"Maybe we'll see him today," Micah said instead.

"Maybe we will."

But the best part of the story was when Melinda had pulled him behind a tree. She'd said she thought she heard Bigfoot. He knew she was just being silly.



But as they stood there, their gazes had locked. They'd been drawn together, and the next thing he knew ... their lips had met.

It had been wonderful.

He shoved those thoughts aside and glanced at her now as a sense of wonder filled her gaze.

“Why do you look like a kid at Christmas?” Micah loved the fact that Melinda had always been the type who'd loved life and trying new things. Experiencing the sights and sounds of this area had made everything an adventure.

He still remembered the first time they'd found a sand dollar. Melinda had acted like she'd won a million bucks. She'd promised to treasure it for the rest of her life and think about him every time she looked at it.

He wondered whatever happened to that sand dollar ...

“You know how much I love adventure and exploring,” Melinda said as she walked. “My ex wasn't such a fan. In fact, he hated most things outdoors and devoted all his time to his company. It's been forever since I've been on a hike. Don't get me wrong. I could have hiked on my own. But you know how it is. It's not the same going places alone.”

“That's true ...” Micah had been sure he'd be married by now with at least four kids. As an only child, he'd always wanted a large family.

But sometimes he wasn't sure that would ever happen.

He and Melinda continued deeper and deeper into the woods.

Micah had so many things he wanted to know.

But he didn't want to bombard Melinda with questions all at once.

“If you don't mind me asking, why haven't you ever married?” Melinda's question felt like a bomb had just been dropped in front of him.

He hadn't expected the tables to be turned.

Micah shrugged. “I guess I’ve been waiting for the right one.”

Melinda glanced at him, a skeptical look in her eyes. “I’m sure you’ve met a lot of women. I mean, I know this town is small in the winter, but in the summer when tourists flood the area, I’m sure you have your pick.”

“I’m not sure it’s a good look for a local officer of the law to be hitting on any attractive tourists that come this way.”

She nodded slowly and let out a soft chuckle. “There is that ... but I’m still surprised.”

Micah didn’t dare tell Melinda that part of that reason was her.

How no one had ever measured up.

And how she’d broken his heart so badly that it still hadn’t recovered.

He kept his eyes open as they walked.

This could all be for nothing.

But he needed to check out the gunshot, just to make sure nothing illegal was going on back here. However, these woods were large. It would be nearly impossible for one person—or two, including Melinda—to search the entire refuge. Not that he was about to let her out of his sight.

Micah had started at the place where Carlotta would have most likely entered the woods.

Ponds, ditches, thick brush, and private property bordered many areas of the refuge, but this area was a little more accessible.

Micah just needed to rule out the possibility that something had happened back here. “We’re going to need to keep going.”

They were a mile in already and, so far, there had been nothing.

But as he stepped off the trail, he spotted something on the ground several feet ahead.

He immediately jutted out his arm to stop Melinda from getting any closer.

“What is it?” Melinda squinted as she stared in the distance.

“I need to find out,” he said. “Stay here.”

Then he braced himself.



Melinda could hardly breathe as she watched Micah creep closer to the object in the distance.

To her untrained eye, it looked like a mix of shadows and maybe an abandoned garbage bag. But based on Micah’s stiff, cautious motions, she suspected it might be more than that.

Her heart pounded in her ears as she waited to see what it might be.

Even though she’d promised Micah to stay where she was, she found herself creeping closer. Maybe curiosity was getting the best of her. She wasn’t sure.

As she watched Micah stop and run a hand over his face, she knew something was seriously wrong.

“Micah?” She took a few more steps toward him.

“You don’t want to see this.” He raised his hand in a stop sign.

But it was too late.

Melinda could already see enough from where she was.

That wasn’t a trash bag.

It was two legs covered in black pants and black shoes.

Based on the flies swarming, whoever those legs belonged to was ... dead.

Then the stench hit her.

Bile rose in her throat.

But still, she couldn't take her eyes off the body.

Was it Carlotta?

Her head began to swirl.

Suddenly, this felt like too much.

Micah was already on his radio, no doubt calling backup.

Then he put it away and stepped toward her. "As soon as the other deputies come I'm going to have one of them take you back to the inn. I'm going to be here a while."

But Melinda barely heard him. Instead, she kept staring at the legs, grateful she couldn't see a face.

"How did she die?" Her voice trembled.

He stepped between Melinda and the body, blocking her view. "You don't want to know."

She looked up at him. "Please, tell me."

Pressing his lips together in a contemplative expression, he finally answered, "A gunshot wound ... to her face."

Melinda shook her head, not wanting to see the images now flashing through her mind. But she couldn't just stop them from coming.

"Come on, let's move back a little." Micah led her back down the trail a few yards.

When they stopped, her gaze met Micah's again. "Did someone kill her? Or did ... she ... ?"

"That's what we need to figure out."

A cry escaped from her before she even realized it was coming. Her hand covered her mouth as the horror of the situation washed over her.

Micah stepped closer and wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close.

Melinda didn't resist his embrace. Instead, she nestled her head into his chest, grateful he was here. That she wasn't alone and that she wasn't Carlotta.

But suddenly, coming on this hike seemed like an entirely bad idea.

## chapter twelve

MICAH KNEW one thing for sure. He definitely should *not* have brought Melinda out here with him. The last thing he'd wanted was for her to see Carlotta like this.

At least he *thought* it was Carlotta.

The victim's face was a mangled mess.

Thankfully, another deputy had been working down in Corolla, and he showed up only thirty minutes later. Sheriff Knox was on his way.

"Take Melinda back to the inn and then come back here," he told Deputy Dorman.

The deputy, who'd only been on the force for a couple of years, nodded.

"I'll check in with you later," Micah assured her.

Melinda nodded and gave Micah one last glance before walking away with his colleague.

A glance that said plenty.

A glance that said she was worried about him. About what had happened. About anything there was to worry about.

As soon as they were out of sight, Micah turned back to the victim.

Regret filled him.

Maybe he should have looked harder when he heard that gunfire. But he'd assumed it was just a hunter or someone trying out a new gun.

He quickly examined the victim.

But the one thing that struck him was that she appeared to be wearing a housekeeping uniform. That only confirmed to him that it was Carlotta.

Had she left to meet her boyfriend out here after her shift ended? If so, why hadn't she changed first?

The last time she'd been seen was two days ago, and Louann had said she didn't come home that night. The next morning was when Louann's things had been rifled through. Carlotta hadn't shown up for work the next day.

Micah's thoughts continued to race.

He glanced around the perimeter of the area and saw a thick area of underbrush beside the body.

Something glimmering there caught his eye, and he stepped closer.

Using a gloved hand so as to not disturb the crime scene, he brushed away some of the weeds.

He sucked in a breath.

It was a gun.

The weapon was just close enough that it could have flown from someone's hand after firing.

That it could have flown from *Carlotta's* hand.

Because otherwise, why would a killer leave the murder weapon here?

The questions pummeled him.

As he glanced back at Carlotta again, he noticed something white sticking out of the pocket of her pants.

Micah pulled the paper out and opened it.

His gaze skimmed the words handwritten on the letter.

*My future is going nowhere, and I have nothing else to live for. I'm sorry to anyone I might be disappointing, but taking my*

*own life is the only solution that makes sense right now. I hope somebody misses me.*

His eyes widened.

A suicide note.

Micah's heart pounded harder as he absorbed those words.

He hated to think that anyone felt that way.

Had Carlotta truly killed herself out here?

How incredibly sad.

When he'd interacted with Carlotta in the past, he hadn't gotten the impression that she was depressed or lonely. Just that she was someone still trying to find her way in life.

For some reason, Micah didn't quite buy that this was a suicide.

But why?

Was it because most women didn't choose suicide via gun? They were more likely to overdose or bleed out.

He wasn't sure. He couldn't put his finger on it yet.

But he needed to continue to search this scene until he had some answers.



Melinda was trembling when she arrived back at the inn.

She couldn't get the image of the dead woman out of her mind.

Which was probably why Micah had told her to stay back. But she hadn't listened, had she? Now she would have to deal with the consequences.

As she started toward her room, Robin's door opened, and she stepped out, spotting her. Melinda had no choice but to stop—even though she didn't feel like talking.



“Everything okay?” Robin studied her face. “You look a little pale and ...” She reached up and plucked a leaf from her hair. “And like you went tromping through the wilderness.”

Melinda considered telling her what had happened. Then she thought better of it.

The less people who knew, the better. Besides, it wasn't her story to share. People here at the inn had known Carlotta. Melinda wasn't going to be the one to break the news of her death to them.

“I think I'm just tired,” Melinda finally muttered, turning away from the wind as it skimmed over the ocean. “And I did take a little walk. The fresh air sounded nice.”

“I get that. How did your interview go?” Robin leaned against the wall, settling in for a long conversation.

Melinda shifted, trying to focus on the conversation. It was difficult when so many other things screamed for her attention. “I suppose it went as well as can be expected. Yours?”

Melinda knew Robin probably wanted more details than what Melinda had shared, but she wanted to keep this short.

Besides, what she really wanted to do was to find answers.

To investigate.

But she knew that wouldn't be wise.

Still ... she could ask some questions, right?

Robin shrugged. “I guess it went okay. But I was really surprised when Osterman asked me about those dolls.”

“That kind of surprised me too,” Melinda said. “The only thing I can think of is that Mrs. Alabaster put something in her will specifying that whoever took over the inn had to keep the dolls. Maybe that's why they're feeling us out about them.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Robin shrugged before rubbing her arms. As the wind kicked up again, she glanced out at the ocean. “I've never seen it looking so rough.”

“The storm brewing out there has really got the ocean churning.”

“The good news is it’s too cold for most people to want to get into the ocean.”

“But that doesn’t mean that some people won’t try,” Melinda reminded her.

“Good point.” Robin glanced at her watch. “Our next challenge is going to start soon. Are you ready for it?”

These challenges were the last thing Melinda was worried about right now.

No, everything else that had happened dominated both her emotions and her thoughts.

Thoughts about how, if she were wise, she would just walk away right now.

Forget all of this.

It seemed someone was willing to go through extraordinary means in order to win ... or to scare them off.

The stakes were too high.

Melinda still didn’t know what she wanted to do. Stay? Or leave?

But she wasn’t leaving until she talked to Micah again. She knew that for sure.

For now, it didn’t look like she was going to have that alone time she craved.

She turned toward Robin. “How about we head back together to see what this next challenge is going to be about?”

“Sounds good.”

Melinda only wished she could let this distract her.

But she couldn’t help but wonder ...

Had Carlotta’s death been somehow linked to what was going on at the inn?

If so, who would be next?

# chapter **thirteen**

THREE HOURS LATER, the scene was secured.

Micah and Sheriff Knox had bagged Carlotta's body, and the medical examiner would now take over. Two other deputies had arrived also to help look for evidence.

They'd found nothing.

The one interesting thing, however, was the fact that the serial number had been filed off the gun he'd found.

There was no way to trace who it was registered to.

Usually that indicated the weapon was stolen.

Had Carlotta gotten a stolen gun? Was she mixed up in trouble?

They needed to figure out who this guy was Carlotta had been hanging out with. But so far, every lead had dried up.

"This isn't something we see every day out here." Sheriff Knox paused beside Micah as he stared at the area where Carlotta had been found.

"I agree. Everyone thought she ran away with a new boyfriend." Micah glanced at the tree nearby and saw the blood dried on the bark.

Knox followed his gaze and frowned. "It's a good thing you found her. We need to contact any relatives and let them know."

Micah nodded. "I'll let the manager at the inn know as well since that's where she worked."

“I think we have everything we need here.” Sheriff Knox took a step back. “I’ll let you know as soon as we hear back from the medical examiner.”

“Got it.”

But as the rest of the team began to walk back to their vehicles, Micah remained at the scene a moment. He tried to imagine everything playing out.

The woods were the perfect place for secrets. To do things in seclusion and privacy.

Was that why Carlotta had come here?

Or had her boyfriend lured her here? Had he killed her and made it look like a suicide?

Something about the scene still didn’t feel right to Micah. He would keep looking into it.

For now, he needed to get back to the inn so he could tell Trent the news and begin investigating. Knox would handle telling her loved ones in Spain, though based on what Micah knew, she didn’t have very many relatives there.

Then he needed to find out this boyfriend’s name and track him down.

Something was going on here in this isolated town, and Micah wasn’t sure what it was.

But he was certain this little experiment Mrs. Alabaster had set up couldn’t be happening at a worse time.

Maybe he could convince Melinda to leave.

However, the selfish part of him wanted her to stay. Even though she’d broken his heart, part of him wanted to reconnect. To know more about her.

To get to know the woman she’d become.

But the other part of him knew the only good idea was sending her away. It would be best for Melinda ... and best for his heart.



Melinda was glad to have that challenge done and over with.

Osterman had them each take a room to clean.

He'd said leadership should never be above those working for them.

Melinda understood the concept, but she had to wonder if this challenge had been added to the list simply because they were short-staffed here in the housekeeping department.

She kept that thought to herself, however.

Melinda didn't mind cleaning. In fact, she'd enjoyed staying busy and keeping her mind occupied.

Afterward, the group sat down for dinner—flounder with grilled vegetables and rice pilaf. She'd tried to enjoy it—and the food *was* tasty—but all she could think about was what had happened earlier today.

As she sat at the table with the rest of the group, she studied everyone.

Richard had a fit when he'd found out he had to clean.

Robin hadn't looked thrilled, but she hadn't complained either.

Fletcher also hadn't complained, but she'd heard one of the real housekeepers mention something about him not doing a good job.

Could one of these people be behind what was going on?

She wasn't sure.

She still remembered the conversation she'd overheard Osterman having with that mystery woman in the middle of the night. Something about it still seemed suspicious to Melinda, though she couldn't put her finger on what.

She took another sip of her water as she observed life around her.

A woman—Melinda had seen her at the front desk—slipped inside and whispered something to Fletcher. His eyes lit up as she spoke, and then he nodded.

Strange. Did the two of them know each other?

Melinda snapped away from the conversation when she saw through the window someone walking up to the inn.

Micah.

Did he have any more news? Anything that he could share?

She wasn't sure.

But she couldn't wait to talk to him.

# chapter **fourteen**

MICAH'S GAZE met Melinda's in the dining area, and he motioned for her.

Quickly, she stood.

The jerkiness of her motions made everyone else quiet and turn to her. She seemed to notice that she was making a scene and slowed down. Offered a gentle smile. Tried to be less conspicuous.

As soon as she reached Micah, he took her elbow. "Can you talk a moment?"

"We're done for the day. Sure."

Still holding onto her elbow, he led her from the inn.

They kept walking, pacing away from the hotel—just in case anyone was nearby trying to listen.

As he glanced back, he saw Osterman step onto the back deck and glance at him.

Did the man sense something was going on? Was he trying to snoop?

It was hard to say.

Thankfully, the wind should conceal their conversation.

He still wasn't sure who to trust.

"We just finished securing and clearing the scene," he told her quietly. "But it's going to be a while until we have the autopsy results. Right now, it looks like a suicide."

Melinda studied his face. “But you don’t think that it was, do you?”

His jaw tightened as he contemplated how to answer. There was no need to deny what she said. Melinda could read the truth on his face.

“My gut tells me something else is going on.” He kept his voice low. “But don’t repeat that. We need to keep this quiet until we have more answers.”

“Micah ... am I even safe to stay here?” Her voice sounded strained with tension.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” He shifted. “I can give you a ride away from this place. You can find somewhere down south to stay for the night and then pick up your vehicle in the morning and drive back to Raleigh. You can forget all of this.”

He saw the thoughts racing through her mind and held his breath as he waited for whatever it was Melinda would say.

Finally, she rubbed her lips together and nodded.

Nodded?

Did that mean she’d take him up on his offer? It would be for the best.

But that didn’t change the disappointment inside him.

“I’m going to stay at least one more night,” she said lifting her chin. “It just doesn’t feel right to leave now. And I have no reason to think I’m in danger. Right?”

Micah hesitated before saying, “Nothing that I’ve seen indicates an imminent threat.”

“Then I’ll stay.”

He stared at her another moment, contemplating the best way to handle this. “If the storm comes, I don’t know what that will mean as far as getting in and out of town.”

“In other words, I could be stuck here?”

“It’s always a possibility.”



She glanced up at him, her eyes imploring. “But I’d be stuck here with you?”

Why did something about the way she asked that question cause Micah’s heart to race faster than wild horses stampeding down the shore.

His throat burned with emotion as he forced himself to nod. “Yes, I’ll be here.”

“That makes me feel a lot better.”

It made Micah feel better to know he’d be close too. But even though he was close if she needed help, he still felt far away.

Melinda opened her mouth as if she was about to say something else when she looked beyond him, and her gaze narrowed.

He turned and looked in the direction where she was staring.

The beach. Several small objects had washed ashore.

“What *are* those?” she murmured.

“That’s a good question.” Micah nodded toward the oceanfront, figuring it was just as safe for her to be down there with him as it was for her to be up here. “Let’s go find out.”



Melinda couldn’t take her eyes off the objects rolling in the surf.

They were scattered along the shore.

She knew what they looked like, but she didn’t trust her eyes. She needed to get closer to confirm.

Because there was a good chance the events of the past couple of days were messing with her head right now.

She and Micah climbed over the dune and down some steps to the ocean. Micah took the lead, and she remained right

behind him.

As they reached the sand at the bottom, he walked to the nearest object and paused.

Melinda's eyes widened when she saw what it was.

A doll.

As she glanced up and down the shore, she counted at least twenty of them.

All porcelain dolls like the ones Mrs. Alabaster had collected.

They lay waterlogged like victims of a tragic shipwreck.

Her head swam. "What's going on?"

Micah shook his head, appearing equally as disturbed as she felt. "I have no idea. I've never seen anything like this."

"Did someone leave them here?"

"My guess is that these were on a boat and fell off before washing ashore." He scanned the shoreline before pointing to a box in the distance. It appeared to be a sturdy plastic tub that had a lid on it at some point.

"Do you think that fell off a boat and the dolls were inside?"

Micah shook his head. "I have no idea. There was an incident down on Hatteras Island several years ago where a container holding Doritos was washed into the ocean. Bags of the chips kept washing ashore for days."

Her eyebrows darted up. "Really?"

He nodded. "Really. Ask any of the locals. I'm sure they remember it. The whole thing was pretty unforgettable."

"That sounds interesting."

"It really was."

Her gaze went back to the dolls around her.

She couldn't get over the sight of them.

As Micah picked up one, Melinda moved closer for a better look.

The figurine had the same open-and-close eyes. Hair that looked real. Perfect milky skin and what had once been a beautiful lilac dress.

“Mrs. Alabaster would have loved these,” she murmured.

And that was what was so weird. Had she ordered these from overseas before she died? Did that shipment *just happen* to fall out right in front of the inn?

It seemed like too much of a coincidence.

Melinda had so many questions right now.

“What are we going to do?” she asked Micah.

“I can’t leave these here. I’m going to get some trash bags and pick them up. Not that this is any type of crime. But I can’t leave them on the beach. It’s litter, at the very least.”

“I’ll help you,” Melinda said.

Micah flashed her a grateful grin. “That sounds good.”

Melinda glanced back up at the inn and shuddered ... especially when she saw a shadow in one of the windows.

As soon as the person saw her looking, the curtain dropped.

Melinda knew that by the time she got up there to check things out, it would be too late. The watcher would have too much time to get away.

Besides, just because someone was watching didn’t mean they were guilty of anything. She knew that. Still, she memorized which window it was.

But Melinda remained unsettled about so many things.

## chapter **fifteen**

IT TOOK Micah and Melinda more than an hour to collect all the dolls.

Micah also called the sheriff to report the incident.

As they collected the dolls, Fletcher wandered down from the inn and joined them. “Whoa! What happened?”

“That’s what we’re wondering,” Micah said, picking up another doll.

“I’ve seen some crazy things but this ... it’s whack.”

Whack. Yes, that was one way to describe it.

“Need a hand?” he asked.

“Why not?” Micah couldn’t see any harm in it. This didn’t appear to be a crime.

“The craziest thing just happened to me,” Fletcher said as he walked beside them. “I got a call that my best friend was in an accident. The caller said I needed to go up to Norfolk to be at the hospital with him.”

“Oh, no,” Melinda said. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Here’s the crazy thing,” Fletcher continued. “I called another one of my friends to see if he knew anything. He was actually with Birdman. Birdman wasn’t in an accident! I talked to him via Facetime myself. Weird, huh?”

“Whack ...” Melinda murmured.

But Micah’s thoughts raced. Someone had placed that call as a means of making Fletcher leave this place and forfeit the

competition, hadn't they?

The knot in his stomach grew larger.

The whole thing seemed strange.

Possibly not a crime. At least not on the surface.

But something about the scene seemed off—most likely the fact that dolls, of all things, had washed ashore. It was almost as if Mrs. Alabaster was sending a message from the grave.

Except Micah didn't believe in things like that.

Fletcher stayed another few minutes before wandering back up to the inn.

After all the dolls were collected, Micah carried the largest bag over his shoulder while Melinda carried a smaller, less full one. They went to his house, where he'd keep them until he could figure out what to do with them.

When they arrived at the little cottage he called home, he unlocked the door and stepped inside.

As he did every time, he scanned the place before stepping too far in.

It was just one of the precautions he used as a cop.

A few years ago, someone he'd arrested for disorderly conduct had gotten drunk and decided to get revenge. The man had broken into Micah's house and hid there, waiting for Micah to return home so he could teach Micah a lesson.

Micah had quickly put the man in his place. But he'd never forgotten the incident, and now he was always cautious.

Inside, he took the bags and placed them in a spare bedroom. Then he walked back to the living room to join Melinda.

She glanced around the space with curiosity.

This had been his parents' place, and he hadn't made very many changes. Since his mom had died when he was young,

the house had largely been a bachelor pad for twenty plus years.

A plain navy-blue sofa sat against the wall with mission-style tables around it. On the wall were a few beach paintings created by locals as well as several photos of Micah and his parents from when he'd been young.

Nothing fancy. But, for him, it was home.

For a moment, Micah felt embarrassed that it didn't look nicer. Certainly, Melinda was used to something much more sophisticated.

"I like it," she finally said with a nod.

Strange relief filled him. Why did he want her approval?

"I like it too." He stepped toward the kitchen. "You want some tea or something to drink?"

As he asked the question, the wind slammed into his house, causing the windows to tremble. He feared this storm might be even worse than forecasters had predicted. The bands coming off it were strong. The fact the system had slowed down might mean it could gain strength.

"I would love some tea," Melinda said.

As Micah began to prepare some, he realized his heart was pounding a little too hard.

Why was he letting Melinda have that effect on him?

He'd gotten over her a long time ago.

At least that was what he told himself.

Micah knew he was charting into dangerous waters when he let his thoughts go the places they wanted.

But he couldn't seem to stop them either.

Melinda leaned against the counter, a soft, sweet smile on her face as she watched him pull out some mugs. "Who would have ever thought that the two of us would run into each other again?"

“Right? I never thought you’d want to come back here.” Micah had thought about it from time to time. What it would be like if she did return. For the longest time, right after their breakup, he’d prayed that she would change her mind. That she’d show up again. That everything would return to the way it used to be.

But that hadn’t happened.

He’d been foolish to hope it would.

“I have some great memories here. Mainly with you. But it’s like I said, my ex-husband really didn’t like traveling. He mostly liked to work. At least that was what I thought. But a lot of those overtime hours weren’t spent working. They were spent with other women.” Her voice caught as if she regretted bringing up the subject.

The thought of someone treating Melinda like that made anger burn inside him. But Micah pushed the emotion down.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured.

“At least it’s all over with now. When I found out what was happening, it was hard. But now it’s in the past, and I’m moving forward.”

“Do you wish you were still married?” He grabbed some tea from his cabinet, glancing away to give her some space.

Melinda sat down at the small breakfast bar and let out a soft sigh. “No. I know it sounds terrible. If Jim had been faithful to me, I would have stuck with him. I didn’t want to end up like my parents and get divorced. But the truth is we probably shouldn’t have ever gotten married.”

“Why is that?” Micah hoped he wasn’t overstepping with the questions, but he wanted to know. If Melinda didn’t want to answer, he wouldn’t pressure her.

She let out a soft sigh. “I met him right after my parents’ divorce became final. I was in a dark place and questioning everything. I felt so insecure at the time. Jim was everything I wasn’t. He just seemed so confident and sure of himself—and sure of me. Suddenly, I didn’t have to worry about making

friends or my future. He seemed to have it all mapped out. I just had to come along for the ride.”

*You should have come back to me instead,* Micah thought. *I could have helped you.*

He didn't dare voice that aloud.

But the thought of Melinda struggling and being alone did something painful to his heart. He would have been there for her in an instant after her parents divorced if he'd known she needed someone ... and if she had asked.

Melinda absently rubbed her face. “We got married—probably too quickly—and it was only after that I realized how incompatible we were. I thought maybe we could compromise, that time would work things out. But Jim's dreams always seemed to take precedence over mine.”

“I'm so sorry.”

She shrugged and continued. “I put the rest of my college aside in order to help him get his HVAC business off the ground. Only once it was running did I go back and take some night classes to finish my degree. Then I ended up just helping him with the company. Which wasn't a bad thing, although HVAC really isn't my passion.”

“I can't even see you doing that. You were always so adventurous, the girl with big dreams.”

“I sometimes wonder what life would have been like if my parents hadn't gotten divorced.” A wistful tone filled her voice.

“What happened between them? If you don't mind me asking. I mean, I remember them fighting often, but they were together a lot of years.”

“My mom never told me this, but I think she may have cheated on him.” Melinda shook her head. “What a mess, huh?”

“It's hard.”

“And it's funny because, personality-wise, Jim ended up being a lot like my dad. I'm not sure how that even happened,



how I didn't see it.”

Micah opened his mouth, trying to figure out a way to properly respond to that statement.

Melinda wasn't the only one who ignored red flags or didn't see them at all until after it was too late. He knew there was a reason for the saying “love is blind.” He didn't understand all the mechanics of it, but he knew good people could easily get caught up in bad situations.

He wanted to tell her not to be so hard on herself.

Before he could, the kettle began to scream.

It was time to have some tea.



Melinda didn't know why she was opening up to Micah so much. Maybe it was because it was good to have someone to talk to, and Micah had always been a great listener.

When they'd been dating, they'd sit outside for hours talking. She'd rambled on and on about her dreams and everything she wanted to do and all the adventures she wanted to take.

Micah had always asked just the right questions and had just the right wisdom for her.

It was rare to find someone like that.

The two of them had been opposites, but in a different way than she and Jim.

Micah was laid-back. Even though he was content to stay here in this area, he wasn't dogmatic. Jim, on the other hand, always wanted things his way. In fact, he *demand*ed things his way. His personality was a lot stronger than hers, and in order to avoid arguments, Melinda had often let him have his way.

She'd resigned herself to be a shell of the person she once was.

She knew that. She'd felt herself slipping away.

But it had seemed as if there was nothing she could do about it.

Melinda had made her choices, and she had to live with them.

But at times, she was grateful to have a fresh start now. It hurt to see her marriage fail, but she had to believe a brighter future waited ahead.

She took a sip of her tea and glanced at Micah over the top of her “Protect the Wild Horses” mug.

Some of her happiest memories had been with him.

But she knew she’d hurt him badly. She hated herself for that.

She took another sip of her tea as she thought about everything.

“So what are you going to do now that you’re single?” Micah continued, motioning for Melinda to follow him to the couch.

Melinda sat down beside him, tea in hand, told him about the little apartment she’d rented until she could figure out what she really wanted. Told him about how she was still looking for a job and living off some savings. She’d had some offers but nothing that excited her.

And life was too short to keep on doing things that bored her to tears.

“If you could pick anything to do, what would it be?” Micah leaned back, all his attention on her.

That was a good question. Melinda set her tea down on the table beside her as she thought about it. But she already knew the answer.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy,” she said.

“Try me.”

“Part of me still wants to work in public relations, to open my own firm maybe.”

“I don’t think that sounds crazy at all. If that’s what you’ve always wanted to do then I think you should go for it.”

Melinda’s gaze locked on his, and she smiled. Hearing his encouragement meant the world.

Then there was the inn. Not that Melinda expected to win it.

But the possibility *was* intriguing.

She had so much to think about right now. So much to figure out.

As she glanced at Micah, only one thought dominated her thoughts.

Something she’d put off for way too long.

She rubbed her lips together as her nerves thrummed inside her.

Finally, she started. “Micah, I know this apology is coming late. Really late. Twelve years too late. But I’m sorry about the way I ended things. For years, I replayed our breakup in my mind and felt terrible.”

“You had to do what you had to do.”

She shook her head, not wanting him to let her off the hook that easily. “I thought our futures would take different paths. I didn’t think we would work. But ...” She let out a sigh and shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I was wrong.”

His intense gaze burned into her. “We were young.”

“We were. And my mom said I didn’t have enough life experience to make those kinds of decisions. I thought maybe she was right. That being tied down would be a mistake ...” She glanced at her hands as guilt filled her.

“Melinda ...”

She slowly raised her head at the sound of Micah’s husky voice.

The look in his eyes showed he had something to say. Something serious.

He leaned closer to her, his gaze on her lips.

Melinda could hardly breathe as she anticipated what might happen next.

“Melinda, have you ever thought about—” Micah started.

Before he could finish the statement, the sound of someone pounding at the door cut through the air.

The two of them jumped away from each other.

As Melinda’s heart raced out of control, she couldn’t help but think maybe this interruption was for the best.

# chapter **sixteen**

MICAH SWALLOWED hard at the interruption.

Then he quickly cleared his throat and stood.

Maybe the person at the door right now was a blessing in disguise. After all, kissing Melinda again could open him up to a world of hurt. She wasn't going to stay here forever. Why would he ever think they could make things work between them now? If anything, they both had more baggage. More things that tied them down.

He motioned for Melinda to stay where she was, and then he approached the door.

He peered out the peephole and saw a familiar face on the other side.

Caleb Cartwright. Accountant for the inn. In his early thirties. The nervous type.

Micah had talked to him several times at church, but the two had never really connected. He was more of the desk jockey type. When he wasn't working, he played video games. Micah, on the other hand, loved nothing more than being outside and being hands-on with life.

He opened the door, and, without invitation, the man rushed inside and shut the door behind him. "Sorry to barge in. I didn't want anyone to see me here."

He shrank away from the windows.

Micah's brow wrinkled. "Is everything okay?"

Caleb shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know who else to talk to about this. And if the wrong person sees me ...”

Just as he said the words he looked up and spotted Melinda.

His skin went pale, and he closed his eyes with what appeared to be regret.

He clearly hadn’t expected to see her.

Melinda rose to her feet. “I can go back—”

“If you go back, I’m walking you,” Micah said, a protective edge to his voice. He didn’t want her going anywhere alone right now—not if he could help it. He also didn’t want to sound controlling, so he added, “Just to be on the safe side.”

Caleb let out another long breath, clearly in distress. “Do you trust her?”

Micah nodded. “I do.”

Caleb looked at Melinda. “Can I trust you not to tell anyone what I’m about to say?”

Melinda glanced at Micah before nodding. “You can.”

“Maybe it’s a good idea if you don’t know too much, Melinda.” Warning stained Micah’s voice. Whatever Caleb was about to say could be sticky. He didn’t want her to get mixed up in things that could cause her trouble. “Information can get a person hurt.”

Melinda approached him and gently touched his arm. “I’ll be okay.”

The way she said the words was so reassuring, like she could handle it.

But another part of Micah didn’t want Melinda to have anything to do with this.

After a moment of hesitation, Micah nodded at his kitchen table. “Why don’t you have a seat, Caleb? Would you like something to drink?”

Caleb shook his head. “No, I’m okay. I can’t stay long.”

But his entire body looked stiff as he quickly walked to the table, pulled out a seat, and sat down. He appeared to be anything but okay.

Melinda and Micah took seats across from him.

“What’s going on?” Micah asked.

Caleb let out another long breath. “I just don’t know what to say. I’ve been trying to pretend like I didn’t notice certain things, but I just can’t keep doing that anymore. But by talking to you right now, I’m in breach of my contract. I’m not supposed to disclose any of this to anybody.”

Alarm shot through Micah. What did Caleb know?

“Why don’t you tell me what’s going on, and then we can help you form a plan of action?” Micah suggested.

Caleb seemed to think about that a moment before nodding rapidly. “Okay. I can do that.”

But he still hesitated, running a hand over his face and through his hair and letting out more sighs. Whatever he had to say was truly burdening him.

“You know I do the books for the inn, right?” Caleb finally started. He looked up with a haggard gaze.

“Yes, I know that,” Micah said.

“Well, something’s not adding up, and it hasn’t been for a while.”

Micah stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“I took over doing the books after Piers died. He kept the books for years. But he had a separate personal account—one that I’m not sure Mrs. Alabaster knew about.”

“A lot of married couples have separate checking accounts,” Micah said. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that there’s still money going out of that account every month, something set up with automatic drafts.”

Now that was interesting ...

“Who is this money going to?” Micah asked.

Caleb shrugged. “I can’t figure it out. I have the checking account numbers, but that’s all. No names. Mr. Alabaster did leave some codes or nicknames, but that doesn’t help me.”

“What are these nicknames?” Melinda tucked her legs beneath her.

“Nothing that really makes sense.” Caleb let out a sigh. “Each one is a string of six numbers.”

“Do you have a copy of them?” Melinda asked.

He hesitated a moment before nodding and reaching into his pocket. Then he unfolded a paper and placed it on the table.

Five different sets of numbers stared back.

Melinda examined them as they talked.

“Why does this suddenly have you all worried?” Micah asked as he continued to study Caleb. The man had been sitting on this information for a long time. Why had he freaked out about it today?

“I think something shady is going on,” Caleb said. “I think Mr. Alabaster was paying someone off or being blackmailed. I don’t know. But his money is almost gone.”

“I can look into that.”

Caleb paused and shifted. “One more thing ... I was given instructions not to tell anyone.”

Now *that* caught Micah’s attention. “What do you mean?”

“About three months ago, I found a typed note on my desk that said, ‘Don’t tell a soul or else.’ I wasn’t sure what it was about. Then I began suspecting it might be something with the books. I’d almost forgotten about the note until after Mrs. Alabaster died. Then I began receiving more threats.”

“Did you save any of the notes?” Micah asked.

He shook his head. “No, I burned them. I was too afraid someone would find them and ask me questions.”



They could have really used those for evidence. Micah kept the thought to himself. Instead, he said, “I’ll keep this between us for now. If anything comes up, I’ll let you know. But I appreciate you coming to me with this information.”

“Do I just pretend like I don’t see any of it?” Caleb looked up at him with bloodshot eyes, appearing desperate for help.

Micah truly felt sorry for the guy.

He thought about Caleb’s question a moment before nodding. “Don’t confront anyone. Not now. Not until we have more information.”

Caleb stared at Micah another moment before nodding and rising. “Okay, I won’t. But if I end up dead, just know that someone killed me.”



A chill swept through Melinda as Caleb’s words repeated themselves in her head.

*If I end up dead, just know that someone killed me.*

After Caleb left, Melinda turned to Micah. “That’s certainly an interesting development.”

It sounded like the understatement of the year.

“It is. I can’t help but think there might be something else going on there at the inn. Something not good.”

“You think this is connected somehow with Carlotta?” In Melinda’s mind, the woman’s death seemed like a separate incident. But was that too coincidental to be true?

She wasn’t sure.

Micah paused before shaking his head. “I can’t say that for sure. I suppose her death could have been a suicide. Or this new guy she was seeing could have had something to do with it. But the possibility still remains that somehow this could be connected with the inn.”

Melinda shivered and rubbed her arms. She didn't like the thought of that.

"There's something else." She hurried back to the table where Caleb had left those numbers and pointed at one. "I think I know what these are."

"Go ahead."

"This number? 031293?"

"What about it?"

"It's my birthday."

Realization spread through his gaze, and he looked at the rest of the numbers. "You think these are all birthdays?"

"They could be. Plus, there are five of them."

He let out a breath. "And five people were invited here." He stared at Melinda and shook his head. "You're brilliant, you know that?"

She let out a feeble laugh. "I don't know about that."

"No, you really are. Don't sell yourself short. Good work."

They stared at each other a moment, something unspoken between them.

Just then, the wind slammed into the house again. The whole place shook at its strength, reminding them of how powerful nature could be.

Micah cleared his throat before murmuring, "They're saying the nor'easter might hit tomorrow."

"I've always loved a good storm on the beach ... usually. It feels different this time."

As tension stretched through the air, near crackling with intensity, Melinda forced herself to stand and yawn. To pretend like she didn't feel it. To put distance between her and Micah.

If she stayed much longer, they might almost kiss again.

Not almost kiss. They might *really* kiss.

And she wasn't sure that was a good idea.

Even though part of her wanted that more than anything.

Then she remembered how abysmal her first marriage had been. She didn't want to go through that again.

Not that Micah was anything like Jim.

Still ... nothing was certain.

She forced a smile at Micah and took a step away. "I should get back."

Micah stood also. "I'll go with you. I have no reason to believe that you're in danger, but ..."

She nodded, not arguing. There was no need to.

She had to admit that a thrill of nervousness rushed through her at the thought of walking beside him.

Memories of their time together in the past flooded her mind. Memories of holding hands. Sharing secrets. Enjoying each other's embrace.

But that was all over now.

She cleared her throat. "Listen, I know this is a weird question. But could I take one of those dolls back with me?"

He raised his eyebrows. "You have a thing for dolls now?"

She let out an airy laugh. "No, most definitely not. I'm just curious about them. They're not evidence or anything, are they?"

"Not if there's no crime."

"I can give it back if someone claims them."

"Any reason why you want to take a doll with you?"

Her thoughts raced through the possibilities to the truth. "Honestly? I'm just curious. I want to study one of them."

Micah stared at her another moment before slowly nodding. "I guess it couldn't hurt anything."

He grabbed one from the bedroom, placed it in a paper bag, and then handed it to her.

A moment later, they opened the door.

As soon as they did, a shadowed figure came into view.

Melinda jumped back as fear pulsed through her.

This person wasn't about to knock. Instead, he was lingering in the darkness several feet away.

Who was he? And what was he planning to do?

## chapter **seventeen**

MICAH SAW the figure lurking there and instantly went on guard. “Hey! What are you doing?”

In two seconds flat, the man darted away.

Micah sprang into action and took off after him.

This guy could have some of the answers they needed.

And what had he overheard? Had he been there when Caleb had talked to them?

Micah needed to find out.

Whoever this guy was, he was fast.

He darted deeper into the shadows.

Micah strained to catch up, pushing himself harder.

But the guy disappeared into a patch of trees.

Micah slowed his steps, remaining cautious.

This wasn't a large area. But there were plenty of places to hide, and the shadows were deep.

He took another cautious step, on guard for more trouble.

Then something sprang toward him.



Melinda didn't know what to do.

Go try to help?

Stay here?

She felt useless just standing there.

But if she tried to help, she might just be a distraction or get in the way.

Still, Micah was out there facing some unknown man.

What if that guy hurt him?

Her thoughts raced.

She paced outside the cottage, unable to settle down as she waited for Micah return. She wouldn't be able to relax—not until she knew Micah was okay.

She knew she should probably go inside where it was safer. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. She needed to watch for Micah.

What was going on here?

Sometimes, everything just seemed like a nightmare.

Melinda looked up as movement in the distance caught her eye.

It was a shadow.

Coming her way.

The darkness made it impossible to make out any features.

Her heart thrummed in her ears.

Was that Micah?

Or was it the man who'd been lurking outside, and was he coming back to finish what he'd started?

# chapter **eighteen**

MICAH RAN a hand through his hair, his frustration mounting.

He should have been able to catch that guy.

But the man had gotten away.

Now, he tromped back toward the cottage.

He saw Melinda waiting for him at the door. But as she stared at him, her hand rushed over her heart.

She was frightened, he realized.

“It’s me,” he called.

Instantly, her shoulders softened, and she rushed toward him. She gripped his arm as she looked into his eyes.

“I was afraid you’d be hurt.”

His scowl deepened. He led her back to his cottage, away from any potential danger. “I almost caught the guy. Then Sir Steve-io practically galloped from between some trees.”

“What?” Surprise laced her voice.

Micah nodded. “It threw me off guard—and nearly off my feet. And it gave that guy enough time to run. I don’t know where he went, but he’s gone.”

“I’m sorry.” Her hands remained clutching his arm as if she didn’t want to let go. “Do you have any idea who he was?”

“Not a clue. I didn’t get a good look at him.”

She frowned and nibbled on her bottom lip.

“Let’s get you back to your room for now,” he finally said. At least he’d know she was safe there.



Reluctantly, Melinda began walking with Micah down the sandy street. It was especially dark out without any streetlights here in the community. However, on clear nights, the stars were amazing.

She and Micah had spent many hours gazing at them from the beach.

That time in her life seemed like so long ago.

Yet it also felt close.

Or like it could be close again.

As they approached the inn, she shook the thoughts from her head.

She couldn’t let her mind go there.

Melinda unlocked her door, and then they paused in front of it. She leaned against it as she glanced up at Micah.

She willed herself to stop thinking about kissing Micah.

But she couldn’t.

She thought about the possibility of what his lips might feel like against hers.

Would it be the same as she remembered? Would her heart race as it had when they were teens?

She’d like nothing more than to find out.

Instead, she reached behind her back and twisted the handle to open the door and allow herself an escape.

“Thank you again,” she murmured.

Micah nodded and looked beyond her as if trying to check out her room. “Mind if I look inside real quick?”



“Of course not.” She flashed him a smile, her heart pounding.

But as she turned, stepped into the room, and flipped the light switch, something in the distance caught her eye.

Something in her room that hadn't been there before.

A scream lodged in her throat when she realized that the porcelain doll—the one that looked just like her—now had a noose around its neck and was hanging from the sprinkler system.

# chapter **nineteen**

MICAH HEARD the distress in Melinda's gasp and rushed inside the room.

He followed Melinda's gaze and saw the doll.

The doll that looked an awful lot like her.

Now it hung from a noose.

His lungs stiffened.

He touched her shoulder, and the next instant Melinda nearly collapsed in his arms.

"It's okay," he murmured into her hair.

"I just wasn't expecting to see that."

Micah glanced at the doll again, and his jaw hardened.

Someone had done this on purpose. Had done this to send a message.

The only reason they would have done that was if they felt threatened by Melinda.

Or if someone wanted to get rid of her.

Micah didn't like either of those possibilities.

He waited until Melinda pulled away from his embrace. He instantly missed her warmth, wanted to hold her longer.

But he couldn't.

Not right now.

Instead, he stepped between her and the doll to examine it closer.

The rope used to hang it was the type anyone around here could have gotten. There was nothing special about it.

This had to have been done when they had gone back to his cottage. They'd probably been there a couple of hours, if he had to guess. Maybe the guy who'd been outside his cottage had done this?

Anger surged through him.

Someone had been looking for just the right opportunity to send this message.

Unfortunately, almost anyone who worked at the inn had access to the key to this room.

Micah didn't like any of those thoughts.

He worked quickly to collect evidence.

Then he considered whether he wanted to wake people up tonight to question them or not.

Most people were probably sleeping.

But it didn't matter. He needed to get to the bottom of this.

There were security cameras outside. They could have picked up on something, he supposed.

After bagging what he needed, he turned back to Melinda and told her his plan of action. He needed to talk to Trent or someone else in charge here.

Her eyes widened with fear. "Can I go with you?"

Part of Micah wanted to say no. Melinda should stay as far away from this as possible. But it was apparent she was neck deep in this already.

What if the person behind this became even more aggressive?

He didn't want to leave her alone and possibly find out. And he knew he couldn't turn her away, so he nodded. "If you

think you're up for it then, yes, by all means you can come with me."



Melinda was glad Micah had said she could go with him.

Because the last thing she wanted to do was to stay in this room.

She couldn't get the image of that doll out of her mind.

If someone had wanted to send a threat to her, it had worked.

The message was loud and clear.

Melinda was in danger.

She just wasn't certain why. Sure, she'd asked a few questions. Seen a few things. But she didn't know anything. Not really.

Yet someone seemed to think she did.

Then another thought hit her.

What if someone else competing to win this inn was trying to scare her away so they could win?

Images of the other "contestants" fluttered through her mind.

She couldn't imagine Robin doing this. She seemed too sweet.

Then there was Fletcher. He seemed too laid-back. And half of the time, he also seemed confused.

That left her with Richard.

He was definitely the shark of the group. His main goal in life seemed to be to get more money.

In her mind, he was the most likely suspect. At least he was the most likely suspect if it was one of the other competitors.

But what if it was someone else entirely? How would she find out answers and prove anything?

She and Micah walked back toward the lobby. It was already 9:00 at night, but the doors hadn't been locked yet. Trent stood behind the front desk, gathering something from a drawer there.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here still," Micah said as they approached him. "You don't usually work this late."

The two of them knew each other? Melinda supposed they were the same age, and in a town this small, of course they would know each other. She'd almost forgotten how close-knit the community here was.

Trent glanced up, an almost startled look in his eyes.

"I just ran back here to grab something." The man glanced back and forth between Micah and Melinda. "Everything okay?"

"Someone broke into Melinda's room," Micah said.

Trent's eyes widened. "What?"

Micah nodded. "Someone found the doll that looks like Melinda and put a noose around its neck before hanging it from the sprinkler."

"What?" His voice rose with surprise. "Why would someone do that?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," Micah said. "I'm hoping you might have some security footage you can show me."

Trent's gaze instantly darkened.

What was that reaction for?

And ... why was Trent wearing all black?

Wait ...

Melinda sucked in a breath.

Could Trent have been the man they saw outside Micah's place? Had he overheard what Caleb told them?

And if that was the case ... was Trent the guy behind this?

He had the motive—he very easily could think he deserved to take over this place after all the time he'd put in here. He definitely had the opportunity and the means as well.

Suddenly, Melinda wondered if she was standing the presence of a killer.

## chapter **twenty**

AS THEY STOOD near the front desk, Micah waited for Trent to respond.

But he had a feeling he wouldn't like whatever his friend had to say.

And why was he wearing all black?

He remembered that conversation he'd overheard Trent having with someone in his office—the argument about money.

What if there was more going on here than met the eye?

What if Trent was somehow involved in the nefarious undertakings here at the inn?

Micah's thoughts raced. He couldn't jump in and accuse his friend—he needed to tread very carefully.

"I'd be more than happy to show you the footage if I could, but those cameras have been broken for a couple of months now," Trent finally said. "They were supposed to be state-of-the-art, but they didn't stand against the elements. They kept getting corroded by the sand and salty air, and we couldn't see anything."

"That's unfortunate," Micah muttered.

"We've ordered new ones, but we kept the old ones up in the meantime. We thought maybe they would deter people from doing anything foolish."

Disappointment bit at Micah. But he understood. He was in the same situation right now. He'd also put up cameras that

didn't last long.

"I would ask you who has a key to Melinda's room, but I think I know that answer," Micah murmured.

Trent's frown deepened. "Anyone who works here would have access to the room if they wanted it. I hate to say it, but it's true." Trent reached down and unlocked a drawer at the reception desk. "Plus, we have this master key—" He stopped mid-sentence.

Micah's shoulders tightened. "What's wrong?"

"We're supposed to have a master key in here for emergencies, but ... it's gone."

Micah's gut squeezed harder. "What do you mean it's gone?"

"I mean, we always keep it here locked up. But it's not in the drawer." His face turned a dark shade of red as if he were frustrated.

"So someone here could have the opportunity to slip inside anybody's room tonight," Micah said. "Is that what I'm understanding?"

Trent's face turned paler. "I suppose. But we don't have any reason to believe anyone is in danger. The doll, while it's horrible, could have just been a prank."

"I have a feeling it wasn't a prank," Micah told him.

"Then it was probably another contestant just trying to scare Melinda off so they can win." Trent shrugged as if he thought they were making too big a deal over this. Or maybe he was trying to convince himself of that.

"That is a possibility. But we also need to consider the reality that maybe it was something more sinister than that."

Trent tugged at his collar as if he suddenly couldn't breathe. "I don't know what's going on. And I don't like it. Until we can find some answers, what can I do?"

Melinda stepped forward. "If I may ask a question ... who's staying in the room right above the lobby?"



“Right above us?” Trent raised his eyebrows. “I’m not sure.”

“Can you find out?”

Trent stared at her a moment as if he didn’t appreciate the question. Then he shifted and opened the ledger at the front desk.

A moment later, he looked back at her. “That’s where Richard is staying. Why?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Whoever is staying in that room was watching me on the beach earlier. I was just curious.”

“Are you sure this person was watching you and not just looking at the ocean?”

She frowned before shaking her head. “No, I can’t be certain of that.”

Micah leaned closer to Trent. “I need you to call the contestants and remind them to lock their doors tonight. Even with the master key, someone can’t get past those dead bolts.”

“True.” Trent nodded quickly. “I can most definitely do that. What else?”

“I’m going to need to talk to everyone on your staff and see if they know anything,” Micah continued. “Since no one has been injured, I won’t get them out of bed for this line of questioning. But I will need to talk to them tomorrow.”

“Of course. Whatever you need. I promised Mrs. Alabaster I’d always run this place to the best of my ability. Of course, that was before I knew she was going to pass away.” He tugged at his collar as if uncomfortable.

Melinda stepped forward. “Did Mrs. Alabaster ever bring up the subject? Did she fear she would die soon?”

Trent swallowed hard and rubbed his throat as if it were tight. “Now that you mention it, Mrs. Alabaster did say several things in the weeks before she died that indicated she might know the end was near. I didn’t think much of it at the time because of her ... her *advanced age*. But as far as I knew, she was healthy. I just thought maybe she was going through a

phase where she was thinking about making sure everything was in place, just in case.”

“Maybe,” Micah muttered.

But other thoughts swirled inside his head.

What if Mrs. Alabaster’s death hadn’t been from natural causes, just like Bonnie had suggested?

But Micah had talked to the medical examiner earlier today, while at the scene in the woods, and Murph didn’t seem to question it. Micah had, however, asked if he might look at the file one more time. Murph had agreed.

But something about this entire situation wasn’t sitting right with him.



After talking with Trent, Melinda stepped away. Micah asked for a private moment with him. She waited, wondering what they were talking about.

Did Micah have the same suspicions about Trent as she did?

He emerged from the office a moment later and took her elbow, leading her outside. He said nothing as the wind whipped around them, and darkness hung in the air.

“Are you going to tell me what that was about?” she asked as they started toward her room.

“I got to wondering if Trent might be involved,” he whispered.

“I wondered that too. And?”

“He says he and his wife are having some problems. She thinks he works too much. So sometimes when he comes in late to get things done he tells her he’s going jogging.”

“And you believe him?”

Micah let out a sigh. “I’ve known Trent for a while. I really do think that he’s a good guy. But it is suspicious.”

“I’d say. I’m not ruling him out ... not yet.”

Micah paused in front of her door. “Are you sure you want to stay here tonight?”

Melinda had been asking herself that exact same question.

Part of her wanted to run. Wanted to ask Micah if he’d take her back to her car that she’d left down in Corolla so she could go back to Raleigh.

But for so long she’d operated on fear. Played by other people’s rules. Let Jim and his subtle manipulations control her.

She was tired of that. Tired of letting other people call the shots.

Yet on the other hand, she didn’t want to be stupid or so stubborn that she got herself hurt.

But her gut instinct right now told her to stay.

“I’m going to use the dead bolt and the chain. I think I’ll be okay,” she finally said.

Micah stared at her a moment, concern in his eyes.

He looked as if he wanted to argue with her decision, but he didn’t.

Instead, he said, “If that’s what you want to do.”

Melinda nodded, even though she wasn’t a hundred percent sure what she really wanted.

“I’d like to look inside, just to be sure,” Micah said.

She repressed a shudder at his words.

Had the person who’d hung that doll up come back when they’d left? Could he be planning something else?

Melinda could hardly stomach the thought of it.

She watched as Micah checked out the rest of her room before coming back to the door. “It’s all clear.”

She nodded. "Thank you."

"You have my number. And if you need anything ..."

"I'll call. I know you're close."

After another moment of hesitation, Micah nodded. "Okay then. I'll check in with you in the morning."

Melinda nodded, surprisingly disappointed that she couldn't reach up and give him a hug.

Instead, she kept her distance.

"That sounds great," she told him.

He finally pulled his gaze from her and stepped back. "I'm going to wait until I hear these locks click in place."

There was no way she wasn't using these locks tonight.

She thanked him, secured the door, and shoved the chair against it again.

Melinda wouldn't be sleeping tonight with her windows open so she could feel some of that fresh ocean breeze. It had been one thing she'd been most looking forward to about staying here. But now she knew it was an incredibly bad idea.

As soon as Micah was gone, she missed him. Missed his presence. Missed the way she felt safe when he was around.

Instead of dwelling on that, Melinda changed and got ready for bed, knowing she should get some rest.

It was getting late.

She turned off her lights. But before climbing into bed, she walked to the window. Standing at the edge of it, she nudged the curtain to the side and peeked out.

She wasn't even sure what she was looking for.

A shadow lurking nearby? The person who left that doll? Did she think he would come back and finish something?

Not really.

She was most likely doing this out of the utmost caution.

But she saw nothing unusual.

Just the deck beyond her room and then the dune and then the ocean.

Relief filled her, and she continued to stare outside.

The sight of the beach usually brought her so much comfort.

But as a light shone in the distance, she sucked in a breath.

Because that was when she noticed the silhouette on the sand dune.

A single silhouette this time.

Of a man.

Who had his hands on his hips.

Melinda guessed he was staring out at the ocean as if looking for something.

But who was he? And why was he standing out there by himself at this time of night in the worsening weather?

Could he be up to some kind of trouble?

Or was Melinda reading too much into this?

# chapter

## **twenty-one**

MELINDA AWOKE EARLY the next morning.

She'd hardly been able to sleep. Not with so much on her mind. So many bad memories.

Just as the sun began to rise, she slipped out of bed and got ready for the day. But instead of dressing up, she threw on her favorite jeans and a sweatshirt.

She quickly glanced out her window again.

She halfway expected to see that man still standing on the dune watching something on the beach below.

But she saw no one. Only a beautiful sunrise that cast orange, pink, and purple hues through the sky.

Maybe in a moment she'd go out to soak all of that in. To maybe take a picture. To focus on the good that could come out of this weekend.

But before she did that, she wanted to look at that doll she'd taken from Micah's house.

She reached into the bag and pulled it out, laying the doll on the edge of her bed.

A sick feeling swirled in her gut as she looked down at it.

There was nothing wrong with the doll itself. Melinda had never been one to have crazy fears over psycho dolls coming alive at night.

She was certain that at one time this doll had been beautiful. But now its blonde hair was matted on one side and

frizzy on the other. One eye wouldn't open. Seaweed was still trapped in the crevice between the doll's head and neck.

It almost looked like a ... corpse.

A shiver ran down her spine.

Despite its bedraggled appearance, that eye ... it still watched her.

She shook her head, trying to cast those thoughts aside.

Melinda vaguely remembered hearing how most dolls had a manufacturer mark on them. Out of curiosity, she began to search the doll for any trademarks of what brand it might be.

Finally, beneath the doll's hair on the back of the neck she found the brand, year produced, and size.

She would look that information up and see if it meant anything. She also made a mental note to tell Micah about it.

Melinda couldn't be sure, but she didn't think the same company who'd made that doll resembling her had made this one. The quality of this doll just didn't seem to be as good as the other one. The details on the dolls Mrs. Alabaster had collected seemed to be a little finer.

What a weird coincidence that dolls, of all things, had washed up ashore outside the inn.

Or was it a coincidence at all? It seemed so unlikely.

There had to be a logical explanation for it.

Something had been nagging at her all night. It was hard to put her finger on exactly what it was.

But nothing made sense right now.

With a sigh, Melinda stood and grabbed her phone. It wasn't too late to capture a picture of that sunrise.

She stepped outside, and the breeze hit her.

The wind was definitely picking up, and she could see more dark clouds in the distance. Probably one of the bands coming off the approaching nor'easter.

She glanced around but still saw no one.

Her gaze stopped at Micah's house. Was he awake? Should she call him?

That was what she'd promised she would do, so she should.

She quickly dialed his number.

He answered before the first ring even finished. "Good morning. Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine. In fact, I'm already dressed, and I just stepped outside. The sunrise is beautiful this morning, and I wondered if you might want to take a look at it also?" A surprising rush of nerves fluttered through her as soon as the question left her lips.

She knew it was important he say yes. That she wanted to spend time with him more than anything. And not just because of the incidents occurring at the inn.

But because she cared about him.

She wasn't sure if she should. She hadn't even wanted a relationship.

Then she'd run into Micah, and now she didn't know what she wanted ...

"I'm already dressed and ready, so I'll meet you outside."

A burst of delight filled her chest.

Melinda shouldn't be this excited about spending more time with Micah.

But she was.

True to his word, Micah met her outside only a few moments later.

His eyes lit when he saw her, almost as if she'd made his day by asking him to do this.

It had been a long time since Melinda had thought she could make a man feel that way.

He paused by her, something about his gaze making her think he only looked at her this way.



Her heart did a somersault at the thought.

“Did you sleep okay?” His voice sounded low and personal.

Her heart did another flip.

“Not at all,” she told him. “You?”

He glanced at her with a weary expression. “Not at all either.”

They both let out an airy chuckle before walking toward the beach.

Thankfully, the colors in the sky were still just as beautiful as they’d been earlier.

What was that old saying? Red sky in morning, sailor’s take warning?

Was the beautiful sky a sign of the coming storm?

As they walked, Melinda told him about the manufacturer’s information she’d found on the doll.

“Impressive. I’ll check the other dolls and see what else I can find out. Maybe it will lead us to some answers.”

They reached the top of the walkover and glanced across the ocean.

The sunrise really was a sight to behold. Melinda was glad they’d gotten here in time to experience this.

She pulled out her phone, opened the camera, and snapped a picture.

Then, on a whim, she turned the camera around and slid closer to Micah. “Quick selfie?”

“Why not?”

He leaned closer, and Melinda was all too aware of his presence. Of his sandalwood scent. Of the brightness of his eyes.

She tried not to let her attraction show.

But as she looked at herself in the camera, she couldn't help but notice her goofy smile—surely a telltale sign that some of her feeling for Micah remained.

Melinda took the snapshot and quickly put her phone away.

Then they turned back toward the beach.

She scanned the shoreline, halfway expecting to see more dolls wash up. There were none.

But her gaze caught something else in the distance, and she pointed. “Is that a dead horse or a dolphin that washed ashore?”

“Too small to be a horse. And too big to be a dolphin.”

Something about Micah's voice made her spine pinch.

Then what did he think it was?

“Stay here,” Micah muttered.

He started down the dune toward the beach, no longer looking relaxed. No, he walked with purpose.

But a question kept nagging her.

One that she didn't want to address.

But one that could be valid, nonetheless.

Was that a ... dead body washed up on the shore?



Micah hurried down the shoreline, anxious to see what that was in the shore break.

He thought he knew.

He hoped he was wrong.

But he didn't think he was.

He hurried across the sand and paused where the waves broke.

His fears were confirmed.

It was a dead man.

Being thrashed around by the current.

Quickly, Micah pulled the body from the surf and up onto drier sand.

He dropped to his knees and put his fingers to the man's neck.

There was no pulse.

Based on this guy's swollen skin, he'd been dead for a while.

There was no need to do CPR.

Instead, Micah grabbed his radio, ready to call it in.

But as he did, he looked up.

He saw Melinda had followed him down the steps to the beach.

Her eyes widened in horror when she saw the man lying there.

"Tom ..."

Surprise clutched him. "You know this guy?"

"He was one of the contestants, but he left two days ago. Said this wasn't worth his time and he was going home."

Micah's heart beat harder. He didn't like the sound of that.

"Hold that thought one moment," he told her.

Then he radioed the incident in. This was going to be more than what he could handle alone. He'd need to get the medical examiner out here.

Just by looking at this guy, he couldn't tell how he may have died. There were no visible wounds.

But given everything else that had happened here in Carova ...

Micah had to figure out what to do before someone else ended up dead.

At the thought, Melinda's image filled his mind.

He wouldn't let anything happen to her.

He promised himself that.

# chapter

## twenty-two

MELINDA COULDN'T STOP LOOKING at Tom's unmoving body.

She couldn't believe he was ... dead.

"I'm sorry, Melinda." Micah stepped back and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Without thinking, she pressed her forehead into his chest, finding immense comfort in his presence.

It was like the comfort they'd found in each other had never faded. Like they could snap back to where they'd left off as if no time had passed.

That was how it seemed for her, at least.

"How do you think he died?" Melinda finally asked.

"It's hard to say. But I know the tide has been high lately. If he attempted to leave on his own, a wave could have swept him away and carried him out to sea."

Melinda gasped again. "That's terrible."

"It is. The ocean is nothing to be messed with."

"Do you think it was just ... an accident?"

"The medical examiner will have to check that out to be sure. But I don't see any obvious trauma."

"Poor Tom ... he seemed arrogant and unlikable, but still ... he didn't deserve this."

"No, he certainly didn't."

Something about the way Micah said the words made Melinda think that maybe he knew more than he was letting on.

Did Micah know something that he wasn't telling her?



Micah had sent Melinda up to the inn so she wouldn't have to watch Tom being processed. He could already tell that the past couple of days had taken a toll on her, and he wanted to spare her as much heartache as possible.

Sheriff Knox had shown up, along with the medical examiner.

Being outside right now wasn't pleasant either. The wind had kicked up, blowing sand into everything in its path. The ocean roared. Dark clouds moved closer, and the tide was rising.

The storm would be upon them by tonight.

Dr. Murph Townsend, the ME, examined Tom's body.

The man was actually a doctor down in Corolla, but he acted as medical examiner on the side. Dr. Townsend was in his early forties, easy to get along with, and smart.

Micah liked him and respected his expertise.

"Just curious ..." Micah stepped closer. "Did you ever reexamine that file on Mrs. Alabaster like I asked? I know you haven't had much time."

"I did glance at it yesterday." Murph rose and wiped the sand from his gloves. "The initial conclusion appears correct. She died of a heart attack."

"Is there a way to tell if that heart attack was natural or somehow provoked by a drug or poison?"

He let out a long breath. "I'd need to look at her bloodwork again and maybe order more tests."

“Are there poisons or drugs that could cause that?” Micah continued.

“Of course. Cyanide. Aluminum phosphide. And there are others.” He paused. “You think she was poisoned?”

Micah didn’t say anything for a moment.

Sheriff Knox stepped closer, his gaze fixed on Micah. “What are you thinking?”

Micah glanced back at the inn. “I can’t help but think there’s more than meets the eye with all of this.”

“I’ll keep looking into it, if I have permission.” Murph glanced at the sheriff.

Knox nodded. “Run a few more tests, just to be on the safe side. I want all our bases to be covered.”

As Murph got back to work, Micah told the sheriff about the dolls and the other happenings at the inn—including what Caleb had told him last night. It was only right to keep the sheriff in the loop.

Knox told him to keep his eyes open for any more trouble and to let him know about any new developments. They could try to get a warrant to look at those payouts, but it would take time, and he wasn’t sure there was enough compelling evidence to do so.

“I have an update as well,” Knox said.

Micah held his breath as he waited for whatever the sheriff had to say. From the tone of his voice, it was serious.

“We examined that gun found near Carlotta,” he started. “It was definitely the one used to cause her death. However, when we dusted it for fingerprints, there were none.”

Micah’s thoughts raced. “She wasn’t wearing gloves.”

“Exactly.” Knox pointed at Micah, indicating he’d hit the nail on the head. “And the gunshot killed Carlotta on contact. She didn’t have time to take off gloves or wipe that gun down afterward.”

“Which meant someone else killed her ...” Micah finished.

Which justified the concern he'd had this whole time.

"Any updates on the boyfriend?" Knox asked.

Micah shook his head. "Not yet. But I'll keep looking. He's definitely a person of interest."

"Let me know if you need backup," Knox offered.

"Will do. For now, as soon as we wrap up here, I'll talk to everyone inside. See if they saw anything. Check their alibis for the hours after Tom left the group."

"That sounds like a good idea," Murph said as he continued to examine Tom. "But this man has a head wound. It could have been caused by the shore break if he got caught up in it. Or someone could have slammed the back of his head with something and then thrown him into the ocean. I'll know more once I do the autopsy."

Micah frowned. He didn't like where this was going.



# chapter

## **twenty-three**

MELINDA STOOD in the private dining room with a cup of coffee in hand. Around her, the tantalizing scents of bacon, eggs, and biscuits with gravy filled the air. But she wasn't hungry.

Not after seeing Tom.

She stared outside at the ocean, hoping to catch a glimpse of what was going on. Yet another part of her didn't want to know.

Yet she knew for sure she'd never get the image of Tom's dead body out of her mind.

Had he drowned? That would have been a terrible way to die, something she wouldn't have wished on her enemies.

As she stared at the window, movement near the brush caught her eyes.

She squinted as the scene came into focus.

Someone emerged from the brush wearing all black.

Was that ... Caleb?

What was he doing in the brush? Was he watching as Tom's body was recovered?

What if ... her thoughts raced.

But what if Caleb had come to Micah's last night and told him that information just to feel him out? To watch his reaction and find out how much Micah already knew?

The heart thrummed faster at the thought.

“Melinda?”

She flinched before swinging her head around.

Richard stood there.

He approached her, a crease of worry on his brow as he held his own cup of coffee in his hand. Immediately, Melinda remembered the fact that someone in his room had been watching her on the beach when she'd found those dolls.

Did that mean he had something to do with this?

Not necessarily.

But she still didn't trust him either.

“Is everything okay?” He paused beside her, sounding earnestly concerned.

She glanced out the window again, wondering how much she should say. As she ruminated on that, she watched as several other guests—the ones not included in this challenge—hailed their suitcases outside, preparing to leave.

With the weather taking a turn for the worse, it wasn't a bad idea.

She let out a sigh as she realized Richard still waited for her response.

“I was walking on the beach and ...” She fought a frown. “I saw something had washed up. It was ... Tom.”

“What do you mean Tom washed up?” Richard stepped closer, looking confused.

“He's ... dead.” The words were garbled in her throat as she held back a cry.

“Dead?” Richard gasped and stepped back. “Do you mean *dead* dead?”

Melinda nodded, her hand covering her mouth to obscure the horror she felt. “He was most definitely dead.”

“What happened?” Fletcher rose and joined them.

She almost wished she had more time think things through before word got out. But it looked like that wasn't going to be

an option.

“I’m not sure what happened,” Melinda finally said. “Maybe it was an accident. The police are down there now investigating.”

“But Tom left on Friday.” Richard squinted as if he tried to analyze the situation. “How did this happen?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t think the police know yet either.” Melinda stared at both of their faces. “Did anyone see him leave?”

Blank stares and shrugs were their only response.

If anyone had seen anything, they weren’t fessing up.

Melinda wasn’t surprised.

“I guess Tom shouldn’t have cursed this place because it cursed him right back,” Richard muttered with a decrepit chuckle. “God rest his soul.”

Melinda cut a sharp gaze his way. “What do you mean he ‘cursed this place’?”

Suddenly, the beady look in Richard’s eyes disappeared, and he seemed to snap back to reality. “Oh, nothing. I shouldn’t talk poorly about the dead.”

“I suppose not. But I’m still curious about what you meant.”

He shrugged as if trying to lighten the situation, to pretend it wasn’t as serious as it was. “I saw Tom after he stormed out that first night. He paced outside his room, talking to someone on the phone. He was muttering something about how wretched this place was and why no one would want to inherit it. He used some pretty ugly language that I won’t repeat in front of a lady.”

Melinda didn’t know why Richard was trying to appear to be a gentleman when he clearly wasn’t.

But that wasn’t her biggest concern right now.

“You don’t know who he was talking to?” Melinda asked.

Richard shook his head, some of the so-called charm disappearing from his gaze as he realized no one was buying his act. “No, I have no idea. But he didn’t look happy. More like annoyed that his time was wasted. I’m sure we can all relate to that.”

In a way, Melinda *could* relate. This all could be a waste of time.

Yet at this point in her life she didn’t have anything else important to do, so she could indulge in the opportunity. Yet she knew Richard was a businessmen and Robin had a busy life. She could see where they would be annoyed. Or intrigued.

Or like Tom, they could just decide to leave.

Just then, another thought hit her.

Where was Robin? Why wasn’t she here yet?

Maybe—just maybe—she’d slept in.

But Melinda doubted that.

A bad feeling brewed in her gut.

She excused herself.

She needed to go check on her neighbor.

She prayed she was overreacting and this was nothing.



Before she left the lobby, she asked both Richard and Fletcher if they’d seen Robin.

Both said they hadn’t.

More anxiety thrummed inside her as she stepped out.

She hurried to Robin’s room and knocked at the door.

There was no answer.

She remembered the fact that the master key was missing.

Had someone gone into Robin’s room and done something?

She spotted a housekeeper coming her way and flagged her down. Her nametag read Bonnie.

“Excuse me,” she started. “I’m worried about my friend. She’s not answering my knocks. Could you make sure she’s okay?”

The woman pushed her eyebrows together in contemplation before finally nodding.

She knocked on the door also, but there was no answer.

Then she pulled out her key and opened the door.

The room was empty except for the furnishings and some of Robin’s clothing.

But there was no Robin.

Melinda wasn’t sure whether or not to be relieved or even more worried.

She thanked the housekeeper and then hurried back toward the lobby.

Maybe the two women had simply missed each other somehow.

But when she stepped inside, Robin was still nowhere to be found.

Melinda spotted Osterman and rushed toward him. He was sitting alone drinking his coffee, and he didn’t appear to appreciate the interruption.

“Have you seen Robin this morning?”

“Mrs. Flattery?” His eyebrows shot up. “No, I haven’t.”

“What’s going on?” a new voice asked.

Melinda turned to see Micah standing there.

“I can’t find Robin, and I’m worried.”

“Why are you worried?” Osterman asked.

“Because weird stuff has been happening here.”

“Maybe she left.” Osterman shrugged.

“Her clothes are still here,” Melinda said.

“We need to find out for sure if she’s here or not,” Micah said. “Can you call her?”

“Of course.” Osterman pulled out his phone, hit several buttons, and finally put his phone to his ear. A few seconds later, he frowned and lowered it. “No answer.”

“We need to look for her,” Melinda said. “You didn’t call a car for her, right?”

“I did not.” Osterman rose. “I’ll look around inside the inn.”

“We’ll look outside,” Micah said.

Then he took Melinda’s arm and led her toward the front door.

But all Melinda could do was pray for her new friend.

## chapter **twenty-four**

MICAH AND MELINDA stepped out just as sunlight burst between the dark clouds.

Melinda sneezed.

He remembered she tended to do that whenever a bright light suddenly hit her.

He'd found it adorable when they'd been dating.

"Bless you," he muttered as they started up the dune together.

"Thank you." Then she sneezed again.

At the top of the dune, he surveyed the beach but saw nothing.

More than anything, he prayed no more bodies washed up on his beach.

But if Robin wasn't at the inn, didn't have a car, and wasn't answering her phone, he could only think in worst-case scenarios.

If he didn't find her soon, he'd call in backup. Maybe they'd even search the woods.

"Where do we look now?" Melinda turned toward him.

He glanced around again. His gaze stopped on the spa, a separate building that was currently being renovated.

They'd searched the rest of the inn but not there. They should look, at least.

He nodded toward it, and he and Melinda started that way.

At the door, he twisted the handle. It was locked.

Then he went to peer in one of the windows. The glass had a film of sand and salt on it. He wiped it away and cupped his hands around his eyes.

That was when something flew into the glass from inside.



Melinda jumped back, her heart ratcheting with fear.

Then a face came into view.

Robin's face.

"Help! Please!" the woman said, pounding on the glass again.

Micah hurried toward the door and threw his shoulder into it. A couple of tries later, the wood splintered, and the door opened.

Robin came flying out.

Melinda caught her and pulled her into a hug. "It's okay. Everything is okay."

She wasn't sure what had happened, but the woman was clearly terrified.

"I didn't think anyone was going to find me! I was about to break one of those windows."

"What happened?" Micah stepped closer, his eyes narrow with concern.

"It was terrible." She wiped beneath her eyes. "I've never been so terrified in my life."

"Maybe you need to sit down." Melinda took her arm and led her to a chair outside the spa.

After Robin took a seat, Micah knelt in front of her, examining her.

Her face was pale and her limbs trembling. Other than that, Melinda didn't see any physical injuries. That was good news,



at least.

Robin took a deep breath before starting. “I got a text. I thought it was from Osterman. He said there was a surprise challenge.”

“When was that?” Micah asked.

“About five a.m. I thought it was weird. But this whole thing has been weird. So I threw some clothes on and came here.” She sucked in a breath. “Only, no one else was here. I wondered if I’d misread the message, so I checked and I hadn’t.”

“What happened next?” Melinda dreaded hearing what else she had to say. She knew the story would only get worse from here.

“Some guy wearing all black came out of nowhere. He pushed me into the spa, grabbed my phone, and told me to be quiet or else. Then he jimmed the lock on the door. I couldn’t get out. I didn’t know what to do.”

“I can only imagine how frightening that was,” Melinda murmured.

“I wanted to call for help, but I kept remembering what he said. That I had to be quiet or else. I was afraid if I spoke up, he might hear me and come back to hurt me. So I stayed there, praying someone would find me. Thank goodness, you did!”

Melinda wrapped her arm around Robin’s shoulders and exchanged a look with Micah.

The same person behind the other incidents had done this also. She was certain of it.

Staying here suddenly seemed like a very bad idea.

Robin cleared her throat. “And there’s one more thing ...”

Melinda braced herself for the rest of the story.

## chapter **twenty-five**

“THERE ARE DOLLS IN THERE.” Robin nodded behind her.

“Dolls?” Melinda repeated.

Robin nodded, her breathing becoming shallower. “Dolls don’t usually scare me. but there were so many in there. And they all seemed to be staring at me ...”

Melinda and Micah exchanged a glance.

Then they both rose and peered through the splintered doorway.

Sure enough, there were probably a hundred dolls inside.

They’d been placed all around the walls of the room, so that it almost did look as if they were staring at the person inside.

Melinda shivered.

It would be a frightening sight to see—especially trapped in there alone and in the dark.

Had that been someone’s intention?

Did they want to scare Robin so bad that she’d leave?

Why else would they do something like this?

The questions haunted Melinda ... almost like these dolls haunted this old spa.



After finding Robin, Micah sequestered all the guests in the private dining room.

Then he questioned everyone one by one in Trent's office. He needed to find out if they knew anything about Tom, about how Robin had been locked in that spa, and any of the other things happening here.

But no one had seen Tom after he'd left the inn, and they each had an alibi during Tom's estimated time of death. He'd even talked to Melinda as part of the process—mostly so others wouldn't think he was showing favoritism and to check on her.

On the surface, the man's death appeared to be an accident. But Micah needed to cover all the bases.

Given the stakes of what was going on here at the inn, it was only wise to explore the possibility that foul play could have been involved.

Micah had to wonder if Mrs. Alabaster had envisioned any of this happening. Sure, in her mind maybe this competition had seemed interesting and intriguing—not that she would be here to experience any of it.

Perhaps stories of the competition would become part of the inn's legacy, and that was why she wanted to do it.

But had she foreseen just how ugly this had the possibility of turning out? If so, why would she have gone forward with the competition?

Micah and Mrs. Alabaster had plenty of occasions to speak with each other, and their conversations had always been pleasant. But she'd never once brought up this crazy idea of hers. If she had, he would have discouraged her.

When Micah finished with the last guest, he called the contestants back together in the library and thanked them for their time.

“Are you sure that Tom guy wasn't murdered?” Fletcher asked, running a hand through his long, blond hair. He'd seemed especially nervous and antsy when Micah talked to him.

This whole situation was obviously making him uncomfortable. Not a surprise since he was a peace, love, and happiness kind of guy.

“The medical examiner will need to determine that,” Micah told him.

“I don’t know ...” Fletcher shook his head, his gaze still shooting all over the place. “It feels creepy. This place feels creepy.”

“I agree.” Robin shivered and glanced around.

Just then, Fletcher rose to his feet, his chair scraping the floor beneath him. The motion was so fast and sudden that everyone turned to stare at him.

“You know what?” He shook his head before slicing his hands through the air in an X sign. “This has been fun, but I’m out.”

“What?” Robin said with a gasp as she stared at him. “Why would you leave now?”

“I thought this could be a cool opportunity, but it’s just not for me.” Fletcher shrugged. “Houses—and inns—are burdens. I like to live free, without any cares, you know? This place is the anthesis of that.”

“It’s good that you realize it now,” Osterman said from the corner where he stood. “I’ll call a ride for you if you like.”

Fletcher nodded. “Yeah, that would be great.”

With that conversation done, everyone turned back to Micah, waiting for him to call the next shot.

He drew in a deep breath as he tried to carefully choose his words. “Based on what we know right now, we don’t believe any of you are in danger. What happened to Mr. Gleeson appears to be an accident.”

“Then why did you question us?” Richard narrowed his gaze. “If it was just an *accident*.”

“Just to be thorough,” Micah explained. “I did want to let you know that there is a nor’easter brewing out at sea. We’re

going to keep an eye on it and, if it continues to head this way, I will recommend everyone evacuate.”

“But it’s just a nor’easter.” Richard shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal. “It’s not like it’s a hurricane or anything.”

“In this area, nor’easters can actually be more deadly than hurricanes,” Micah explained. “Plus, the wind pushes the tide into shore and floods the beach and the streets, and there’s no way to leave until the water recedes.”

Richard’s face went paler. “Then maybe I should leave now too.”

“Maybe you should,” Micah agreed with a slow nod. “If any of you have any questions or if you remember anything that might help us, please feel free to call me.” He had given each of them a card during their interviews.

As he stepped back, Osterman stepped forward. “Now that that’s all over, I welcome anyone who wants to take themselves out of this competition to do so. But if you’re staying, the next challenge is starting in fifteen minutes.”

He was going to continue these challenges as if nothing had happened?

It seemed crude.

Was Osterman heartless enough to do whatever necessary in order to get what he wanted?

Did that include taking over this inn?

Micah hadn’t considered him as suspect before.

But maybe he should.

Because someone who could so easily set his emotions aside in order to carry out business was the type who could hurt people who stood in his way.

## chapter **twenty-six**

“BEFORE WE START OUR DAY, I wanted to let everyone know we’re having a church service at ten in the private dining room,” Osterman began. “We have one at the inn every week since the closest church is down in Corolla. You’re all welcome to join us.”

Melinda tried not to show her surprise. She’d had no idea they did that here. But she liked it.

She had attended church when she’d been married to Jim, but later she’d realized it was more like a networking opportunity for her, a place to mix and mingle and to get business for the HVAC company.

She hadn’t realized those facts on a conscious level—not at the time. It was only after her divorce the truth became clear.

Then, in her darkest moments, she remembered some of the things the pastor had told her, and they brought such an immense comfort to her heart.

She’d wanted to know more. So she’d found a new church—one that Jim and his new wife didn’t attend—and she jumped in, fully getting involved.

Melinda attended church every Sunday in Raleigh. She looked forward to Sundays and to Bible studies and to volunteering whenever she could.

She glanced around the room and saw Richard and Robin chatting about what they would do. Go to church or skip out?

Was this secretly one of the challenges?

She wasn't sure, but she could see Mrs. Alabaster testing the waters like that.

Melinda, for one, would attend.

Since she had a few minutes until the service started, she wandered into the lobby, where she saw more guests checking out.

With the weather like it was, she couldn't blame them.

Micah still stood there talking to Trent. Melinda had assumed he'd left to continue investigating. But she liked the fact he was still here, still close.

He looked up when he saw her and stepped closer. "You okay?"

She pushed a curl behind her ear. "I guess so. You?"

"Things are shaping up to be pretty busy today. I usually try to attend the service on Sundays, but so many other things are going on right now that I won't be able to make it."

She nodded.

Considering finding Tom washed ashore dead and the approaching storm, she totally understood.

But she was still surprised at the disappointment she felt.

On the other hand, knowing that he now attended church comforted her. They shared the same faith—just one more thing to bond them.

"I'll catch up with you later, okay?" His gaze met hers, concern circling in the depths of his eyes like a powerful undercurrent below a placid surface.

If she wasn't careful, she'd get sucked right in.

Melinda nodded and pushed away her nerves. "That sounds great."

With one more glance at him, she slipped into the private dining room where rows of white chairs had been lined up. An older man with a bald head stood at the front, a Bible in hand.

Maybe this service would help ground her.

Because everything felt like shifting sand around her at the moment.

And she knew where shifting sand led.

*But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.*

A great crash ...

That was exactly what everything felt like around her ...



Micah wished he could stay.

But other than feeding his spiritual hunger, he didn't think this group would offer him anything else right now. Thankfully, he had Bible study at his place once a week, so if he missed church he always had that smaller time with his friends to study the Word.

He'd gotten several calls because of the approaching storm. He needed to take care of those right now and make sure that all the residents hunkering down would be safe.

As he stepped outside, his phone rang, and he saw it was Deputy Dorman.

"Everything good in Carova right now?" Kyle started.

"As well as to be expected I suppose. What's going on?"

"I just thought I'd let you know we got a call here this morning from one of the locals, Mrs. Watson."

"I know her."

"She said she saw somebody on the beach last night. This person appeared to be picking up babies. Well, that's what she was seeing at first. Then she realized they were dolls."



“Is that right? There have been some that have washed up here, so I’m sure if somebody found them, they assumed they were free for the picking.”

“Maybe. I just thought I’d make you aware of that. The whole thing seems a little weird and creepy to me. Maybe I should start calling that place The Isle of Dolls.”

“That doesn’t sound creepy at all ...” That might attract the wrong kind of people, for that matter.

“And one other thing. We also had someone else report some weird lights on the sound last night. Most boaters I know wouldn’t go out in this kind of weather. I just thought you should be aware of that also.”

More lights on the water at night ... that usually meant someone was doing something they wanted to hide.

The question was, what?

What kind of trouble had come to their town?

That was what Micah needed to figure out.

## chapter **twenty-seven**

AFTER CHURCH, Melinda had a break before their next challenge started.

She was grateful for that.

And she was grateful she'd been able to attend church. The service was simple—more of a devotion, really. But the preacher had talked about Jeremiah 29:11. “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

The message had been timely and had brought her so much comfort.

But now it was back to reality—this temporary reality, at least.

Part of Melinda felt silly still participating in these challenges when there were so many more serious issues going on.

But as everyone scattered to go back to their rooms for a few minutes, she began to wander the inn.

She told herself it was just because she was curious. But the truth was, she couldn't stop thinking about what Caleb had mentioned last night.

The fact that her birthday was listed on one of those secret accounts getting money every month wouldn't leave her thoughts. Who were these deposits going to? And why?

The only person who knew that might have been Mr. Alabaster. But he was dead.

Had he kept records anywhere?

The only place that would make sense would be his suite.

Melinda's thoughts sped ahead of her logic.

She had overheard someone saying Mrs. Alabaster had a suite here on the first floor, one that was only accessible through the interior of the building.

Melinda wasn't sure why, but her feet seemed to take on a mind of their own as she turned the corner and found a long hallway.

The administrative area.

There were two open doors that led to offices. Beyond those, at the end of the dimly lit passageway, was a third door.

Mrs. Alabaster's suite must be on the far side of the building.

She glanced around, but no one else was close by. The staff was all too busy preparing for the storm. Maybe she should utilize this opportunity to the fullest.

She darted down the hallway. The sounds from the dining room faded as she walked.

At the far end, she paused in front of the door that read "Owner's Suite" on a gold plaque.

She stared at it a moment, contemplating her next move.

She wasn't usually the lawbreaking type.

But she desperately wanted to see what was inside Mrs. Alabaster's room.

Melinda wasn't sure how she thought that might help anything.

Unless Mrs. Alabaster still had her deceased husband's paperwork. Were there clues in that space nobody had thought to look for?

She had the nagging feeling that maybe the woman's death wasn't natural after all. Melinda had no evidence to base that on. Nothing to back up the thought.

But she did usually have pretty good instincts.

Her instincts right now were telling her there was more going on here than met the eye.

Melinda glanced behind her one more time and still saw no one.

The door was probably locked anyway.

With that thought, she reached for the door handle and twisted it.

It wasn't locked.

Her heart pounded harder.

Why wouldn't Mrs. Alabaster's private suite be locked up? Had someone already cleaned it out? Were they just waiting for the new owner to move right in?

She couldn't imagine that being the case.

Then again, a lot of things had already happened that she couldn't imagine happening.

After a moment's hesitation, she pushed the door open.

A creak sounded as it swung back on its hinges.

Then Mrs. Alabaster's suite came into view.

The space was much larger than the other rooms here at the inn, with room for a bed plus a living area that was cordoned off with half walls. But the style was same as the rest of the place with antique furniture and simple decorations.

Melinda took another step inside.

Mostly what she noticed were the dolls.

So many dolls. On the shelves. Dressers. Even on a ledge behind the bed.

She knew of people who collected quirky things. Coins and thimbles and spoons.

But dolls ... ? Melinda had to wonder what kind of need and desire this collection filled in the woman.

Was it because Mrs. Alabaster hadn't been able to have her own children?

That seemed farfetched.

Maybe there was no psychology behind it. Maybe Melinda was reading too much into things, looking for answers where they didn't exist.

But she needed to know that for sure.

She took one more step inside and ran her finger along the dresser near the door.

This room was where Mrs. Alabaster had died.

If she closed her eyes, she could imagine the woman having a heart attack right here.

But she'd rather not.

Quickly, Melinda pushed the thoughts away.

She didn't want to go there. Didn't want to imagine any more death than what she'd already experienced.

No, she needed to look for those records. Where would Mr. Alabaster—or his wife—have kept them?

She glanced at the dresser. In there?

Quickly, she opened the top drawer.

It was empty.

She opened the second and the third.

All empty.

Someone had cleaned out her stuff. That meant if the paperwork had been here, it was probably gone now.

Disappointment pressed on her.

She should have known.

She glanced around the room once more.

But nothing obvious stood out to her.

She should go, Melinda realized, suddenly feeling as if she were invading Mrs. Alabaster's personal space.

She wasn't sure what she had hoped to prove by coming in here.

But before she could even turn around, she heard a footstep behind her.

She quickly ducked behind the door, hoping she hadn't been seen.

She held her breath, praying she wouldn't be caught.

But the next instant, a light shone in her face.

On cue, she sneezed.

Then a deep voice asked, "What do you think you're doing in here?"



While Micah took a quick lunch break, he did something he should have done a while ago.

He looked into the backgrounds of each of the people who'd been invited here for this competition.

He even looked into Tom and Fletcher, although Tom was dead and Fletcher had already left.

He still found it odd that Mrs. Alabaster had invited five random strangers. Sure, maybe they'd each met her at some point in their lives. However, the connections to her were so vague that they didn't make sense.

But if he dug into everyone's background, maybe he could find another link.

However, as he began to search, he saw very little they had in common. Each person was from a different city. Had a different type of family. They had different careers. Some were married. Some weren't.

They ranged in age anywhere from twenty-six to thirty-four years old.

So what exactly was Mrs. Alabaster thinking? Did she have some type of record or notes somewhere that Micah might be able to look at that might offer a clue?

Could she have simply chosen them at random?

Micah knew he could ask Osterman, but he didn't think that would get him very far. The man seemed pretty tight-lipped.

He sighed and closed his computer before taking the last bite of his turkey sandwich.

Just as he did that, his phone rang, and he glanced at the screen.

It was Louann.

"Micah?" Her voice came out as a rushed whisper. "Someone's in Carlotta's room."

He sat up straighter. "Right now?"

"That's right. I'm hiding in my kitchen pantry. I don't know what to do."

"Stay hidden. I'll be right there."

He ran to his truck, threw it into Drive and headed toward her house, urgency racing through his veins.

# chapter

## twenty-eight

MELINDA'S HEART raced out of control.

She stepped from behind the door and saw a figure clad in dark clothes standing there.

Trent, she realized.

“I’m ... I’m sorry.” She took a step back.

Her first reaction had been relief upon seeing Trent. But when she saw the anger in his eyes, all of her concern—and fear—returned.

What if he was the person behind all of this? He would have the opportunity and maybe even the means to kill someone. But did he have a motive?

Melinda didn’t know. She wasn’t thinking clearly.

“This is private property.” Tension stretched through his voice.

“I was just trying to get a feel for the inn and everything here ... you know just in case I win. When I got here, the door was unlocked. I thought maybe everything had been cleared out after Mrs. Alabaster’s death.”

His gaze darkened, and the polite man who’d been chatting with Micah earlier disappeared. “Well, it hasn’t. Whoever wins will, of course, get to explore the entire building. Until then ...”

With the sweep of his arm, he indicated that she should leave.

“I’m sorry,” Melinda murmured again.



“I think they’re waiting for you for the next meeting anyway,” he said. “If there’s one thing I know about Osterman, it’s that he doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Of course.”

But she was trembling as she stepped from the room.

Why was Trent so angry that she was in Mrs. Alabaster’s room? Was it because he knew something she didn’t? Or was he just upset because she was trespassing?

It could really go either way.

But Melinda liked this situation less and less all the time.



Micah pulled his truck to a stop in front of Louann’s house and rushed out.

Quietly, he walked to the front door.

He hadn’t asked her if it was unlocked, but he didn’t dare call her now. The sound of the phone ringing could give away her presence, and there were no guarantees she’d put the device on vibrate.

Instead, he twisted the handle.

It didn’t budge.

He walked toward the back of the house. From what he remembered, that was where the kitchen was. Maybe Louann could let him inside.

As he reached the door, he found it ajar.

Concern raced through him.

Drawing his gun, he gently nudged the door open.

Normally, he’d announce who he was.

But he couldn’t do that now. If this guy had Louann, then announcing his presence could put her in greater danger.

For now, Micah stayed quiet.

But as he walked past the pantry with its accordion doors, he saw a single eye staring out at him.

His heart skipped a beat.

Until he realized it was Louann.

He let out a long breath before mouthing, “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “So far ...”

“My truck is unlocked. Go wait inside it. Now.”

She didn’t hesitate before sliding the door open. Then she darted outside.

Only once Micah knew she was safe did he continue.

He stepped into the living room.

It was empty.

He started down the hall toward the bedrooms.

That was when he heard a noise from the bedroom on the left.

Carlotta’s room.

Quickly, he walked toward the door. On the mental count of three, he kicked it open, announcing himself this time. “Police!”

The guy inside—who looked exactly as Carlotta’s boyfriend had been described—startled.

In three seconds flat, the guy lunged across the room and dove out the open window.

Micah scrambled behind him.

But the guy was spry.

By time Micah’s feet hit the ground, the intruder had already taken off across the sandy roads.

Micah sprinted after him.

Whatever he did, he could not let this guy get away.

# chapter

## **twenty-nine**

MELINDA QUICKLY JOINED Richard and Robin in the library.

Osterman already stood at the front of the room, impatiently tapping his foot as he waited for her to arrive.

She glanced at her watch.

She was right on time.

Based on the way Osterman was acting, she was ten minutes late.

He let out a sigh before saying, “As I’m sure you know, the nor’easter is almost here. I had some challenges planned for you today, but unfortunately, they’re not going to work out.”

“Does this mean we’re going to have to stay longer than anticipated?” Richard crossed his arms as if preparing himself to argue or complain.

“I wouldn’t ask you to do that.” The familiar dour expression captured Osterman’s face. “So, no. Instead, I’m going to incorporate some new challenges to fit the storm instead.”

“What do you mean?” Melinda heard the edge of caution in her voice. Part of her dreaded whatever he was about to say.

Sometimes she felt as if this were a reality show where the competition would get more elaborate as the pool of contestants narrowed.

Would he have them stand outside in the surf until the ocean knocked one of them down?

Or maybe he would have them prepare dinner for a group of fifty people without using electricity? Or utensils?

She had no idea.

Part of her hated not knowing what to anticipate.

“As they say, we need to batten down the hatches,” Osterman continued. “It’s all hands-on deck for this, and so I’m going to request your help. We need to secure any loose items around the inn that could become projectiles in the wind. After that, some of our elderly locals need help securing their items. I can’t force anyone to help us with this project, but if you would be so kind, I know the locals would appreciate it. If you do want to take over this inn, it will help to build a good rapport. As you know, Mrs. Alabaster was proof of that.”

Interesting. Melinda thought this was one challenge that was actually a good idea.

Some of her dread disappeared.

Anything she could do beyond the walls of the inn sounded good.

Because her heart was still racing after that confrontation with Trent.

Was that man hiding something?

She didn’t know.

But someone here at this inn was.



This guy was fast. But Micah was faster.

He saw his opportunity and lunged at the intruder.

Micah caught his legs and tackled him to the ground.

The guy hit the sand with a thud.

Using his hands, the man struggled to get away, practically crab crawling to do so.

But Micah’s grip was too strong.

“Give it up,” Micah muttered.

Still keeping one hand on the man’s leg, he used his other hand to grab his handcuffs.

Then Micah kept him in place and cuffed him.

That done, Micah dragged the man to his feet and looked him in the eye.

He’d never seen this guy before.

But he looked like trouble.

“I didn’t mean anything, man,” the guy started.

“What’s your name?” Micah demanded.

“Su—Su Nguyen.”

“And what were you doing inside Louann’s house?”

“I wasn’t up to trouble. I promise.”

“Then what exactly *were* you up to? What were you looking for?”

Yet all Micah could think was that he already knew the answer.

The idea that made the most sense was that Su was looking for drugs.

Was this guy somehow involved in some secret drug deals going on here on the island? The secluded area was perfect for those types of things. Micah had heard rumors that exchanges were taking place near the Currituck Sound at night.

He and Deputy Dorman had patrolled the area when they could. So far, they hadn’t caught anyone.

But the last thing Micah wanted was for drugs to infiltrate this town.

“I just left something there. I need to find it, man. That’s it.” Panic rose in Su’s voice.

“You need to start talking before I haul you off to jail.” Micah was losing his patience with this guy.

Finally, Su let out a shaky sigh, his motions still jerky with nerves. “I was looking for a necklace that I gave Carlotta. You happy now?”

A necklace? That was the last thing Micah had expected to hear.

“What kind of necklace?” Micah continued to press.

“An expensive one. I used my savings to buy it for her.” Tears filled his eyes, and he almost violently wiped them against his shirt sleeves as if angry they’d appeared in the first place. “I wanted her to keep it. But now that she’s not here, if I could get it back I could pawn it. The money would really help me.”

“That’s all you were looking for?” Micah continued to eye the guy.

“Yeah, that’s right, man. What did you think I was doing in there? Drugs or something?”

Micah didn’t say anything.

The man’s face nearly crumbled. “I’m not into drugs. I don’t know who you think I am. I loved Carlotta.”

“Then why was your relationship a secret?”

“Carlotta didn’t want people spreading rumors about her.” He shrugged before aggressively wiping away his tears again. “You know how people talk. The two of us ... we were different. I’m definitely from the other side of the tracks. We wanted to see if we could work together before we announced ourselves as a couple.”

Micah stared at the man another moment trying to figure out if he could believe him or not.

# chapter **thirty**

AS MELINDA HELPED Osterman move some Adirondack chairs from the deck to inside, questions whirled in her head.

This was the perfect opportunity to find out what Osterman knew.

But what could she ask without making him clam up?

She lifted another chair, working against the wind to carry it through the sliding glass door that led to the lobby. The furniture would be stored there until the storm passed.

She glanced at Osterman as he picked up a matching blue chair and carried it inside. “If you don’t mind me asking, I’m curious about yesterday’s challenge.”

Osterman paused. “What about it?”

“How did I do?”

He offered a barely perceptible shrug. “Quite well.”

She followed him back outside and they each picked up another chair. “When will the winner will be announced? On our last day here?”

“An announcement won’t be necessary. The winner will be the last one standing.”

His words had an eerie ring to them, even though Melinda knew he meant the words figuratively. Still ...

She left her chair against the wall, as directed. Osterman did the same.

The space would be crowded, but it was better than this furniture becoming projectiles in the wind.

Melinda started to ask Osterman more questions when her phone rang.

She glanced at the screen and frowned.

It was her mom.

Mom hardly ever called.

She quickly excused herself and paced toward the library for privacy. “Hey, Mom. What’s going on?”

“I haven’t heard from you in a few days, and I just wanted to check in.” Her mom’s cheerful voice filled the line.

She and her mom had been close at one time. After her parents’ divorce, things had changed. Now that her mom had moved to Maine, things had really changed.

She hadn’t realized just how strained her parents’ relationship was until she herself became an adult.

Her mom never wanted to talk about the reasons they’d split. But the split in their family had definitely left a mark.

“I’m doing okay,” Melinda told her. “I’m actually at The Bungalow on Shadow Road.”

Her mom went silent. “What? What are you doing there?”

Her voice held a tinge of irritation ... or panic ... or something. Melinda couldn’t place the emotion.

“I was invited here. Mrs. Alabaster died recently, and I’m in the running to inherit this place since she had no family to pass it on to. Crazy, huh?”

Again, more silence.

Then finally, “You shouldn’t be there.”

“What? Why not?”

They had nothing but good memories here. Was it because of the divorce? Did her mom’s memories of the inn involve too many with Dad?



“Just ... the place is trouble. Nothing good comes from it.”

Her mom was making absolutely no sense.

Melinda switched the phone to her other ear as curiosity, mixed with irritation, rose inside her. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying ... I’d stay far away from that place if I were you.”

“Why would you say that?” She was tired of dancing around the heart of the matter—whatever that was. “What happened here that you’re not telling me?”

Instead of answering, her mom rushed, “I’m sorry ... I’ve ... I’ve got to go.”

Then the call went dead.

Melinda stared at the phone a moment before shaking her head.

What in the world had that been about?

She wasn’t sure, but she didn’t like the unsettled feeling in her gut.



Micah stared at Su as they stood on the road.

Tattoos—as well as sand—covered part of the man’s face.

He didn’t seem to notice the grit. Instead, he held his body tight as if he wanted to run.

Micah wasn’t going to let that happen. “Is there anything else you want to tell me? If so, now’s the time.”

“There is one more thing,” Su said. “I don’t know if this means anything, but Carlotta was ready to quit working at the inn.”

“Why’s that?”

“Carlotta thought something suspicious was going on there. Said there were all these secret meetings and lots of

stress over there.”

“Did she say anything specific about the meetings or the stress?”

Su shrugged. “Not really. Just that nothing had been the same since Mrs. Alabaster died. Mrs. Alabaster had given her a chance when no one else would. Carlotta took her death really hard.”

“I can imagine.”

“And she didn’t believe her death was natural either.”

That caught Micah’s attention. “Why not?”

“Said Mrs. Alabaster was looking over her shoulder a lot in the days before she died. Carlotta believed someone poisoned her.”

Micah nodded slowly. “Good to know.”

“Can I go now?”

Micah had no reason not to believe what Su was saying.

But that meant he was back at ground zero.

Micah’s jaw hardened until he finally nodded. “For now.” He uncuffed Su’s hands. “But I need your contact information, and you need to stay in this area, just in case.”

“Yes, sir.” Su touched his face, felt the sand there, and began wiping the grains away.

Micah got everything he needed and then let Su go.

Just as Micah climbed back into his truck and let Louann know it was okay to return to her home, his phone rang.

It was Trent.

“Hey, I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time,” Trent started. “But I talked to a guest at the inn today, and Tom’s name came up.”

Trent now had his total attention. “Why was that?”

“She said they were neighbors here at the inn. She’s here alone, and so was Tom, so the two of them had chatted some.

Anyway, she mentioned she saw Tom arguing with a man the night he left.”

Micah leaned back in his seat. “What else do you know?”

“The guy Tom was arguing with, his name is Chuck Larson. He just checked out of the inn about three minutes ago. So if you want to catch him ...”

Micah most definitely wanted to catch him. “Anything you can tell me to help ID him?”

“The easiest is that he drives a lime-green Jeep.”

Micah remembered seeing the brightly painted vehicle out front. It was hard to miss. “That should work.”

Micah put his truck into Drive and hurried back toward the inn, desperate to catch this guy before he left the area.

Especially now that he’d ruled out Carlotta’s boyfriend.

Su had been their best lead as far as who might have murdered Carlotta. And there was a good chance that Carlotta’s and Tom’s deaths were connected.

Just as Micah reached the inn, he saw the lime-green Jeep pull away.

Larson’s vehicle.

Instead of pulling him over, Micah decided to follow the guy.

If Larson got too far from town, Micah would turn his lights on.

For now, he was curious about where this man was heading. Larson wasn’t driving erratically, and the fact he was leaving wasn’t entirely unusual given the forecast.

Larson slowed by an empty lot filled with trees. The man put his Jeep into Park and climbed out.

Micah needed to be cautious. He parked a good distance away and stayed in his truck and watched as Larson headed toward the wooded area.

But Larson wasn’t alone out here.

Someone waited for him at the back of the property.

What exactly was going on back there?

Micah reached for his door handle.

He needed to find out.

## chapter **thirty-one**

MELINDA and the rest of the team moved on from helping at the inn to assisting residents in Carova. As they worked, the wind continued to kick up. Occasional bursts of rain fell from the sky, which remained an eerie blue-green color. The storm clouds were heavy and lingered all around them.

It was mostly senior citizens who needed help moving outdoor furniture and other items inside to keep them safe from the winds, which could be gusting up to fifty-five miles an hour. Many of them had autumn decorations out that also needed to be secured.

Melinda enjoyed talking to the local homeowners. Many of them had lived in this area for years and had lots of stories to tell about other storms and the general way of life around here.

To live in Carova, planning was required. One couldn't simply run to the store to pick up a few groceries. Residents had to allow enough time for travel.

The whole pace of the area seemed slower.

Melinda didn't realize until then just how welcoming that thought was. She'd lived at a fast pace for a long time now, all for the sake of her husband's company. She needed a break. She wanted to take more time to breathe.

"I was so sorry to hear about Alice," a seventy-something-year-old woman named Mrs. Stafford said as she watched Melinda work.

The woman sat on a swing on her covered porch, an apple and knife in hand. Every few minutes, she'd cut off a piece

and offer it to Melinda, who would decline.

The woman still seemed spry, but she explained she had osteoporosis and couldn't lift anything heavy.

"It's a shame about Mrs. Alabaster." Melinda grabbed another potted plant. "She was a wonderful woman."

"She was." Her voice sounded wistful.

Melinda paused and studied the woman a moment. "Were you friends?"

"Oh, yes. We got together to play bridge every week for the past thirty years."

"Then I can only imagine what your loss feels like. I'm sorry."

"This community won't be the same without her. I still just can't believe she's gone. How someone who seemed so healthy and vibrant one day could just die the next." She shook her head and cut off another piece of apple.

"It's hard to comprehend," Melinda agreed.

"Now her husband, on the other hand ..." Mrs. Stafford shook her head and let out a bitter laugh. "I wasn't sad to see him gone."

Melinda paused, curious about her words. "Why is that?"

Mrs. Stafford raised her eyebrows as if secretly delighted to share what she knew. "He was quite the ladies' man, and everyone here in town knew it."

Melinda froze mid-step toward the door. "Really?"

"Really. He would invite ladies over to the spa and shower them with special attention. That always led to other things ... if you know what I mean," she said with an exaggerated wink.

Oh, Melinda got the hint alright. She had no idea Mr. Alabaster was so scandalous. "Did Mrs. Alabaster know about his little trysts?"

Mrs. Stafford frowned. "I don't think she did for the longest time. But how could she not after a while? It was quite

obvious.”

“I guess she stuck with him despite that.”

“She did. If she didn’t, they would have both probably lost the inn. Splitting the assets, neither would have been able to afford to keep it. And Mrs. Alabaster loved the place.”

“Not Mr. Alabaster?”

Mrs. Stafford raised her eyebrows again. “Oh, he loved it ... but for other reasons. Anyway, I shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.”

Melinda stored that information away as a more complete picture formed in her mind.

Not everything was as perfect at the inn as it appeared, after all.



Micah crept closer to where the men talked behind some trees.

He couldn’t make out what they were saying. But he did catch a glimpse of the man Larson was talking to.

Peter Franklin. A longtime resident here in the area who owned a charter fishing business. The sixty-something man was on the short side, with a robust belly and an easy smile.

With an edge of caution staining his every action, Micah stepped forward. “Hey, you guys. Not trying to startle anyone. I just saw some commotion back here and decided to check things out.”

He’d met Peter on many occasions, and he liked the man. He didn’t want to think this guy was behind anything that might be happening in the town.

But Micah had to be careful to watch his own biases as well. He couldn’t let his personal feelings cloud this investigation.

Both of the men did look startled but not necessarily guilty as they looked up at him.

“Micah ... I’m surprised to see you here.” Peter paused and placed his hands on his hips. “I was expecting you to be helping out around the island.”

“I have been. But I saw someone was out here and just wanted to make sure things were okay.” His gaze remained on Larson, challenging the man to lie to him.

Peter seemed to notice the tension between them and let out a nervous chuckle. “I know it probably looks weird that the two of us are meeting out here in the woods in all this wind and rain.”

“I would say that is especially true since someone said you were spotted arguing with the man who was found dead today on the beach.” Micah gave Larson a look.

The man’s eyes grew wide. The guy was in his fifties with neat salt-and-pepper hair. He dressed, moved, and spoke like a businessman. “You know about that?”

“Word gets around.”

“It’s not what you think.” He raised his hands, panic racing through his gaze.

“Then what should I think?”

“I wanted to do some beach driving on Friday night. But when I got outside, this guy I’d never seen before was leaning against my new Jeep. I asked him to move. Apparently, he didn’t like my tone of voice because he copped an attitude.”

“And then what?”

“Finally, I got him to move, but it was too late. There was already a small scratch in my paint. The zipper of his jacket had slipped behind him and marked the clear coat. Needless to say, we exchanged words. I wasn’t very happy.”

“Where exactly is this scratch?”

“Left side of my car right above the front tire. I can show you if you want.” He stepped in the direction he’d parked as if ready to prove his innocence now.



“I can check in a moment.” Micah’s thoughts continued to race. “If you don’t mind me asking, what are you two doing out here right now?”

Larson turned to Peter, who let out a grunt.

“Truthfully, I’m thinking about selling this property.” Peter shrugged. “And Larson here is thinking about buying it. He swung by to take a look at it.”

“This is your property?” Micah knew Peter owned several pieces of property in the area, but he’d always refused to sell whenever anyone asked. From what Micah understood, he’d had many offers.

“It is, but I’m thinking about retiring a little farther south. That means I might need to liquidate some of what I own. I hate to do it, but it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Micah resisted a sigh.

Unfortunately, it looked like this was another dead end.

He thanked both of them and then walked back toward his truck. On the way, he checked out Larson’s Jeep.

Sure enough, a scratch marred the paint. But had Tom done that? Or had it been something else?

Micah ran a hand through his hair, fighting frustration.

He’d chased enough red herrings.

He needed a real lead.

As the wind picked up again, bringing with it a smattering of rain, his thoughts went back to Melinda.

Right now, all he wanted to do was to check on her. Last he’d heard, she was helping some residents near the inn prepare for the storm.

He headed there now to see how things were going.

## chapter **thirty-two**

MELINDA MOVED another potted plant inside Mrs. Stafford's house before stepping back outside to wipe the dirt from her hands.

The woman had mostly sat on the deck and watched Melinda work, but Melinda was fine with that. She was just glad she could help someone.

From where they were, she could see a few other people from the inn working at various houses. It wasn't just the contestants and Mr. Osterman. Several of the inn's employees were helping as well.

They were supposed to stick together in teams, but everyone was already paired up when she headed toward Mrs. Stafford's house. Osterman was staying close, supervising everyone.

"I'm not sure I like that Osterman man." Mrs. Stafford continued to sway back and forth on her porch swing. Her eyes narrowed as she glanced at Osterman.

"I take it you don't know him very well?"

Her gaze remained shadowed. "He's definitely an outsider to the area. We're not opposed to outsiders. I mean, we have many, many tourists in this area. They help us with our livelihood. But that man doesn't fit here, and he acts like he owns the place. That bugs me."

"That would bug me too." Melinda picked up a pot, turning her gaze away from Osterman. "Do you know anything about him?"

“I can’t say I do.”

“Did Mrs. Alabaster like him? Did she bring him up during your bridge games?”

Mrs. Stafford cut off a piece of her apple and took a bite before answering. “I suppose she liked him fine enough. But he tried to boss her around, and if there’s one thing you probably remember about Alice it’s that she didn’t like to be bossed.”

Melinda let out a laugh. “I could see that.”

“It will be really interesting to see what happens to that place. That’s for sure.” She frowned as if bothered by the idea.

Melinda could understand.

She placed the last plant in Mrs. Stafford’s living room and then stepped out. “Well, it looks like that’s everything. Stay dry during the storm.”

Mrs. Stafford flashed her a smile and stood. “You too, honey. I think I’ll go back inside now.”

“You need a hand?”

“I’ll be just fine.”

Melinda started down the steps, ready to catch up with everyone else and see if any other homeowners needed help.

But when she reached the sand at the bottom of the stairs, rustling sounded in the trees in the distance.

She paused.

Was someone in the brush? Or could it be a wild horse?

She knew better than to get too close to the wild horses. Signs were posted everywhere to remind her that she wasn’t supposed to get closer than fifty feet from them or feed them.

Melinda remained frozen, trying to figure out exactly what was in those trees.

The quick, almost frantic movements made her think something had been trapped or was distressed.

What if it was a neighborhood dog? Or cat?

No doubt, animals could sense the storm coming. Maybe they'd tried to find safety and had gotten caught on a low-lying branch or some thorny underbrush.

She remained cautious as she stepped closer to the sound.

She wasn't sure how close she should get.

As she continued forward, she prayed this wasn't a bad idea.

She stopped near the edge and called, "Hello?"

The rustling suddenly stopped.

She turned and glanced behind her. From where she was standing, she couldn't see the rest of the group.

Bad idea.

She needed to find someone to help her.

But just as she started to step away, a hand reached from the brush.

Fingers circled her arm and pressed into her bicep.

The next moment, she was jerked into the patch of woods and out of sight.



Micah saw Mr. Osterman directing someone to roll a trashcan away from the street.

He pressed on the brakes and leaned out the window. Big fat drops of rain broke through the clouds and splattered around Micah.

"Good afternoon," Micah called. "Have you seen Melinda around?"

Osterman paused and shrugged. "She's supposed to be at that house."

He pointed to a pale blue house in the distance.

If Micah remembered correctly, that was Mrs. Linda Stafford's place. The woman, a former kindergarten teacher, was a staple around here and a talker, at that. If Melinda wasn't careful, she would end up being there all day.

Micah thanked Osterman and then continued down the road toward Mrs. Stafford's place.

He hadn't liked being away from Melinda this long, but it had been necessary.

But now he wanted to put his eyes on her so he could know for himself she was okay.

He pulled up to the house, but no one was outside. However, it did look as if most of the things had been secured.

He climbed the stairway to her front door. As he knocked on the screen door, a scratchy voice inside yelled for him to come in.

He stepped into the dark house.

Mrs. Stafford sat in her recliner with some iced tea and her feet propped as if watching Melinda work had exhausted her.

"Micah ... to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Good to see you, Mrs. Stafford. I'm actually looking for Melinda, and I heard that she was helping you out here."

"She was. She left about five minutes ago." She raised her sweaty glass in the air as if to confirm the thought.

"Interesting." Micah was surprised he hadn't seen her or that Osterman didn't know where she had gone. He had to assume they'd gone into this with a plan of some sort.

"Did she tell you where she was heading?"

"No, but I saw her walking away. I thought she was going to meet that other man, Osterman. But before she got there, she turned off toward the woods. Figured maybe she saw something she wanted to check out and that it wasn't my business."

Micah's heart beat harder.

The woods?

Given everything that had happened around here lately, that didn't seem like a good idea.

Quickly, he thanked Mrs. Stafford.

He rushed outside and glanced at the thick patch of trees.

He prayed Mrs. Stafford was wrong.

That Melinda hadn't ventured into this area alone. Anywhere too secluded was a risk right now.

But most of all, Micah prayed she was okay.

Just as that thought went through his mind, a scream sliced the air.

Melinda.

That was definitely Melinda.

Micah took off in a run.

## chapter **thirty-three**

PANIC SURGED through Melinda as she realized the situation she was in.

The man still grasped her arm, his fingers digging into her skin. His gloved hand had slapped over her mouth after she screamed.

Branches had scraped her face and hands.

The wind masked any sounds—including that of her muffled cries.

No one knew she was out here.

She was ... alone.

Fear shot up her spine.

She should have known better than to approach those bushes.

*Fight!*

Why was she just standing here?

Instantly, she snapped into action.

At once, she struggled against him, desperate to get away.

But there was no use.

The man was too strong. Too much bigger.

Just what was he planning on doing with her?

Another surge of panic rushed through her at that thought.

She tried to jerk away from her captor. Tried to kick. To wiggle.

It was no use.

His grip was like iron.

“You’re going to give me what’s rightfully mine,” the man grumbled into her ear.

What was his? What was he talking about?

But his fingers pressed so tightly into her mouth that there was no way Melinda could voice the question.

“Do you understand?”

She wanted to shake her head no. She *didn't* understand.

But if she did that, then the man might hang around longer.

All she wanted was to get away.

So she nodded.

“Good,” he grumbled. “You have until the end of the day. If you don’t give it to me, then I will come and take it. You don’t want me to have to do that.”

Melinda’s heart thudded in her ears. The man’s words made no sense. She had no idea how she would fulfill some kind of promise to him that she’d made in her state of distress.

What was it even that he wanted?

Before she could think about it any longer, the man released her arm and shoved her away from him.

She stumbled into a tree, and her forehead hit the rough bark, scraping the skin off.

Disoriented, Melinda sank to the ground.

As she did, the man darted away, disappearing into the trees.

She sat there a moment, hardly able to breathe.

Touching her forehead, she felt the blood there.

It was just a scrape. But it still stung.



*Get away.* An internal voice urged her to leave. It would do no good to stay here any longer.

The man could decide to come back.

But as she tried to stand, her knees wobbled.

“Melinda?” someone called.

Her heart leapt into her throat. Micah?

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Swallowing hard, she tried again.

“Micah ...” But his name came out as a whisper.

You can talk louder than that, she chided herself. Find your voice.

She cleared her throat then forced air through her windpipe as she said, “Here! I’m over here.”

Not as loud as she wanted but definitely louder.

But was it loud enough?

Somehow, she knew when Micah was close that everything would be okay.



Micah followed Melinda’s voice. He saw her on the ground with blood drizzling down her forehead.

Worry instantly seized his muscles as worst-case scenarios sped through his mind.

He rushed toward her and knelt on the ground, grasping her shoulders as he studied her face. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “It’s just a little scrape. I should be fine.”

“What happened?”

“I thought I heard something in the bushes. I went to check it out but got spooked and changed my mind. By then it was too late. A man lunged from the woods and grabbed me.”

Micah's worry turned to anger. His muscles hardened as he pictured everything playing out.

He glanced around. Was the guy still close? Most likely, he'd run.

He could check out the area, but he was better off staying with Melinda.

"What did he do to you?" His words came out fast and sharp as his voice hardened.

"He told me I needed to give him what was rightfully his."

That twist in the story made Micah jerk his head back in surprise. "What?"

"I have no clue what he meant." Melinda shrugged. "As far as I know, I don't have anything that belongs to anyone."

"Could he be talking about the inn?"

"I don't know how since the inn doesn't belong to me."

"Did he say how you were supposed to give it to him?" Micah asked.

Melinda shook her head. "No, he left that detail out."

His thoughts raced, but still came up with zero.

He had no idea what that guy could have been talking about.

Melinda's wobbly gaze met his. "He said I had until the end of the day to get it to him. In my state of fear, I just nodded in agreement. I didn't know what else to do." Her voice cracked.

In an instant, some of Micah's anger disappeared, replaced with concern and compassion.

He reached for Melinda and grasped the side of her head, gently running his thumb along her cheek. "We're going to figure it out. Okay? Let's just get you back to the inn right now."

"Not yet. More people need help."

"But you're bleeding."

She started to touch her forehead but stopped herself. “Do you have a tissue?”

Micah knew better than to stand here and argue with her. She had a way of being very convincing—from talking him into sneaking out at night to look for bioluminescence in the ocean to talking Mrs. Alabaster into having a Fourth of July dance for the teens in the area.

He led her back to his truck and sat her in the front seat. Then he found a first aid kit and gently dabbed her wound with some gauze until the blood was gone.

He was leaning entirely too close, he realized.

But he made no effort to back away.

He finished and put the first aid kit away. “That looks better. All cleaned up for the most part. We’ll probably need to put some Neosporin on it when we get back to the inn.”

Melinda nodded. “I meant it when I said I want to keep helping. It’s clear that some of these people need all the help they can get. I’m going to be fine. I promise.”

“It’s true. But this time, you and I are sticking together.” No way was he letting her out of his sight again. Not if he could help it.

## chapter **thirty-four**

MELINDA CONTINUALLY LIFTED prayers of thanks that Micah had found her.

In just their short time together over the past couple of days, she'd been reminded of the steady presence he'd been in her life.

He'd been her first love, and she had never forgotten about him. Sure, when she'd been married, she'd put thoughts of him aside. But he'd always hold a special place in her heart.

As they worked, she enjoyed seeing the easy relationship he had with the residents in town. Many of them were chatty and treated him as if he were their son.

Melinda noticed another theme within the people they talked to.

Residents liked to bring up the Alabasters.

Most people had only good things to say. But based on the glances several people exchanged with each other, many also knew about Mr. Alabaster's philandering ways.

As they talked to one woman—a former real estate agent—Osterman approached them. He didn't bother to hide the curiosity in his gaze as he looked back and forth between the two of them.

"I see everyone's being chatty." He said the words in such a way that made it clear he didn't approve.

"We were just talking about Mrs. Alabaster." Melinda paused from taking down a hammock. "I'm curious how the

two of you connected.”

He sneered. “I was an acquaintance of her husband’s.”

“But you’re probably thirty, thirty-five years younger than he was. How did you know each other?” Melinda continued.

“Aren’t you inquisitive?” He curled up his nose again. “As you probably know, he was an investor, and he headed up to Norfolk quite often to do some of his business. I happened to be working for one of the companies he was affiliated with. That’s how we developed our friendship.”

“Mr. Alabaster must have thought a lot of you.” Micah stared him down.

“I couldn’t tell you his thoughts. But I was fond of him. He took me under his wing and almost felt like a father to me.”

“It’s nice to have someone in your life like that,” Melinda said.

Osterman seemed to get misty-eyed a moment before straightening. “Now, I do believe we need to wrap this up. Dinner will be ready soon, and it’s time for us to take care of business back at the inn before this storm hits.”

Melinda nodded. “We’re almost finished here anyway.”

But Osterman had already turned and headed toward the inn.

There was something about that man. She wasn’t sure what it was, but she still couldn’t help but wonder if he was hiding something.



Micah stepped back inside his cottage and scrubbed his hands over his face.

What a day.

What a week, for that matter.

Between Melinda showing up here, the doll situation, Carlotta's supposed suicide, and now finding this dead man in the surf, he felt as if a whole year's worth of crime had been squeezed into only a few days.

The few days when Melinda happened to be here.

He constantly reminded himself that Melinda wouldn't stay forever. She had other dreams, and he couldn't let himself get swept away in unrealistic hopes that the two of them might have a future together.

Besides, he had so many other things he needed to focus on right now. Why did his thoughts continually stray back to her?

He knew why. It was because at one time he'd been madly in love with her. Though he'd been devastated when they broke up, his feelings had always remained.

He let out a deep breath as he collected his thoughts.

He'd been invited for dinner at the inn. In fact, anyone in town who lived in a low-lying area had been invited to take shelter there.

He planned on heading over—mostly so he could keep an eye on Melinda. The threat the man had made toward her lingered in his mind.

The guy wanted something from her—and he wanted it tonight.

Micah grimaced. He didn't like the sound of that. He would do whatever it took to protect her.

Before he left for dinner, however, he remembered what Melinda had told him about the dolls having manufacturer's information on them. He wanted to check that out. See if he could track down where the dolls originated from and go from there.

He walked back to his spare bedroom where he'd left the bags of dolls. But when he stepped inside, he froze.

The room was empty.

Empty of the bags of dolls, at least.

What sense did that make? Micah knew this was where he'd put them.

His breath caught. There was only one reasonable explanation.

Someone had broken into his house and stolen those dolls, hadn't they?

His heart pumped harder.

How would someone have gotten inside?

He'd set cameras up on the outside of his house but, just as Trent had mentioned earlier, they kept getting covered with a film of salt and sand.

He walked to the bedroom window and shoved the curtain aside. When he did, he saw that a single pane of glass had a circle cut out of it, right below the lock.

Images of what had played out filled his mind.

Someone had cut that hole in the glass, reached inside to unlock the window, and then shoved it open. Then they snuck through the window, grabbed the dolls, and escaped.

Probably all while Micah was patrolling the area earlier.

But how would this person have even known he had the dolls? Or what room he'd put them in?

He couldn't see Melinda telling anyone. She wasn't the type to randomly tell people things.

He quickly checked the rest of the house to make sure nothing else was missing.

Everything appeared untouched.

So someone *had* just broken in for those dolls.

But why would they want those dolls so badly?

Were they valuable?

Micah doubted that.

There had to be more to it.

A concerning thought struck him.

There was one thing this person might not know.

The thief might not know that Melinda still had one of those dolls.

If someone was desperate to get their hands on them ... what would they do when they found out that one was unaccounted for?

Would they come back looking for it? Or try and hunt down the person who had it?

Melinda ...

Micah needed to tell her, to make sure she was safe.

Could that doll possibly be what the man had been talking about? Did he want the doll Melinda had?

But why?

Micah only knew one thing for certain—he needed to get to Melinda.

She wasn't going to get hurt on his watch.

Only over his dead body.



# chapter **thirty-five**

MELINDA STARTLED when she heard the knock at the door.

“It’s me. Micah.”

Relief flooded her at the sound of his voice.

She rushed to the door and answered. The wind nearly blew the door open.

Micah stepped inside and closed the door quickly before the rain could dampen the floor.

Then he locked the door behind him.

Locked the door?

That was a surprise.

As soon as she saw his expression, she knew something was wrong.

What now?

Tension stretched through her chest and shoulders.

“Sorry to rush in here like this without calling first.” He stood close, his hands on his hips and an urgency in his tone. “Do you still have that doll that you took with you last night?”

She pointed to her nightstand. “I put it in the drawer. Why?”

“Can I see it?”

“Of course.” She pulled it out and handed it to him.

He took a seat at the small table in the corner and examined it a moment.

“Micah? What’s going on?” Fear made her voice sound scratchy and uncertain.

He glanced up at her, his gaze softening. “Someone broke into my house and stole all those other dolls.”

“What?” She gasped as the word left her mouth.

He nodded to confirm she’d heard him correctly. “I’m not sure what’s so special about these dolls, but someone wanted them back.”

Melinda’s thoughts raced. “Did you ever find out who the container belongs to?”

“Not yet. Deputy Kyle is looking into it for me.”

“What’s so great about these dolls?” She stared at Little Lucy, as she had named her.

Micah placed the doll on the table, and she still looked like a wreck after being tossed about in the ocean.

Melinda could relate. She’d had many similar days after her divorce.

Micah studied the doll. “I have no idea why someone would want all of them. Something is clearly going on here.”

She watched as he examined the doll.

The next instant, Micah twisted the doll’s neck with a quick jerk... beheading the toy.

Melinda held back a gasp as she wondered what he was doing.



“Micah ...”

He glanced up when he heard the fear in Melinda’s voice.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I probably should’ve given you a heads-up first.”

“Or a heads-off.”

He let out an airy laugh, thankful for some levity, however fleeting it might be. “Good one.”

Melinda kept her hand over her heart as if it were racing.

“I’m just following a hunch,” Micah explained.

He peered inside the hollow head of the doll. Just as he suspected, something was in there.

“Do you have tweezers?” He looked up at Melinda.

She rose and, a moment later, returned from the bathroom with a pair.

Micah pulled some gloves from his pockets and slipped them on. He’d already touched the doll before he thought it might be part of a criminal investigation. So his prints were all over it.

But he would take precautions now.

Using the tweezers, he reached inside the cavity of the doll’s head. Melinda stood behind him, watching his every move.

He squeezed the corner of the mystery object and then pulled it out.

He sucked in a breath when he saw what it was.

A bag full of white powder.

Heroin, most likely.

“Is that ... ?” Melinda’s voice trailed.

Their eyes met. “Drugs? Yes. Someone was using those dolls to smuggle drugs.”

Melinda dropped onto the edge of the bed and shook her head. “Why would someone do that?”

“Because most people aren’t going to get suspicious of dolls. They’re a great vessel for smuggling drugs in.”

“This must be what that guy wanted,” Melinda said. “He must have realized we still had one of the dolls, and he wants it back.”

“You’re probably right.”

Melinda shook her head as if she didn’t know what else to say.

Neither did he.

Did Mrs. Alabaster have a side business going on in the drug world? He had a hard time seeing it.

Did the other missing dolls also have drugs inside them?

So many questions rushed through his head.

Maybe the answers were getting closer ... but he didn’t like any of them.

## chapter **thirty-six**

MELINDA GLANCED AT MICAH, who still sat at the table. “Can we talk all of this through? I have so many thoughts swirling inside my head right now. I just need to bounce them off someone.”

“Of course. Go right ahead.” Micah watched her, a good listener like always.

“Okay. So this is what we know. Mrs. Alabaster planned for us here to compete for this inn—even though she didn’t really know most of us, which I find odd.”

“I find that odd also.”

“Plus, there’s the fact she died so suddenly and all the suspicions around her death ...”

“Right.”

“Almost right from the start, Tom left,” Melinda continued. “However, thirty-six hours after he left, his body was found in the ocean.” She shivered as she said the words.

“Also correct.”

“We’ve had dolls wash up on shore. Drugs were found inside one of them. Dolls that are not the same ones as those Mrs. Alabaster collected.”

“Also true.” He nodded.

“Carlotta was found dead in the woods. Her death looked like a suicide, but I have a feeling it wasn’t.” Micah had given her a brief update on that situation earlier. “So when you put all of that together, what do you have?”

“That’s a good question.” Micah shrugged. “I don’t know that answer yet.”

The wind pounded into the side of the inn again, making the whole place tremble.

“All the possible suspects are at the inn right now,” Melinda said. “They’re all getting ready to eat dinner there.”

“You want to go?” He stared at her, trying to read her expression.

Everything in her wanted to stay here with Micah. To pretend like their problems didn’t exist. To pretend as if she had her future figured out.

“I think we should,” Melinda finally said. “This may be our best opportunity to keep an eye on them.”

Micah nodded. “I agree.”

“So are you ready for this?”

Micah frowned but quickly covered it with a swipe of his hand.

Then he nodded. “I’m ready. Let’s go back ... but we’ll need to be very, very careful.”



Micah and Melinda ran through the rain to the lobby. They’d tried to use umbrellas and parkas, but they hadn’t helped much.

They’d both gotten drenched again—but neither seemed to really mind.

That was another thing Micah had always admired about Melinda—she didn’t mind getting dirty.

When they stepped inside, they found various guests as well as some locals sitting around at tables playing board games. A table with sandwiches, chips, and fruit had been set up against one wall so people could grab a bite to eat. Piano music played in the distance.

Memories flooded his mind.

This was the inn he remembered.

It had been such a happy place. Even though he hadn't stayed here as a guest, he had felt like he was part of the family. He had eaten many meals, participated in many events, and made a lot of friends.

Melinda being the one he cherished the most.

Looking at everyone now, it was hard to believe all the crime occurring around the inn.

Yet he couldn't allow himself to forget. Not if he wanted to keep people safe.

"Where should we start?" Melinda asked, glancing up at him as they stood near the door.

"We can start by talking to people. But just don't go anywhere alone. Please."

She nodded in reassurance. "I don't plan on it." Her gaze stopped on Nikki. "I saw her and Fletcher whispering something the other day. I've been thinking about it ever since then. I don't know if it's important, but I thought I'd mention it to you."

"I'll see what I can find out."

Then the two of them split up.

Micah sat at a table with Richard, who played Scrabble with Nikki and an out-of-town guest Micah hadn't met yet. "You mind if I watch?"

"Not at all," Richard murmured as he played with some of the tiles in front of him. "How is it out there?"

"It's wet, to say the least," Micah said. "The ocean is high—all the way to the dunes. The streets are flooding. It's going to be a doozy."

As if to confirm his statement, the wind slammed into the inn, rattling its shutters. Then thunder cracked.

Everyone quieted a moment to listen before resuming their normal activities.

Micah glanced at Nikki, trying to figure out how to casually broach the subject of Fletcher. “Just out of curiosity, did you know any of these guests involved in this competition before they arrived?”

Nikki continued to study her letters, unaffected by his questions. “No. Why?”

“I thought you and Fletcher might have known each other.”

She let out a chuckle. “No, we didn’t. But I’d like to know him more. We exchanged phone numbers, so I’ll see if he calls.”

Phone numbers? So maybe there hadn’t been anything nefarious about that interaction Melinda had seen.

Good to know.

The lights flickered a few times then finally went out.

Everyone went silent again.

The next second, the lights came back on.

As they did, Richard sneezed so loudly he nearly ruffled the curtains across the room.

“Excuse me,” he muttered with a sniff. “Believe it or not, I’m actually allergic to bright lights.”

“What?” Nikki narrowed her eyes. “That’s a thing?”

“It is,” Richard said. “It’s called ACHOO Syndrome. It stands for Autosomal Dominant Compelling Heliopathic Outburst. Strange, right?”

“I’d say.”

But Micah’s thoughts raced as a theory formed in his mind.

He thought it through a few more minutes before turning to Richard. “Did you ever come here as a child?”

Richard shook his head. “No, I didn’t. My mother came here a few times before I was born, though. Why do you ask?”



“Just curious.” He could be totally off base. But the theory that had formed in his mind wouldn’t leave his thoughts.

Was he reading too much into this?

He didn’t think he was.

But he needed to ask Melinda a question—in private—and it couldn’t wait.

He excused himself and walked toward Melinda, who sat at a table with Robin playing Jenga. The two laughed as the tower tumbled down.

If only he could let her enjoy this moment.

Instead, he paused in front of her. “Sorry to interrupt, but could I talk to you a minute?”

Alarm filled her gaze, but she quickly hid it and nodded.

“Of course.” She stood and glanced at Robin. “Excuse me a moment.”

Micah didn’t know if his theory was off base or even crazy. He still had a lot of things to think through here.

But the answers started with Melinda.

## chapter **thirty-seven**

MICAH PULLED Melinda down the hall and out of earshot of anyone else.

Her pulse raced. What kind of revelation had he had to cause this reaction?

He glanced around as if still unsure he should speak. Then he opened the door behind him.

The door to the owner's suite.

Was he leading her inside Mrs. Alabaster's old room for a specific reason? Or was he just desperate for privacy and this was the only place he could think of?

Her thoughts continued to rush ahead.

Micah quickly shut the door and turned toward her again.

"What's going on?" Melinda couldn't keep the question quiet any longer.

He blew out a breath before starting. "I might sound crazy."

"Try me."

His jaw tightened before he said, "You remember how people have said Mr. Alabaster used to cheat on his wife?"

"I do." She still wasn't sure where he was going with this.

"You know how Richard just sneezed because of the bright light—just like you do?"

She hadn't met other people who had that same issue before. "I did think that was weird."

“It’s not just weird. It’s hereditary.”

Her eyebrows pinched together. “What?”

“Way back when you and I were dating, I looked it up once. I was curious why bright lights made you sneeze. And one of the things I read is that the condition is hereditary.”

“Okay ... so Richard and I both inherited the trait. That *is* weird.”

“Even more so because it’s also pretty rare.” He stared at her.

Melinda knew Micah was trying to send a message. She just wasn’t sure she was ready to accept it yet. He needed to spell it out because she refused to draw the conclusion he wanted.

“Melinda ... Richard’s parents came here before he was born. Your parents came here before you were born.”

She squeezed her eyes shut as the truth pummeled her, making it unable to ignore.

Still, she remained quiet.

“Plus, there are five bank accounts Mr. Alabaster paid people from. One with your birthday as a marker and the others with the birthdays of everyone else involved in this competition. I ask Mr. Osterman for that information earlier, and he confirmed it.”

Her eyes flung open. “You think Mr. Alabaster had affairs with our mothers, and the five of us who were invited here are actually his children ... ?”

The words sound ludicrous, even to her own ears.

Micah reached for Melinda and squeezed her arm. “I know that’s a lot to consider. And I’m sorry to have to present the theory to you this way. But it makes sense, right?”

Melinda let the idea float around in her mind a moment.

*Did it make sense?*

And if it did, was that really a reality she was ready to accept?



Micah watched Melinda's expression carefully.

He hadn't wanted to share his theory. But he had to. If this was the truth, then Melinda deserved to know.

But in order to know for sure, he had to be honest with her. She was his best chance at finding out answers.

She shook her head faster and faster with every moment that passed, clearly trying to keep up with her thoughts as she processed everything. "I mean, I thought my mom might have cheated on my dad. But nothing like *that*."

"Your parents were fighting a lot. I remember that."

"I know, but ... she wouldn't ..." Her words didn't sound convincing.

"Listen, I know you might not want to think about this. But do you have any memories of your mom talking to Mr. Alabaster?"

Realization washed over her features, and he knew she did.

But she remained silent.

"Melinda?" Micah prodded.

She squeezed her eyes shut again. "There was this one time I saw my mom and Mr. Alabaster whispering about something. I just thought it was about the hotel or something trivial. But ... now that I'm replaying that scene in my head ... maybe there was more to it. Their words sounded emotional, and it was late at night."

Micah remained quiet a moment as Melinda processed that.

"I wonder if my dad finally realized the truth and if that's why they divorced." She frowned as if the thoughts physically hurt her.

He rubbed her arm again, wishing he could take away some of her pain.

Melinda let out a long breath. “Okay, just for the sake of argument, let’s say your theory is true. How does that explain everything that’s going on here? All these incidents?”

Before he could answer, the lights suddenly went out.

Melinda gasped and stepped closer to him.

Had the storm done that?

Or had it been someone who feared they were getting too close to the truth?

# chapter **thirty-eight**

MELINDA'S HEART—AND thoughts—continued to race.

Was Micah right? She couldn't think about that right now and the implications it could mean for her life.

Right now, she needed to find answers and ensure everyone here was safe.

She could hardly breathe as she stood there in the dark next to Micah.

When she looked up, she realized their faces were inches apart.

Suddenly, she was all too aware of his presence, his closeness.

“Melinda ...” His voice trailed.

She lifted her head. “Yes?”

The next instant, his lips pressed against hers.

She felt it all the way down to her toes.

She was kissing Micah.

Again.

And it felt just as natural as ever.

And it ended entirely too soon.

“I've been wanting to do that since the moment I saw you here,” he said softly.

“I've been wanting you to do that from the moment I ran into you.” She smiled, realizing that was the absolute truth.

She'd just been in denial. She'd let fear take over her life after what happened with Jim.

"We should get out there and check on everyone," Micah murmured.

"We should." She stepped back. As she did, something tumbled from the dresser. "What was that?"

"Let's see." Micah turned on the flashlight on his phone and shone it on the floor.

But they saw nothing.

"It must have gone under the dresser." He gently nudged it away from the wall.

That was when he saw a small candle that had fallen.

As he picked it up, his flashlight spotlighted something else beneath the dresser.

Melinda stepped closer. "What is that?"

He squinted. "It looks like someone wrote a name there in the dust."

"Why would they do that?" Melinda said before gasping. She grabbed Micah's arm. "Micah, this is where they found Mrs. Alabaster ..."

"Are you thinking she wrote that name before she died?"

Melinda shook her head. "I know that sounds crazy. But maybe ..."

"And if that's the case ..." Micah nodded at the name. "Is that person the killer?"



Melinda and Micah stepped back into the lobby.

No one had even seemed to notice they were gone.

*Seemed* being the key word.

She felt certain that one person in this room had been keeping an eye on them.

The killer.

Did he suspect that they figured it out?

How would Micah even handle this?

She glanced at everyone. Candles had been lit. Several people were playing cards and board games in the dim, flickering light. Some were talking.

It wasn't just the remaining competitors who were here. Osterman was here, Trent, Caleb, Nikki, as well as several guests and some townspeople. She recognized Mrs. Stafford and a couple other residents they'd helped. There was also a blonde woman whom Melinda had seen playing the piano a couple of times in the dining room.

She glanced at Robin and then Richard.

Her sister and brother?

Fletcher and Tom might also be her brothers ...

Could that be true?

The thought of it overwhelmed her.

Just then, Micah cleared his throat. "Excuse me, everyone. If I could have your attention ... I have a few questions, and they can't wait."

Melinda prayed he knew what he was doing.



## chapter **thirty-nine**

MICAH PRAYED he knew what he was doing as everyone turned toward him.

This was a risky move, but he didn't know how else to play it.

“What's going on?” Osterman asked.

“By show of hands, can everyone here tell me if your parents frequented this inn before you were born?” he started.

After a moment of hesitation, Richard raised his hand.

Micah turned toward Robin. “Not your parents?”

“I ... I don't know. They never mentioned it. Why are you asking this?”

He didn't answer.

Instead, he asked, “No one else here?”

No one raised their hands.

“Again, what's going on?” Osterman demanded.

“I believe that Mr. Alabaster fathered several children with women who stayed here between twenty and thirty-five years ago.”

Several people gasped, and murmurs rippled through the crowd.

“That's preposterous!” Osterman said. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“Don’t say it like it’s such a surprise,” Micah said. “We know you were helping him pay those mothers to stay quiet. We found the paperwork.”

“I would never!”

Caleb stepped forward. “Yes, you would. It was you who tried to keep me quiet about that, wasn’t it?”

Osterman raised his chin. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Richard stepped closer. “What are you getting at?”

“We believe the reason we were all brought here is because we’re Mr. Alabaster’s children. He wanted one of us to take over the inn and keep it in the family.” Melinda glanced at Osterman. “Isn’t that correct?”

His cheeks reddened, but he said nothing.

Robin stepped forward. “I hate to say it, but what they’re saying makes sense. My parents got divorced, and I knew my mom had cheated on my dad. I just never knew the details—never knew my dad might not actually be my dad. But that would explain why he completely cut off contact with me after the divorce. It also explains why I never looked like him.”

“I suppose it’s a possibility.” Richard frowned. “But how did you guess that?”

“Your sneeze gave it away,” Micah said before explaining the condition.

Everyone remained in stunned silence a moment.

“If what you’re saying is true, why bring it up now?” Richard asked.

“Because someone murdered Tom Gleeson. Someone in this room right now.”

Gasps raced through the space as everyone looked at each other.

And Micah waited to see how it would play out.



Melinda was less and less sure this was a good idea.

But she was trying to trust Micah here.

She knew he had a plan.

The flickering candlelight and the sound of the wind and rain hitting the inn only added to the eerie feeling of the moment.

“Who?” Osterman demanded. “Who killed him?”

“Someone who wanted to eliminate any competition so he could have the inn himself,” Micah said. “Someone who thinks he deserves it. This person had tried to run everyone off through various means and scare tactics.”

“You know who this person is?” Robin asked.

“I do. Mrs. Alabaster left a message from the beyond the grave,” Micah said.

“What kind of hocus-pocus are you talking about?” Richard sneered.

“When she had her ‘heart attack,’ she fell on the floor. Her hand must have slipped beneath the dresser where she spelled out the name of the person who did this to her.”

“What?” Osterman shook his head. “You can’t be serious.”

“As serious as a heart attack,” Micah said. “And, by the way, her heart attack was caused by poison. She was murdered by someone who was ruthless enough to kill her to get what they wanted.”

“Are you going to tell us who?” Richard demanded. “Why play this game? Why not make an arrest?”

That was because Micah didn’t have enough evidence to make an arrest. He only had a hunch.

He needed to draw this killer out.

He needed a confession.

“Oh, I will be doing just that, and this person will be going away for a long time. It was someone right in front of us all the whole time. Someone I didn’t want to believe could be guilty. But someone who had the motive, means, and opportunity. Motive: money and entitlement. Means: being here at the inn and a failed stint in law enforcement. Opportunity: they were plenty of those.”

“Who is it?” Robin rubbed her arms. “Please ... I don’t want to be stuck here with a killer.”

Just then, someone stepped forward and drew a gun from his pocket. “Enough talking! I know you know it was me. And I’m not letting you walk away from this.”

# chapter **forty**

MICAH'S PLAN HAD WORKED.

Trent stepped forward, his gun trembling in his hands.

“Now, Trent ... you didn't have to pull out a weapon.” Micah patted the air with his hands, hoping to calm him down. “We're just having a discussion.”

Thankfully, Micah had already told the sheriff what was going on. Getting here would be difficult with the storm upon them. But Sheriff Knox had promised to get up here as soon as there was a break in the weather.

“I didn't want it to come down to any of this!”

“You're the one who pulled Melinda into the woods and threatened her? Who hung the doll from her ceiling fan?”

“I just wanted to scare her!”

“I'd say you succeeded,” Melinda murmured.

“You left that fake message for Fletcher about his friend, and you lured Robin into the old spa ...” Micah laid everything out.

“You don't even know half of the story.” Trent's breathing became shallower. “I'm in some serious debt. I made some bad investments in my friend's startup company. He promised big payouts that he didn't deliver on, and now all our savings is gone. I might lose our house. My wife. I can't let that happen. Emily deserves better than that. Besides, this inn should be mine anyway. I've managed it all these years.”

“You probably do deserve it,” Micah said. “But life isn’t always fair. You should know that.”

“I’m losing everything! My job. My marriage. My money. I’m just trying to fix things.” Sweat dripped from his face.

“Why don’t you put that down and we can talk? Shooting me isn’t going to fix anything.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do anymore!”

“I was trying to figure out who would cut through the glass window at my cottage with such precision and skill,” Micah continued. “Then I remembered that you started the academy with me to become a sheriff but dropped out when you realized it didn’t pay enough. But one of the speakers during those first couple of weeks mentioned something about how a smart robber would cut the glass to open a window. I remember you commenting on that and saying in jest that since your dad was a locksmith, you had the skills to do that.”

Trent said nothing, but sweat continued to pour from him.

“Let’s talk about those dolls then,” Micah said. “You knew dolls coming in and out of this area wouldn’t raise any eyebrows since Mrs. Alabaster was always buying them. But you saw an opportunity. You knew if you could slip drugs inside, that you could really make a big profit.”

His face reddened, but he didn’t deny it.

“I think Tom saw you doing a secret deal as he was waiting for his ride to leave. When he confronted you, you got scared. Maybe hit him on the back of the head. You didn’t mean to kill him. But you did. So you waited until nighttime and dragged him to the ocean where you hoped it would look like an accident.”

“You’re right. I never meant to kill him. I just wanted him to be quiet!”

“I can verify that Trent and his wife have been having financial problems.” Osterman stepped forward. “She met me with a couple of nights ago to ask me questions. To ask me about legal options.”

“You were the ones out there on the dunes?” Melinda asked.

Osterman nodded. “I take it you were the one listening?”

“I didn’t mean to. Your voices carried. But you mentioned Tom ... you said, ‘What are we going to do about Tom?’ to be precise.”

Osterman shrugged. “I told her someone would win the inn, and Trent’s job here could be impacted. At the time, I thought Tom was the frontrunner. She wanted to talk to him, see what he was thinking.”

“But I thought she was going to leave him?” Melinda asked.

“Divorce is a confusing thing.” Osterman shrugged. “A lot of mixed emotions. That was the case here as well. She keeps changing her mind.”

“Enough of this talking!” Trent’s voice rose again as his anger grew. “I need to figure out how to fix this. How all of you can die without anyone suspecting me.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Micah told him. “You just need to give it up. I already told the sheriff. There’s no walking away from this. But if you kill us, then you will go to prison for a long, long time. Right now, you’re looking at involuntary manslaughter.”

“What about Carlotta?” Melinda’s hand flew over her mouth as if she didn’t mean to ask the question.

But it was a good one.

Trent shook his head. “I promise, I didn’t kill Carlotta. I wouldn’t do that. I just needed money.”

Was he telling the truth? And if so, what did that mean?



Trent had been working with someone, hadn’t he? Melinda realized.

It was the only thing that made sense.

But who?

The sense of foreboding haunting Melinda all evening only grew stronger.

He wasn't the type to find drug dealers and help them with their business.

No, someone else had most likely approached him with this idea.

Why hadn't they seen it earlier?

"You need to give me your gun, Trent," Micah told him, stepping closer.

Melinda prayed that wasn't a mistake.

But Trent really didn't seem like a killer.

If that was the case, who had poisoned Mrs. Alabaster?

What were they missing?

Melinda watched as Micah stepped closer and closer.

Finally, he grabbed Trent's gun and tucked it into his own waistband.

Then he pulled out his cuffs and put them on Trent's wrists as he read him his rights.

He led him to a chair and took out another set of handcuffs to keep him there.

Meanwhile, tears streamed down Trent's eyes.

"I never meant to hurt anyone!" he cried. "I promise!"

He looked honestly sorry.

Melinda wished she could feel relieved. But she didn't.

This wasn't over yet, was it?

Was Trent's partner in this room?

Just then, the lights came back on, nearly blinding her.



As she tried to hold back a sneeze, someone else in the room beat her to it.

And it wasn't Richard or Robin.

No, it had come from another direction.

# chapter **forty-one**

EVERYONE in the room turned to ... Louann.

She startled and took a step back. “What? Can you just say *gesundheit?*”

“You’re one of Mr. Alabaster’s children too,” Micah muttered.

He expected her to argue. To deny it.

Instead, Louann’s gaze darkened. “That jerk never wanted to acknowledge it. While all of the rest of you were getting money, my mom and I struggled to put food on the table.”

“Why would he deny you were his child?” Micah asked. “He acknowledged everyone else.”

“Probably because my mom wasn’t good enough for him. She had no proof. No money to get blood tests done. No money to hire a lawyer and demand anything.” Louann looked at Robin, Richard, and then Melinda. “But I can assure you of this—our father was scum. Total, complete scum.”

Considering everything that had been revealed, no one was going to argue with that right now.

“You started playing the piano here, and you began to overhear things.” Pieces of the story formed in Micah’s mind. “That’s when you put together your plan, isn’t it?”

“I tried to talk to Alice about things, but she wouldn’t listen. That’s when I had to take matters into my own hands.”

“So you poisoned her?” Melinda shook her head in disgust.

“I told her to leave Mrs. Alabaster alone!” Trent’s face nearly vibrated with emotion. “But Louann insisted that getting rid of Alice was the only way. She put those drugs in her soup.”

“Mrs. Alabaster wouldn’t listen!” Louann’s hands flew in the air as her emotions continued to rise. “I tried to talk to her. I really did!”

“I’m guessing she found out about your drug deals and wanted to fire you from playing piano here at the inn,” Micah said. “Which would have cut off your flow of information. The drug dolls were your idea, weren’t they?”

She scowled. “And it was a great plan until Nathaniel capsized. And our newest shipment fell into the ocean ... only to wash up a day later. Do you know how much money’s worth of drugs was in those dolls?”

“I’m thinking it was in the thousands,” Micah said.

“The tens of thousands.” Her nostrils flared.

“Why did you kill Carlotta?” Micah asked.

Louann must have known this was all over because she kept talking. “I caught her going through my files, trying to snoop and find out what I was up to. I told her to mind her own business. But I knew she was going to blab. If she told that boyfriend of hers, he could have started trouble. She should have just kept her nose to herself!”

“The two of you are unlikely partners.” Melinda glanced back and forth between Louann and Trent.

Trent scowled. “She overheard me and Emily arguing. She knew how serious our money problems were. That’s when she asked me to help her for a cut of the profits. I told her I would once. Then after that I was in too deep. She said if I didn’t help, she would turn me in. Then my marriage really would be over.”

“And you thought if Trent took over the inn, you could sell it and split the profits?” Micah asked.

“No, I wanted him to run the inn because it’s easier to disguise our secret meetings this way. When certain deliveries arrive, Trent has them sent to the spa. No one ever asks any questions. It was the perfect setup.”

“How did you even get involved in drugs, Louann?” Micah stared at her. “I know money is tight, but going to these extremes? It doesn’t seem like you even.”

“You do what you have to do to get by,” she growled. “I became friends with people in the wrong crowd, you’d probably say. One thing led to another ... and here I am. Playing it straight never did anyone any favors. Certainly not me.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t buy a bigger house considering all the cash you’re bringing in,” Melinda muttered.

“I’m going to. I just need more time. I didn’t want to raise suspicions, so I’m tucking it all away for now.”

Micah let out a sigh before reading Louann her rights. Caleb retrieved some zip ties to restrain Louann until backup got here.

But maybe this was finally over.

Micah could only hope so.

# chapter

## **forty-two**

TO MELINDA'S RELIEF, backup finally arrived four hours later.

Trent and Louann were taken into custody—and they immediately turned on each other.

It was clear they'd both be going away for a long time.

In the meantime, the relief was nearly palpable in the room.

This nightmare was finally over.

They were safe.

As morning broke and the storm passed, people were cleared to go back to their rooms. The inn's staff began the cleanup outside. Locals headed back to their places to check them out.

But one issue remained.

The Bungalow on Shadow Road.

Who would be the rightful owner?

Melinda stood near the window with a cup of coffee in hand and stared outside as a gorgeous sunset burst to life over the ocean.

The calm after the storm.

There was nothing like it.

Soon, she'd need to track down Fletcher and give him the update on this situation. Let him know they were probably related. There were still DNA tests that would need to be done, but the truth now seemed pretty obvious.

“Job well done,” someone said behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Osterman there. “Thank you ... I guess.”

Micah wrapped up his conversation with the sheriff and wandered toward them. He slipped an arm around her waist as if letting Melinda know he was there for her.

“I just wanted to let you know that this inn ... it’s yours,” Osterman announced.

Melinda’s eyes widened. Had she heard him correctly? “What? How? What about Robin and Richard?”

“Mrs. Alabaster made it clear the qualities she wanted in the person who took this place over. First of all, they had to love people and love this inn. Second, they had to be intelligent and courteous. I think you’ve proven to be all of those things.”

“But ...” She felt speechless, unsure how to respond.

“There are no buts.” Osterman nodded curtly. “I know with everything in me that you’re the right person for this job.”

“I’ve never run an inn ...” She glanced around, trying to picture herself doing so.

“I can help you with the legal aspect of things,” Osterman said. “And Caleb can help with the accounting. The rest is mostly hospitality. I think you’ll do a lovely job. But it’s your choice.”

Melinda glanced up at Micah, wondering what he thought about all of this.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I ... I’m speechless.” That was the truth.

Robin—who’d been grabbing some coffee across the room—joined them. “I have to say I agree—I think you’re the right person for this job. I’ve thought that from the start.”

“I also agree.” Richard appeared from the lobby. He’d clearly been close—and listening. “I wanted to win, more for

the bragging rights than anything, but I'm not sure a town this small would be a good fit for me."

"We're all in agreement." Osterman stared at her. "So what do you say?"

She thought about it a few seconds before nodding. "I say it sounds like a great opportunity."

Everyone softly applauded around her.

"That's wonderful." Osterman grinned. "I'll give you a couple of days to clear your head after everything that's happened. Then we can go over the details. How does that sound?"

"Sounds perfect."

This inn was really hers ... Melinda couldn't believe it.

Nor could she believe everything she'd gone through to get to this point. It felt as if she'd truly walked through the fire.

But she couldn't wait to see what the future held.

After everyone had cleared away a few minutes later, Micah and Melinda stepped outside.

Micah locked gazes with her. "Are you sure this is what you want? To keep the inn?"

Melinda looked at him, her heart filling with warmth. "I'm more than sure."

"But you've never thought a small town like this was the place for you." Hints of their past lingered in his words.

She shrugged. "What can I say? I've since seen the light. Maybe this is where I was supposed to be all along."

A grin spread across his face. "I am thrilled to hear you say those words."

"My dad always emphasized to me the importance of being on time ... and I have to believe that the timing of this is just what it should be. That I'm not early or late. I'm right on time."

"I like that."

“Any earlier and I may not have appreciated things as much as I do now. But I’ve walked through the valley, and now I’m ready ...”

“For the mountaintop?”

She laughed. “For life atop these dunes, at least.”

They exchanged a smile.

Her smile faded as she turned toward him. “Micah, I believe in second chances ... which is what I hope the two of us will have.”

Melinda held her breath as she waited for his reaction.

“I would love nothing more.” With those words, Micah leaned forward and kissed her.

She knew she was exactly where home should be.

Here in Carova at The Bungalow on Shadow Road.

~ ~ ~

Thank you for reading *The Bungalow on Shadow Road*. If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review!



**also by christy barritt:**

# you also might enjoy: fog lake suspense

## Edge of Peril

When evil descends like fog on a mountain community, no one feels safe. After hearing about a string of murders in a Smoky Mountain town, journalist Harper Jennings realizes a startling truth. She knows who may be responsible—the same person who tried to kill her three years ago. Now Harper must convince the cops to believe her before the killer strikes again. Sheriff Luke Wilder returned to his hometown, determined to keep the promise he made to his dying father. The sleepy tourist area with a tragic past hadn't seen a murder in decades—until now. Keeping the community safe seems impossible as darkness edges closer, threatening to consume everything in its path. As *The Watcher* grows desperate, Harper and Luke must work together in order to defeat him. But the peril around them escalates, making it clear the killer will stop at nothing to get what he wants.

## Margin of Error

Some secrets have deadly consequences. Brynlee Parker thought her biggest challenge would be hiking to Dead Man's Bluff and fulfilling her dad's last wishes. She never thought she'd witness two men being viciously murdered while on a mountainous trail. Even worse, the deadly predator is now hunting her. Boone Wilder wants nothing to do with Dead Man's Bluff, not after his wife died there. But he can't seem to mind his own business when a mysterious out-of-towner burst into his camp store in a frenzied panic. Something—or someone—deadly is out there. The killer's hunger for blood seems to be growing at a brutal pace. Can Brynlee and Boone

figure out who's behind these murders? Or will the hurts and secrets from their past not allow for even a margin of error?

### **Brink of Danger**

Ansley Wilder has always lived life on the wild side, using thrills to numb the pain from her past and escape her mistakes. But a near-death experience two years ago changed everything. When another incident nearly claims her life, she turns her thrill-seeking ways into a fight for survival. Ryan Philips left Fog Lake to chase adventure far from home. Now he's returned as the new fire chief in town, but the slower paced life he seeks is nowhere to be found. Not only is a wildfire blazing out of control, but a malicious killer known as "The Woodsman" is enacting crimes that appear accidental. Plus, there seems to be a strange connection with these incidents and his best friend's little sister, Ansley Wilder. As a killer watches their every move and the forest fire threatens to destroy their scenic town, both Ryan and Ansley hover on the brink of danger. One wrong move could send them tumbling over the edge ... permanently.

### **Line of Duty**

Jaxon Wilder didn't plan on returning home to Fog Lake, Tennessee, following his tour of duty in Iraq. But after a gut-wrenching failure during his stint in the Army, he now faces a new challenge: his family. Abby Brennan always did her best to be the good girl and to live by the rules. When a wrong decision changes her entire life, she tries to hide from the world. However, a madman known as the Executioner is determined to find her and enact his own brand of justice. When Jaxon and Abby are thrown together in the killer's crosshairs, they're forced to depend on one another to survive. Will Jaxon's sense of duty be enough to help keep Abby safe? Or will deadly secrets lead to the penalty of death?

### **Legacy of Lies**

*The justice system failed her family—and so did her hometown.* Madison Colson knows deep down that her father—a convicted serial killer—is innocent. But believing it and proving it are two entirely different things. Unable to help her

father, Madison has spent most of her adult life overcompensating by helping others. When her aunt dies unexpectedly, duty calls her back to Fog Lake, Tennessee, a beautiful but painful place she'd rather forget. Terrifying events begin to unfold once she arrives, unleashing her worst nightmares. The Good Samaritan Killer—or a copycat—is back, and now Madison Colson is his target. FBI Special Agent Shane Townsend is determined to stop the deadly rampage that has sent the tightknit community into a frenzy. But he needs to earn Madison's trust first. The task feels impossible, especially considering his father is the one who put her dad in prison. With the whole town on edge and pointing fingers, tension escalates out of control. Madison and Shane must sort the facts from the lies—and fight for a legacy of truth—before The Good Samaritan Killer has the final say.

### **Secrets of Shame**

*A killer has a promise to keep ...* Attorney Isaac Colson only wants to put his tumultuous past in Fog Lake behind him and return to his life in Memphis. But when an ominous text threatens that he must come back or there will be deadly consequences, he knows he can't take any chances. Rebecca Moreno has only ever loved one man—her high school sweetheart, Isaac Colson. But when his dad went to prison for murder, Rebecca's father forbade them from seeing each other again. Years later, Isaac is back in town and old feelings are stirring. But Rebecca is harboring a secret that could change everything. When The Good Samaritan Killer strikes again, guilt pummels her. She has to tell Isaac the truth. But as events unfold, she has more to lose than ever. Isaac and Rebecca must find answers—their lives depend on it. But everyone seems to have secrets, each that forms an obstacle to finding the truth ... and to staying alive.

### **Refuge of Redemption**

*Home is a place of refuge—unless it's a killer's playground.* For years, Bear Colson has been known as the serial killer's son. But now, someone else is behind bars for the crimes his father was accused of committing. Bear wants to believe hope for a brighter future is in sight, but he has

reason to suspect more than one killer was involved. Forensic photographer Piper Stephens' career crashed and burned when she trusted the wrong man. Now, after discovering an alarming secret about the infamous Good Samaritan Killer, she sets out to find both answers and redemption. But things go awry when her assistant becomes the next victim. As fear batters Fog Lake residents once again, Bear and Piper join forces to track down the truth. But the killer is determined to remain in the shadows—and he'll destroy anyone who stands in his way.



# about the author

*USA Today* has called Christy Barritt's books "scary, funny, passionate, and quirky."

Christy writes both mystery and romantic suspense novels that are clean with underlying messages of faith. Her books have sold more than three million copies and have won the Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Suspense and Mystery, have been twice nominated for the Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award, and have finaled for both a Carol Award and Foreword Magazine's Book of the Year.

She is married to her Prince Charming, a man who thinks she's hilarious—but only when she's not trying to be. Christy is a self-proclaimed klutz, an avid music lover who's known for spontaneously bursting into song, and a road trip aficionado.

When she's not working or spending time with her family, she enjoys singing, playing the guitar, and exploring small, unsuspecting towns where people have no idea how accident-prone she is.

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