

WIDOW'S ISLAND NOVELLA 7

BURIED BONES

MELINDA
LEIGH

**BURIED
BONES**

ALSO BY MELINDA
LEIGH

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Cross Her Heart

See Her Die

Drown Her Sorrows

Right Behind Her

Morgan Dane Novels

Say You're Sorry

Her Last Goodbye

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Twisted Truth (Rogue Justice)

The Widow's Island Novella Series

A Bone to Pick

Whisper of Bones

A Broken Bone

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BURIED BONES

MELINDA
LEIGH

 Montlake

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

1

Deputy Tessa Black rounded a bend in the trail and recoiled at a whiff of decomposition.

Hiking at her side, her teenage sister, Patience, held her nose. “Smells like something died.”

Tessa scanned the woods on either side of the path but saw nothing. “Probably an animal.”

Patience shrugged and kept walking. She was a Pacific Northwest girl and loved hiking, camping, kayaking, and almost any other outdoor activity. She’d spent enough time in the woods to have seen dead animals before.

The trail widened to a plateau, giving them a view of Widow’s Bay. They were near the top of Crone Mountain. In the rough center of Bishop State Park, the mountain’s peak was the highest point on Widow’s Island. In the open, the wind swept away the foul odor, leaving behind the smell of the sea, earth, and pine.

“This never gets old.” Tessa sighed, taking in the view. The bay was flat as a mirror, and a sailboat bobbed just off the rocky shore.

Widow’s Island sat off the coast of Washington State. Winters were temperate. Summers were bliss. The temperature rarely rose above a pleasant seventy-five degrees. At ten o’clock in the morning in mid-July, the shade of the forest was cool.

Tessa glanced at her sister. Patience was nearly two decades younger than Tessa. Technically, they were half sisters, but Tessa didn’t care for the distinction. Patience was her only sibling—and someday would be her only family.

At the rate their mother’s illness was progressing, that *someday* would be here sooner rather than later. Tessa swallowed the grief clogging her throat. Their mom rarely recognized her younger daughter. Early-onset dementia had already robbed Patience of her mother.

“Thanks for coming with me today,” Tessa said.

“This is fun.” Patience pulled her water bottle from the slot on the side of her pack. She took a long drink, not meeting Tessa’s gaze. Normally, her little sister was much chattier. Was something wrong?

Worry bubbled up inside Tessa. “Do you mind that Logan is living with us?”

Until recently, both of their lives had revolved around managing their mother and doing their best to keep her safe. Tessa’s fiancé, Logan Wilde, had moved in with them in May, pitching in with Mom’s care and allowing Patience more time to be a teenager instead of a caregiver. He regularly volunteered to hang out with Mom so Tessa could exercise and she and Patience could have some sister-bonding time. This morning, Tessa was pleased not to be winded after several hours on a fairly steep trail. Two months ago, she would have been out of breath.

“What’s not to like?” Patience shifted the day pack on her back. “He fixes everything. He’s great with Mom. Even Killer Hen likes him.”

Tessa laughed. “Why does that chicken hate me?”

“No idea, but it’s hilarious.” Patience turned away from the view, still avoiding eye contact.

“How’s school?” Tessa followed her sister back into the forest.

“Fine.”

“Is there anything you need to talk about?”

“No.” Patience walked faster.

The path narrowed, forcing them to walk single file, and Tessa let it go. All she could do was be available. She couldn’t force her sister to talk.

They were hiking little-used, rougher trails, hoping to avoid tourists. The wind shifted, and the smell of rotting flesh wafted over them again.

“Wow.” Patience coughed.

“Yeah.” Tessa stopped.

“What’re you doing?” Patience asked.

“Just curious. Wait here.”

Patience shoved her hands into the kangaroo pocket of her sweatshirt. “It’s probably a deer or something.”

With no remaining land predators, black-tailed deer had overrun Widow’s Island.

“Probably.” Tessa followed her nose off the trail. The space between Tessa’s shoulder blades itched, and the hairs on the back of her neck lifted. She knew humans were naturally repelled by the scent of death, but her experience with homicides drew her in. She stepped into the underbrush and spotted a small clearing a few yards deeper into the woods. She trudged toward it, then halted at the perimeter. The area was approximately ten feet across. Pine needles and dead leaves carpeted the ground. Weeds bloomed around a tree stump in the center. A ray of sunshine streamed through the break in the canopy and highlighted the stump.

The smell intensified as she moved closer.

Underbrush snagged her hiking pants as she moved toward the open space. The toe of her boot caught on a tree root. Tessa pitched forward, landing on her hands and knees and expelling air in an audible “Oof!”

“You okay?” Patience called out from the trail.

“Fine.” Tessa looked down at her boot and froze. She hadn’t tripped over a tree root.

A hand seemed to reach out from under a pile of dead leaves. Tessa followed the outstretched arm with her gaze. The rest of the body lay in a shallow depression. Enough time had passed that she couldn’t tell if the depression had been carved out naturally or by hand.

Not a deer.

The remains were partially buried and mostly skeletal, but enough was visible that Tessa could plainly see they were human.

Animals had been at the body, and the earth around it had been disturbed. One lower leg was missing. The remaining foot had lost some of its small bones, as had the hands. The wind shifted, intensifying the smell, though it wasn't as overwhelming as that of a body at the peak of putrefaction.

Tessa had seen—and smelled—worse. Bloated bodies, floaters, and fire victims were the hardest to endure. This body was mainly decomposed. Animals, insects, and bacteria had consumed most of the flesh. Blackened skin stretched over some of the bones.

“What is it?” Foliage rustled as Patience moved into the trees.

“Stay on the trail!” Tessa’s voice was sharper than she’d intended.

But it was too late. Patience had already followed her. “What’s wrong? Are you okay? Oh, my god.”

“Don’t look.” Tessa clambered to her feet, making sure she didn’t trample evidence but simultaneously trying to put her body between her little sister and the corpse.

“Was that a person?” Patience’s voice sounded distressed but solid. She was made of tougher stuff than Tessa had realized, which was how Patience had survived the last couple of years.

“Yes,” Tessa answered without taking her eyes off the remains. She checked her phone for reception. No bars. She retreated over her own path to minimize contamination of the scene. She steered her sister away from the remains. “It’s awful. No need for you to get a better look.”

“I’m okay,” Patience protested.

“I know, but trust me. There are things you can’t unsee, even if you want to.” Tessa linked their arms and guided her sister back to the trail. “Besides, I need to go back to the

plateau for cell service. Do you have something we can use to mark this turnoff?”

Patience swung her backpack in front of her and opened the zipper. She held out a red T-shirt. Tessa took it and knotted it around a branch. Then they walked back to the plateau. Tessa called Logan and told him about the body. “Can you get someone to babysit Mom?”

As the forest ranger in charge of Bishop State Park, Logan needed to be on site. “I’ll call my grandmother.”

Jane Sutton ran the Widow’s Island Knitting and Activist group. The organization kept Widow’s Island functioning like a slightly rusty machine. The members took turns sitting with Tessa’s mother while Tessa worked. It was as if the entire island was working hard to keep Mom at home as long as possible.

“I’ll call Henry. Could you bring him up here?” Tessa gave Logan directions to the body. “I’ll also need an evidence-collection kit.”

“I’m on it.” Logan ended the call.

Tessa opened her contacts and called Henry Powers, the only doctor on Widow’s Island. When he’d purchased his practice, he’d unknowingly also taken on the job of coroner.

“I’ll be ready when Logan gets here,” Henry said. “I’m packing my kit now.”

Tessa ended the call and turned her attention to her sister. “Are you okay?”

Patience was a little pale, but she seemed to be handling the situation okay. “Did someone get lost or hurt?”

“I don’t know, but it’s my job to find out what happened.” Tessa sat on a rock to wait. Only three deputies were stationed on the small island, and Tessa was the only one with prior experience in a big-city department.

Patience perched next to her and rested her head on Tessa’s shoulder.

Tessa put an arm around her shoulders. “I’m sorry our hike was ruined.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s your job.”

Once again, Tessa was reminded that the past few years had matured her little sister well beyond her years. But mature or not, she was still a teenager. So Tessa waited with her sister instead of returning to examine the body.

An hour later, Logan’s voice boomed through the trees. “Tessa?”

“Here.” Tessa stood.

Logan appeared on the same trail Tessa and Patience had used. Though he was no longer in the military, he had maintained his fitness, and his black hair was still shorn close to his head. He wore his forest ranger uniform, consisting of a short-sleeve shirt, cargo pants, and a sidearm. He emerged from the woods onto the plateau, with Henry right behind him. Henry carried his coroner kit, and Logan carried a bagful of evidence-collection supplies in addition to his normal day pack.

Since they were both on duty and serving in their official capacities, Logan’s greeting was a nod instead of a kiss, but his blue eyes warmed as they made contact with hers, searching to make sure she was all right.

Her heart thumped, and she marveled once again they were getting married in September—that he actually wanted to marry her—and that he’d already moved in with her and was willingly subjecting himself to the complete chaos that was her life.

How could she have gotten so lucky?

Tessa led them down the secondary trail to the spot she’d marked with the T-shirt. She turned to her sister. “Wait here, okay?”

“Why?” Patience protested. “I’m not going to throw up or anything.”

“I know.” Tessa quelled the urge to say *Because I said so*. Her sister was not a child and deserved an appropriate response. “We want to minimize impact to the scene and preserve evidence.”

“Oh.” Patience nodded, as if satisfied with the explanation. “Okay.”

Tessa started into the woods. Logan and Henry followed in her footsteps.

Tessa raised a hand and pointed to the ground. “Watch your step.”

Both men froze. Their gazes dropped.

“Oh.” Henry squatted to get a closer look at the body. He pointed to the torso. “So, was the victim buried in this gully and dug up by animals?”

Logan scanned the ground. “The grave wasn’t very deep. Maybe a few inches of dirt tossed on top.”

“Yes,” Tessa agreed. *Maybe a rushed disposal?*

Don’t get ahead of yourself.

“Are those yoga pants?” Logan asked.

“Looks like,” Tessa said.

“So potentially a female,” Henry said.

Tessa scanned the body. She couldn’t discern the original color of the long-sleeve shirt. The clothing was torn and stained with dirt, decomposition fluids, and mold. “Do you see shoes?”

Logan’s eyes roamed the small clearing. “No. How long do you think she’s been here?”

“I don’t know.” Tessa considered the condition of the remains. When she’d moved back to her island hometown a couple of years before, she hadn’t expected to investigate multiple homicides. But her experience with the Seattle PD was proving to be more useful than she’d anticipated. “My very broad guess would be a PMI of a month or so.”

The postmortem interval, or PMI, referred to the time since death.

“So she died in May or June?”

“Maybe. We’ll have to wait for the medical examiner for confirmation.” Tessa studied the surrounding area. “If the victim was a transient, we’d probably see some personal possessions. A sleeping bag or rough camp of some sort.”

“If it was a lost hiker, she’d be wearing shoes or boots. I don’t see a backpack either.” Logan squinted up at the treetops. “Also, this area has no steep grades or great heights where she could have fallen.”

Tessa sighed. “I’d been hoping for an accidental death, but that isn’t looking very likely.”

“Illness or injury is still possible. Maybe her personal possessions were stolen?” Logan asked. “Or she took her jacket and shoes off. When people get hypothermia, they sometimes feel hot and remove their clothes. We get cold nights in May and June.”

“It’s possible.” But uncertainty nagged at Tessa. “Do you think she became partially buried naturally?”

“It’s *possible*.” Doubt laced Logan’s voice. “But this ground is pretty flat. I don’t see any sign of runoff here.”

“So it’s unlikely?”

“Yes.”

“Damn.” Tessa chewed on her lip. If the body hadn’t been buried by nature, then there was only one alternative. “It’s too early to draw conclusions, but we’ll treat the death as suspicious. Let’s process the scene. I’ll start with photos.”

Logan propped a hand on his hip. “I’ll go back down the trail for the stretcher.”

“We’ll need another person to man the stretcher.”

Logan squinted at the body. “She can’t weigh much. Not now. Henry and I can probably manage it.”

“I don’t want her jostled,” Tessa said. “Most of the connective tissue appears to be broken down. It’ll be hard enough to keep the corpse from coming apart.”

“I’ll try not to think about that too much.” Logan turned away.

“Logan?”

He glanced over his shoulder.

“Could you take Patience with you?” Tessa didn’t want her sister any more exposed to the horror than she already had been. She’d held up admirably, but why inflict any additional trauma?

“Will do. I’ll get someone to pick her up at the base of the mountain and take her home.” He nodded and returned to the trail. He called for Patience, and their voices faded as they walked away.

Tessa retrieved her camera and spent the next half hour documenting the scene. With every photograph, she became more convinced the body had been dumped. No camping gear. No trash. No personal effects. No outerwear. She found nothing in the clearing except for the body. Absorbed in the process, she lost track of time as she worked.

Henry stood. “Honestly, I’m not going to be able to tell you much. It would almost be easier to look at bare bones.” He gestured to the remains. “There’s just enough skin and tissue remaining to conceal injuries. Without x-rays, it’s hard to discern damage that occurred before or after death.” The doctor studied the head. Except for random pieces of dark, dried tissue, the face was gone. But clumps of long strands of blonde hair were still attached to the skull. “I don’t see an obvious head injury.” He scanned the rest of the body. “I can’t even confirm the sex of the victim. Going by the general size, the hair, and clothing, it appears female, but I can’t be certain.”

Prior to his arrival on Widow’s, he’d had no experience as a coroner, but he’d made efforts to learn since his surprise appointment.

Henry continued. “Disturbing the clothing could damage the body. I believe the best course of action is to remove the body as is and transport it to the medical examiner on the mainland.”

“Makes sense to me.” Tessa spotted maggots on the corpse. “I already photographed the body and scene. After the remains are removed, we’ll take soil and insect samples from under and around the body.”

A forensic entomologist could study the life cycle of insects feeding on the body to further tighten the PMI.

Henry stood. “Let’s get to it. Let’s get the body bagged.” He fetched the black body bag and spread it on the ground next to the victim. “We need to distribute the weight as evenly as possible to keep what’s left of her intact.”

They shifted the body. Tessa caught a flash of tarnished metal around the corpse’s wrist. “Wait!”

Henry bent closer. “It’s a medical-alert bracelet.” He brushed dirt from its surface with a gloved finger. “Aurora Franklin. She had a nut allergy.”

They went silent for a moment. Those two tiny bits of information made their remains human in a way that wasn’t merely biological. Aurora Franklin had been as real as Tessa. She’d had hopes and fears, triumphs and regrets. She’d lived and loved.

And she’d been reduced to an empty shell of decomposing organic matter.

A raptor’s piercing cry broke the quiet. Tessa glanced up to see a hawk soar across the crystal-blue sky. Her gaze immediately dropped to the body.

Henry cleared his throat. “Her emergency contact is Tony Franklin. There’s a phone number.”

Tessa used her cell phone to snap a picture of the bracelet.

Dread gathered in the pit of her stomach. Tessa stared at the corpse. *How did you get here, Aurora?* Beyond her initial

horrifying appearance, the victim looked small and alone, with no personal items anywhere near her.

As if she had been dumped there.

Though it was up to the ME to determine the manner of death, Tessa knew in her own bones that this was a homicide.

2

Logan perched on the corner of Tessa's desk in the tiny satellite sheriff's station and squinted at the bright afternoon sun pouring through the blinds. The funeral home's hearse had transported the body to the medical examiner on the mainland. Tessa had called in Deputy Bruce Taylor to help. Tessa, Logan, and Bruce had spent hours processing the scene on Crone Mountain. They hadn't recovered much evidence, but they'd made every effort.

Tessa typed on her computer. Her uniform was dusty and rumpled from scouring the woods. A few blonde hairs had sprung free of her bun and waved around her face. But Logan was happy to note that the dark circles under her eyes had faded since he'd moved in with her and made sure she got a full night's sleep at least a few nights a week.

She offered him a protein bar.

He took it reluctantly. "I'm not hungry."

"Me either, but we need to eat," she said. "We missed lunch."

Logan could still smell the corpse and had to force down the food. It tasted like cardboard.

"Aurora Franklin was twenty years old." Tessa scrolled on her computer. She read off an address.

Logan plugged it into the map app on his cell phone. "That's on the mainland. It'll take us a couple of hours to get there."

"Her emergency contact, Tony Franklin, lives at the same address. Tony is fifty-one."

"Probably her father." Logan's chest ached at the thought of notifying the poor man of his daughter's death. "Why did she come to Widow's? Did she come alone or with someone else?"

“Hopefully Tony knows.” Tessa sipped from a stainless steel water bottle. “I’d rather not do a death notification over the phone. A deputy from the mainland would handle it, but I need to question Tony anyway. It’s Sunday. Maybe we’ll catch him at home.”

“We can make the next ferry if we hurry.”

Tessa said, “Let’s go. We’ll research on the way.”

They used her official SUV and took the ferry to the mainland. During the crossing, they remained in her vehicle and gathered more information on Aurora Franklin. Neither Aurora nor Tony Franklin had a criminal record. Aurora had attended a state college. An old Ford Escape was registered to her. Tony worked at an accounting firm and drove a Honda.

“See if you can find her social media accounts,” Tessa said.

The task took just a few minutes. Aurora had been a pretty blonde with intense blue eyes. Scrolling through her photos gave Logan a pang of grief. She’d enjoyed swimming, yoga, and Broadway musicals. Even though he’d seen her remains, he had a hard time accepting that the lively young woman was gone. He swallowed. “Most of her posts are photos. No personal drama in her feeds.”

“Maybe she didn’t have many close friends.”

He scanned her posts. “The last post I see is a selfie of her getting off the ferry on Widow’s on May twentieth, but she didn’t ever post daily. Typical timing of her posts was varied. Never more than a couple a week. Sometimes she went two or three weeks without a post.”

“But she was most likely alive on May twentieth, about seven weeks ago.”

“Yes.” Logan closed her social media accounts as the ferry docked, and Tessa drove off the boat.

At just past four o’clock, she turned onto a suburban street of small one-story homes. Kids played on front lawns and rode bikes on the sidewalk. Adults worked on yards or stood in groups, watching their kids and talking.

Logan read the addresses on the mailboxes. “That’s it. The white one.”

Tessa pulled her SUV to the curb and shifted into park. A Honda Accord sat in the driveway.

Logan took a deep breath. He’d helped Tessa with a few cases. One thing he’d learned was that death notifications were one of her hardest duties.

They got out of the vehicle and walked to the door. Tessa knocked. A stout middle-aged man opened the door. He wore jeans and a gray T-shirt. He took in Tessa’s uniform and tilted his head. “Can I help you?”

Tessa introduced herself and Logan. “Are you Tony Franklin?”

He nodded, but his expression went wary.

“May we come inside?” she asked.

He stepped back and gestured for them to enter. They stepped into a small foyer, with the kitchen at the end of a short hallway. The house smelled of disinfectant, and Logan could see a sliver of gleaming countertop. Tony led them into a living room. A basket of folded laundry sat on the coffee table, but otherwise nothing was out of place. There were no knickknacks, and photographs were limited to Aurora’s school photos, framed and hung in a neat row on the wall, grade school through high school graduation on full display. The one thing that hadn’t changed over the years was Aurora’s smile.

Tony gestured toward a worn gray sofa. The news played on a flat-screen TV. He reached for a remote and turned it off. He took a chair opposite, his mouth flattening into a grim line. “You’re here to give me bad news. The police don’t come in person unless the news is bad.” It wasn’t a question.

Tessa eased onto the sofa. Logan sat next to her.

“I’m afraid so,” Tessa began. “Aurora Franklin is your daughter?”

Tony leaned forward. Fear shone in his eyes. “Yes.”

Tessa didn't waste words. "The medical examiner has not issued an official identification, but a medical-alert bracelet with your daughter's name and your phone number was found with human remains on Widow's Island."

"No." Tony stared, openmouthed. "Aurora is working at some tourist trap. She's fine."

"Can you describe her bracelet?" Tessa asked in a gentle voice.

"Yeah. It's silver. She's scary allergic to nuts." Tony fell backward, blinking as if unable to comprehend the news. Shock wiped his features into a blank page. "I can't believe it."

"When did you see her last?" Tessa asked.

"Spring break." Tony's eyes searched Tessa's. "How did . . . it happen?"

"We don't know yet. We're investigating." Tessa didn't give him the gory details.

"Are you sure?" Tony asked. "It doesn't feel possible."

"Do you know if Aurora had current dental or medical records we could access?" Tessa asked. "Then the medical examiner can make an official identification."

Tony scrubbed a hand over his face. "I'll get you our dentist's name. She had a couple of cavities filled last summer."

"Aurora went to college?" Logan asked. "Did she come home at the end of the semester?"

"No, she didn't." Tony shook his head. "I called her in early May, and she told me she got a job on Widow's Island for the summer and was going straight there."

"Did she give you her address or say where she'd be working?" Logan asked.

Tony's sigh was heavy with regret. "No. She was still mad at me. We didn't talk long. She said she needed some space."

Tessa took out her notepad. “Do you remember the date you last spoke with her?”

“It’ll be in my call log.” Tony picked up a phone from the end table. “May fourth.” While he had the phone out, he read off the dentist’s name and number in a flat voice that made Logan’s chest ache.

Tessa made a note. “What did you and Aurora fight about?”

Tony looked away. “She’d just declared her major: acting.” He pressed his lips together. “Every nickel in my savings is earmarked for her school. I want her to get an education, but I’d also like her to be able to pay her bills. I wanted her to double major or even minor in something more practical, but she refused. She says being an actor is her dream. I said fine, but you don’t want to starve while you’re pursuing it.” His next breath trembled. “I guess it doesn’t matter now.”

“We’re sorry for your loss.” Logan noted Tony’s continued use of the present tense. How did a father accept his daughter’s death?

Tony shuddered and inhaled sharply, trying unsuccessfully to pull himself together. “Her mom died when she was thirteen. She’s been mad at the world since.” Another shaky breath escaped him. “I let a lot of things slide, but it felt like I should put my foot down this time. I didn’t tell her she couldn’t be an actor, just that she needed a backup. Maybe I should have supported her dream unconditionally, but I thought I was helping her in the long run. I’m her father, not her friend. But now, she’s gone. Our last words were angry, and there’s no chance to change that.” Regret hunched his shoulders.

“Does she have any friends who might have been in more recent contact with her?” Tessa asked in a gentle voice.

“I don’t know. Her best friend is Sky Eastbrooke. I don’t have her phone number, but her parents live on the next block. Thirty-Two Warren Avenue. She might be home for the summer.”

“Did Aurora have a boyfriend?” Logan asked.

“She didn’t mention one to me.” Tony set down his phone. His hands closed into fists on his knees, and he looked as if he was going to break down.

Logan met Tessa’s eyes. They silently agreed that Tony had had enough.

Tessa stood. “I’ll let you know when I hear from the medical examiner. Is there anyone we can call for you?”

Tony gave one curt shake of his head. He looked immobile, as if a single movement would break him. The skin of his face looked as hard as stone, and he didn’t show them out. Logan wondered what would happen after they left.

Tessa left her business card. Logan followed her outside and down the driveway. They got into the vehicle.

Tessa started the engine. “Since we’re out here, we might as well see if Sky is home.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“That would be nice.” Tessa drove to the next block. This street was just as busy as the previous one. The neighborhood had been designed cookie cutter–style. The Eastbrookes’ house was just like Mr. Franklin’s but in blue. The driveway held a minivan. A pickup truck was parked at the curb. Tessa parked behind the truck, and they climbed out of their vehicle. At the front door, Logan stood aside as Tessa knocked. The sound of footfalls approached inside. A curtain in a window shifted. A boy of about twelve peered at them.

“Mom!” he shouted over his shoulder. “There are two cops at the door!”

He turned away, and the curtain fell back into place. Heavier footsteps sounded. The curtain moved again. A woman’s face appeared for a few seconds. Had she not believed the boy?

Over the sounds of commotion in the house, Logan heard the unmistakable slide of a window being opened. He and Tessa exchanged a glance.

“I’ll check it out.” He backed away from the door just as the dead bolt snicked.

He heard the door open, and a woman’s voice said, “Can I help you?”

But Logan was rounding the corner of the house. A young woman was climbing out of a side window. She had one leg over the sill when she spotted him and muttered a curse.

He smiled but said nothing. One thing he’d learned from Tessa was that people didn’t like silence, and they often filled it.

“He deserved it,” the girl stammered, resentment narrowing her eyes. “It’s just a stupid car.”

Logan raised an eyebrow.

The girl snapped her mouth closed. She slid the rest of the way out of the window and faced him. She was somewhere around twenty years old. Denim shorts and a tank top showcased her slim body to its best advantage. She scanned his uniform, popped a hip, and crossed her arms. “You’re not a cop.”

“I am not.” Logan tapped the forest ranger badge on his sleeve.

“You’re not here to arrest me.”

“Did you kill anyone?”

“No,” the girl answered abruptly, seemingly shocked by the question. Logan wondered what she’d done that would make her automatically bolt from cops on the doorstep.

“Then I’m not here to arrest you.” Most people didn’t know that park rangers were law enforcement officers and could make arrests. “Do you want to tell me why you were running?”

“No.”

“Okay,” Logan said. “Is your name Sky Eastbrooke?”

The girl nodded.

“There’s a deputy from Widow’s Island at your front door. She would like to ask you a few questions.”

“Is *she* here to arrest me?” Sky leveled him a wary look, as if he was trying to trick her.

“I don’t think so.” Logan gestured for her to come with him.

She fell into step beside him. They rounded the corner of the house and approached the front door. Tessa stood on the step, talking to a tall thin woman in her forties.

Tessa gave Logan a look. “This is Mrs. Eastbrooke. She was just saying she didn’t know where Sky was.”

“Where did you go?” Mrs. Eastbrooke asked her daughter.

The girl just shrugged. Her mother’s head tilted with suspicion, but she didn’t ask any questions.

“Sky, this is Deputy Black,” Logan said.

Tessa faced the young woman. “I’d like to ask you some questions about Aurora Franklin.”

Sky’s body jerked. “Aurora?” Her gaze darted back and forth between Tessa and Logan. “What is this about?”

Tessa glanced up and down the busy street. “Is there somewhere we could talk?”

Mrs. Eastbrooke motioned toward the house. “Come inside. I just made a fresh pot of coffee.”

Backpacks and shoes were piled by the front door. They went into a small cluttered kitchen that smelled of roasting meat and coffee. A pie cooled on the counter, and a wide window looked over a grassy rear yard. Crayon drawings and school papers covered the refrigerator. Tessa, Logan, and Sky took seats around the table. Sky bit off a cuticle.

“Mrs. Eastbrooke, how many kids do you have?” Logan asked to give the girl a few seconds to settle in.

“Four. Sky is the oldest. Nash is twelve. My husband took the twins—they’re seven—to the zoo today. I love them, but every now and then, it’s really nice to have a quiet afternoon.”

Mrs. Eastbrooke poured four cups of coffee and handed them out before sinking into the remaining chair. “Now, you’ll tell us what this is all about before my daughter answers any questions.”

Sky straightened suddenly and stared at Logan’s forest ranger patch. “Wait. You’re from Widow’s Island. Did something happen to Aurora?”

“We found a body in the state park on Widow’s Island this morning,” Tessa began. “The body was wearing a medical-alert bracelet with Aurora Franklin’s name on it.”

Sky covered her mouth with a hand. “No.”

“You were friends?” Tessa’s voice softened.

The girl nodded.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Tessa said.

Tears slid down Sky’s cheeks. “She was my best friend.” Her mother reached across the table and gripped Sky’s hand.

“When was the last time you saw Aurora?” Tessa asked.

“Spring break.” Sky sniffed. Her mother got up, left the room, and returned a few seconds later with a box of tissues. She set it in front of her daughter.

Sky plucked a tissue from the box. “I can’t believe she’s gone.”

“Have you talked to her since spring break?” Tessa asked.

Sky blotted her eyes. “Mostly, we texted.”

Tessa pulled out her notepad and pen. “When was the last time you communicated with her?”

Sky reached around to her back pocket and withdrew a phone. She woke it and scrolled. “May tenth.” She dried her eyes again. “She started seeing some guy and stopped returning my texts. Aurora always ignored me if she had a new boyfriend.”

“Did that make you angry?” Tessa asked.

Sky lifted one bare shoulder. “I’m used to it. We’ve been best friends since kindergarten. That’s just the way she was. We didn’t fight or anything. I knew I’d get a text from her when she was done with the new guy.”

“Do you know his name?” Tessa tapped her pen on the notepad.

Sky shook her head. “No. She called him Hot Bod.” The corner of her mouth tilted up in a bittersweet smile. “Aurora always gave guys nicknames according to what she liked best about them.”

Tessa asked, “Do you know where she met him?”

“School.” Sky ripped her crumpled tissue into thin strips.

“How did you know Aurora was on Widow’s Island?” Logan asked.

“The last time we talked, back in May, she said she’d gotten a summer job there.” Sky abandoned the shredded tissue and grabbed another. Tears leaked from her eyes in slow, steady drips.

Logan pressed for more information. “Do you know where she was working?”

“It was a whale-watching tour company.” A sob slipped from Sky’s lips, and she trembled with the effort of holding them back. “I don’t know the name. She was really excited. She loves—loved—whales.” More sobs burst free.

There were only two whale-watching tours on Widow’s Island. Finding the right one wouldn’t be hard.

Mrs. Eastbrooke dragged her chair closer and put an arm around her daughter’s shoulders. When Sky leaned on her shoulder, she kissed the top of her head.

The simple acts of comfort made Logan picture Tony Franklin, all alone in his tidy house. Logan would take a cluttered, chaotic home any day. He glanced at Tessa.

Would they have kids?

They'd never talked about kids. She had so much on her plate he doubted she could spare the mental energy to think about the future. Besides, he was flexible on the issue. Kids would be great someday, but he would be perfectly happy spending the rest of his life with just Tessa.

"Do you know of anyone who would want to harm Aurora? Anyone she fought with?" Tessa asked.

Shaking her head, Sky continued to sob. They'd probably gotten all the information they were going to get from her today.

"Did Aurora give you her address on Widow's Island?" Tessa asked.

"No." Sky shook her head. "She said she'd rented a cottage."

"Call me if you think of anything." Tessa stood and set a business card on the table. "We can see ourselves out."

They left the two women crying in the kitchen.

Logan settled in the passenger seat of the SUV. "That's the worst part of your job."

Tessa sighed. "It is. Telling the family is even harder than viewing the body."

Logan reached over and gave her hand a quick squeeze. "It'll be late before we get home." He used his phone to check the ferry times. "We have time to grab a quick bite before the ferry."

Tessa drove away from the house. "I want a huge burger and a large order of fries."

"Comfort food." Logan agreed completely. Sadness still sat in his chest like a boulder.

They detoured to a drive-through, then queued up in the vehicle line for the ferry. They ate while they waited.

Logan enjoyed every bite of his greasy burger and fries. "What's the plan for tomorrow?"

Tessa checked her email. “The ME is conducting the autopsy first thing in the morning. I’m going to email him with the dentist’s contact information tonight. Hopefully, he’ll be able to issue an official ID and also give us some useful information tomorrow. Then we’ll dig into Aurora’s life. Considering the condition of the remains, there’s no guarantee the ME will be able to determine a cause or manner of death.”

“If the cause of death is undetermined, is it possible to prosecute a potential suspect?”

“Yes, but it’s harder. We’ll take this one step at a time. We need to talk to her employer and locate her temporary residence on Widow’s.”

“We also need to find the boyfriend.” Logan was new at criminal investigations, but he’d already learned that men were statistically more likely to be killed by strangers, while women were usually killed by someone they knew.

Someone had gotten close enough to Aurora to kill her.

3

Tessa turned off the beeping of her phone alarm. After rubbing her eyes, she rolled over and reached for Logan. But he wasn't in bed. He rarely slept past dawn. She tossed back the covers and got out of bed. She brushed her teeth and headed for the kitchen, where Logan stood in front of the stove.

A smile pulled at her mouth as she watched him flip pancakes. A dish towel hung over one shoulder. He'd already showered and dressed in his uniform, and he looked all sorts of fine in green cargos and a short-sleeve uniform shirt. At the table, Patience topped a short stack with syrup.

"Do you want me to pack you a lunch?" he asked Patience over his shoulder.

"Nah. Cate will feed me." Patience forked pancakes into her mouth.

She had a summer job working for Logan's sister, Cate, at Black Tail Bakery.

In the chair next to Patience, Tessa's mother sipped from a mug. As usual, her hair was a tangled mess, but she was dressed. Tessa would take wins when she could get them. Logan slid pancakes onto a plate, turned, and set it on the table in front of her mother.

Tessa's mom blinked in confusion but said, "Thank you."

Since Logan had moved in with them, Mom had seemed surprised to see him in the house every morning. Tessa had worried her mother would be upset. Dementia was a brutal disease, and Mom didn't take change well. But Tessa's fears had not been realized. Her mother's recall of the distant past was clearer than her short-term memory. Logan had been around since Tessa's childhood. His sister was Tessa's best friend. Logan was not a stranger, and Mom accepted his presence even if she didn't understand why he was there.

Logan and a change in medication for her mother had smoothed out some of the chaos in Tessa's life. Yes, her

mother was still ill. The meds made her lethargic but had reduced her nighttime wanderings and crushing anxiety. She was manageable, at least for now. Before the meds, Mom had been awake with raging panic attacks all night long.

How long would it last before Mom's disease progressed further?

Tessa brushed away the question. She was learning to live day by day—and accepting joy whenever it appeared in her life.

Or cooked pancakes in her kitchen.

Logan handed her mom the bottle of syrup. “Here you go, Bonnie.”

Her mother had developed a sweet tooth and flooded her pancakes with syrup like a five-year-old. Tessa was happy for her to enjoy whatever pleasures were still possible. She leaned on the doorjamb and let the happiness sink into her.

Patience carried her plate to the sink and nudged Logan's elbow on the way by. “Did you—” She spotted Tessa in the doorway and closed her mouth before asking her question. A strange expression crossed her face.

“Is everything all right?” Worry flooded Tessa.

Patience avoided eye contact. “Fine. I have to get ready for work.”

Tessa said, “I can drop you on my way to the station.”

“Okay.” Patience bounced past her.

“Hey.” Tessa tugged on her sister's T-shirt, slowing her down. “Did you dress Mom?”

“I put clothes out on her bed, and she put them on.” Patience shrugged. “I told her she needed to be dressed because there was a man in the house. It worked.”

“Good thinking.” Tessa laughed. “Thank you.”

Patience's glance at their mother was bittersweet. “She still doesn't remember me, but I can live with that if she's like this.”

By “like this,” Tessa knew her sister meant *peaceful*. Their mother couldn’t be cured, but her new calm was far better than having complete meltdowns every day.

“Me too,” she said.

“I don’t want to be late for work.” Patience rushed out of the room.

“We leave in thirty minutes,” Tessa called after her.

Logan said, “I was just going to come wake you.”

“I feel like she’s keeping something from me,” Tessa said.

“Like what?” Logan asked.

“I don’t know. Does she seem okay to you? She *did* see a human body yesterday.”

“She’s tougher than she looks. Like her sister.” Logan’s eyes fell on Tessa, and he smiled.

She smiled back. Gratitude filled her. “But she was acting weird before that. When I drop her off at the bakery, I’m going to ask Cate to talk to her.”

“Good idea. Now sit.” He waved the spatula toward the table. “Breakfast will be ready in a minute.” He turned back to the stove and spooned more batter into the pan.

Tessa poured herself a cup of coffee and took the chair next to her mom. “Morning, Mom.”

Her mother mumbled something around a mouthful of food.

Logan set a plate in front of Tessa.

“Thank you.” She picked up her fork. “We have to make some decisions about the wedding before your sister explodes.” She glanced at her mother, who seemed focused on her pancakes and oblivious to their conversation. “I know the wedding feels rushed, but I really want to do it quickly.” She didn’t want to say *Before Mom has to be moved into a facility*, not with her mother in the room, even if she didn’t appear to be paying attention. Tessa knew her mother would eventually need more care than could be provided in the home.

“Anything you want is fine with me,” Logan said with no hesitation.

“It’ll have to be a simple celebration.” Tessa’s mom didn’t handle crowds well. “Do you mind if we have the ceremony here? Maybe outside?” Leaving the property also distressed her mom.

Logan snorted. “Don’t take this the wrong way. I care very much about our wedding, but the details . . . not so much. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. As far as I’m concerned, we’re already living our best life just because we’re doing it together. Making our relationship legal is icing.”

The warmth that filled Tessa felt silly, but knowing he loved her unconditionally made her happy. *He* made her happy. Her face stretched into a smile she felt to her bones. “I’ll call Cate today.”

“Great. Hopefully she’ll stop asking me if we’ve picked a place every time I see her. This island is small. I see her just about every day.” He brought his own plate and coffee to the table. They ate in peace, and Tessa settled back in her chair to finish her coffee.

Mom said, “I need to fetch the eggs.” She still thrived on routine. She’d checked on her chickens every morning as long as Tessa could remember.

Tessa pushed to her feet. “I’ll go with you.”

Logan stood. “I’ve got this. Go shower.”

Tessa hesitated. He’d taken over so many of her family responsibilities that she felt guilty. “Are you sure?”

His eyes met hers, serious. “Tessa, we’re a team in every way now. This isn’t a big deal. It’s just a morning like every other one.”

But it was a very big deal to her. And one more thing for her to be grateful about.

She kissed him lightly on the mouth, then headed for the shower. By the time she was ready for work, one of the ladies

from the knitting group sat with her mother in the living room. Mrs. Harris was working on a pink-and-blue baby blanket. Tessa's mother's project was a scarf. Her concentration wasn't strong enough for complicated patterns, but the mechanics of knitting were imprinted in her muscle memory, and her fingers moved with little input from her brain.

Logan and Tessa headed out the door together. Patience rushed out behind them and climbed into the passenger seat of Tessa's official SUV.

"I have to check in at the ranger's station," Logan said. "I'll be free to help with the investigation in a couple of hours. Does that work for you?" The investigation was as much Logan's responsibility as Tessa's.

"Yes. I'll start with the warrant applications this morning."

"Don't do anything interesting without me." Logan's phone rang, and he looked at the screen. "I have to get this." He jumped into the driver's seat of his battered Range Rover, closed the door, and put the phone to his ear.

With a quick wave, Tessa climbed into her SUV and drove to the tiny town of North Sound, just a few minutes away. Tourists already crowded Black Tail Bakery. Tessa pulled around back.

Patience had the door open before the vehicle was in park. "Thanks!" She bolted for the bakery.

Shaking her head, Tessa parked and followed her sister in the back door. Patience donned an apron, washed her hands, and hurried into the front of the store to help with customers. Tessa could hear Jane's voice over those of the patrons. Cate and Logan's grandmother kept the island supplied with her famous cinnamon buns. Cate was kneading dough on a table. Despite the early hour, the former FBI agent looked relaxed and rested.

At a long worktable, Tessa and Cate's childhood friend Samantha iced cupcakes with a piping bag. She looked up from her work and smiled. "Hey, Tessa."

Sam might never fully recover from being kidnapped as a teenager and held prisoner for decades before Tessa and Cate had found and rescued her, but she looked content. Working in Cate's bakery had been exactly what she'd needed.

"Hey, Sam." Tessa greeted her with a one-arm hug.

"Morning," Cate said. "I saved you a fresh blueberry fritter."

"Thanks." Tessa helped herself to a cup of coffee and a fritter. She leaned on the counter. "Can I ask you a favor?"

"Always." Cate placed her dough in a bowl and covered it with a dish towel. She wiped her hands on her apron. "Please tell me it's about wedding details."

Tessa grinned. "Two favors, then."

Cate poured coffee into a mug and sipped. "Go."

Tessa glanced at the swinging door. "Patience has seemed a little off lately. Considering what happened yesterday, I'm worried, and she doesn't want to talk to me."

"You want me to try?" Cate set down her mug.

"Yes, please."

"Done." Cate opened the oven to check on a batch of muffins. She closed the door. "Now, when are we going to discuss wedding deets?"

"As soon as I solve this murder."

Cate rolled her eyes. "It's July, and you want to get married in September. We don't have much time here."

"I know." Tessa broke off a corner of the fritter. "We've decided to have the ceremony and reception at the house. All we need is food."

"And a tent, tables, chairs, linens, music." Cate counted the items off on her fingers. Her mouth dropped open in horror. "You don't even have invitations."

Tessa popped the piece of pastry into her mouth. Sugar exploded on her tongue. "We're keeping it small. We'll print

them ourselves and hand deliver them.”

“What are you going to wear?”

“I don’t know yet.” Tessa wrapped her fritter in a napkin.

“We will work out some of these details *this* week.” Cate’s tone brooked no argument.

“Fine.” Tessa grinned. “I have to get to work.”

Shaking her head, Cate shoved a bear claw into a white bag. “For Kurt.”

Tessa took the bag and tucked it under her arm. “Thanks. See you later.”

She hustled out to her SUV and drove to work. The sheriff’s station was claustrophobically small, and she spent as little time as possible in it. She found fellow Widow’s Island deputy Kurt Olson at the desk, typing on the computer. Gray and grizzled, Kurt was a seasoned officer.

“How was the night shift?” She handed him the white bag.

“Thanks.” Kurt opened the bag and sniffed. His face widened in a smile. “A typical exciting night. Fender bender on Orcas Road. One barking-dog complaint. No one died.”

“Always good.” Tessa poured coffee into her mug.

Kurt saved his document, stood, and stretched. “What’s happening with the investigation?”

“I have some warrant applications to fill out while I wait for the ME to finish the autopsy.” Tessa sipped her coffee.

“Call me if you need me.”

“Will do.”

Kurt left, and Tessa finished her coffee and fritter while she applied for search warrants to access Aurora’s cell phone and financial records. She was typing up her interview notes when her phone vibrated, and Henry’s number popped onto the screen.

She answered immediately. “Yes?”

“The ME started early this morning. He finished the autopsy already. I assume you want to be here when I call him?”

“You bet. I’ll be right there.” Tessa locked up the station and headed to Henry’s clinic. He’d recently expanded the small practice into a full urgent care. The receptionist was on the phone when Tessa entered. She waved her toward the door that led into the back rooms. Tessa went directly to Henry’s office. He gestured toward a chair and dialed the phone. “Dr. Green? I’m going to put you on speaker. Deputy Black is here with me.” He tapped his phone and set it on the desk.

The ME’s voice emanated from the phone as he greeted Tessa. “Getting right to it. Dental records confirm the ID of the victim as Aurora Franklin. I estimate the postmortem interval as four to eight weeks. Considering the condition of the corpse, determining cause of death is difficult. X-rays and scans of the remains showed only one notable, clear injury: a fractured hyoid bone.”

Tessa straightened. The hyoid was a U-shaped bone in the neck. A hyoid fracture occurred in approximately one-third of all deaths by strangulation. “Are there any other signs that she was strangled?”

The ME paused. “The remains are too decomposed to determine if there was bruising or other soft tissue injury. *But* the lack of other obvious injuries is information in and of itself. Because of its location, the hyoid is not commonly broken under normal circumstances. The hyoid can be broken from hanging, a fall from a great height, or some other significant trauma to the neck, like an automobile accident. None of the other recovered bones in this case are broken except the hyoid, and we recovered about eighty percent of this victim. There’s also no evidence of the use of a ligature or of hanging, so manual strangulation is the most likely cause of death, which means the manner of death is homicide.”

“Thank you, Dr. Green,” Henry said.

“I’ll be sending the remains to a forensic anthropologist for confirmation. She’ll strip the remaining flesh from the

bones to more closely examine them. It's possible she could give us more information."

"Any idea how long that might take?" Tessa asked.

"I'm waiting to hear back," the ME said. "But she's always backlogged. I'll send my preliminary report tomorrow." The final autopsy wouldn't be available for at least six weeks.

They ended the call.

Tessa stood. After thanking Henry, she left his office and called Logan to give him the results. "I'm headed to the harbor to find out which whale-watching tour company hired Aurora."

"That shouldn't take long," Logan said. "I'll meet you at your office in a few minutes."

Tessa picked him up at the station, where he'd left his vehicle. Then she drove along the edge of Widow's Bay to Harlot Harbor. She parked at the marina. Both of Widow's whale-watching tour companies had small booths at the docks in front of their boat slips.

Widow's Whale Watching was first in line. Tessa turned her face to the water and enjoyed the salty tang of the air.

At her side, Logan inhaled. "The smell of the sea never gets old."

"No, it doesn't." Tessa headed for the kiosk.

A pretty brunette of nineteen or twenty was writing on a clipboard. She looked up and smiled when they approached. "Can I help you?"

Behind her, Tessa could see a muscular man hosing down the upper deck of the boat. She gave the girl a nod. "How long have you worked here?"

"Four weeks," the girl said.

"We need to speak with your boss."

The girl turned around and shouted, "Chad!"

The man on the deck looked over. He wasn't close enough for Tessa to read his facial expression, but his posture stiffened.

He turned away and set down the hose sprayer before descending a ladder. He crossed the lower deck, gangplank, and dock. He nudged the girl. "Go finish rinsing the deck, then clean the windows."

She ambled away, checking her phone as she walked.

"I'm Chad Nickelson." Chad offered his hand.

Tessa and Logan accepted his handshake, and Tessa introduced them. "Do you own this boat?"

"I do." Chad glanced back at the vessel. "Well, me and the bank."

"Did you employ Aurora Franklin?" Tessa pulled Aurora's driver's license photo from her pocket and showed it to him.

Chad's brows dropped into a hard line. "I did." His mouth tightened. "She showed up for work for a few days, then disappeared."

"Did you think that was odd?" Tessa pocketed the photo.

Chad shrugged. "Not really. She was flaky. The days she did come to work, she was late." He rolled his eyes at his employee's retreating back. "All of these kids are a pain in my ass. They don't show up on time. Can't keep them off their phones. No attention span." He lifted a shoulder. "But I need summer help, and I can't afford to pay a lot, so what can I do?"

"Do you have Aurora's local address?" Tessa asked.

"Her application will be in the office." He turned back to the boat and yelled, "I'll be right back. Keep working."

The girl waved and picked up the hose. Tessa didn't agree with Chad's generalization about college kids, but his current employee was definitely not hustling.

“The body that was found yesterday . . .” Chad started down the dock. “That was her, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Tessa answered.

“Shit.” Chad crossed the marina parking lot to a row of touristy shops. His office was located on the second floor, above the bait-and-tackle shop. He unlocked the door and led them into a small room. A metal desk and a few filing cabinets cluttered the cramped space. Through an open door, Tessa could see a toilet and sink.

Chad stood behind the desk and fired up an ancient laptop. A few minutes later, a printer on top of a filing cabinet chugged and spit out two papers. Chad crossed the room, collected them, and handed them to Tessa. “Here’s her application.”

Tessa read the page. Aurora had listed two addresses: her permanent residence on the mainland and a local summer rental in the Seaside Cottage Resort. She scanned the rest of the application, noting Aurora had listed Sky’s mother as a reference. “What was the last day she showed up for work?”

Chad tapped on his keyboard. “May twenty-fourth. She was scheduled to work on the twenty-fifth but didn’t show.”

“Do you remember anything specific about Aurora?” Logan asked.

“She only worked for me for a short time.” Chad stared out the window. “I didn’t have the chance to get to know her very well.”

“But you didn’t think to make sure she was all right when she didn’t report to work?” Logan’s body tensed, and an undercurrent of anger seeped into his tone.

Tessa shifted closer and pressed her arm against Logan’s until he visibly relaxed. She was angry too, but she didn’t want Chad to get defensive. She wanted him to talk.

Chad took a small step backward. His gaze dropped to study his boat shoes. “I guess I should have. At the time, I thought she’d just left.” His voice lacked conviction, and he refused to make eye contact.

Tessa wondered if Chad was Hot Bod. “What *did* you do when she didn’t show up?”

Chad shifted his weight. “I hired someone else.”

“Were you angry?” Tessa pressed.

“I was annoyed.” Chad folded his arms, and his posture stiffened. “But it’s not like it was the first time it’s happened.”

“Why did you think Aurora might have stopped coming to work?” Tessa asked.

His gaze finally met Tessa’s as he said, “I have a business to run. I don’t have time to coddle lazy college kids.” For most people, lying wasn’t easy. They often avoided direct answers. Chad’s evasive answer made her wonder what he could be hiding. “I gave you her application. Is there anything else you want? I need to get back to work.”

“Of course,” Tessa said. “Just one more question. Did Aurora have any local friends? Did you see her talking to anyone?”

“Not really.” Chad scratched his chin. “But a guy showed up at the dock asking about her a few weeks ago. I don’t know who he was.”

“He didn’t give his name?” Tessa asked.

“No.” Chad shook his head. “I said I hadn’t seen her, and he left.”

“Can you describe him?” Logan asked.

“Early twenties, dark hair. Average looking.” Chad shrugged. “These college kids all look alike, and I wasn’t really paying attention.”

Tessa smelled a lie, but what was he lying about, and why? She turned toward the door. Logan didn’t budge. He was still squared off facing Chad.

“Are you married, Chad?” Logan asked.

“Divorced,” Chad said.

“Why did you break up?” Logan pressed.

“My ex is crazy.” Chad sighed.

“Crazy how?” Tessa asked.

Chad shook his head. “We were married for three years. The whole time she wanted to move to the mainland, but I couldn’t do that. My business is here. She didn’t even move after the divorce. Like I said, she’s crazy.”

“Thanks for your help, Chad.” Tessa set a business card on Chad’s desk. Then she nudged Logan until he followed her out of the office and down the steps.

“His young female employee disappears, and he doesn’t bother to check on her? What an asshole.”

“I agree. We need to find out more about Chad.”

“Let’s grab lunch first.” Logan led the way to a deli in the middle of the row of shops. Ten minutes later, they carried their takeout to the SUV.

Tessa scarfed down her turkey sandwich in a few bites, then started the engine. She called Bruce and asked him to locate Chad’s ex-wife.

After she’d finished with the call, Logan asked, “Do you think the man asking about Aurora even existed?”

“I don’t know, but I also didn’t like his answer when I pressed him on why Aurora might have quit.” Tessa drove out of the lot, heading for the Seaside Cottage Resort. “He was either holding back information or downright lying.”

4

The Seaside Cottage Resort was just down the road from the marina. Logan scanned the entrance. In his opinion, calling the small cluster of one- and two-bedroom units a *resort* was a stretch. Also, the sea was more than two blocks away. Maybe you could see the water if you stood on a roof. But despite the misleading name, the place was popular among college kids and families on a tight budget.

Tessa turned at a sign that read **SUMMER RENTALS**. The very first cottage was marked **OFFICE**. They got out of the car, and Logan took stock. Tourists crowded the grounds. About half the cottages had a vehicle parked in the assigned space. In the rear of the complex, Logan could see a pool surrounded by a fence. Kids splashed in the water while adults watched from lounge chairs. A sign with an arrow directed guests toward a path leading to the harbor.

A bell mounted on the door jingled as Tessa and Logan went inside.

The tall hairy man behind the registration desk looked up from a computer. He eyed their uniforms with a raised bushy eyebrow. “Can I help you?”

“I’m Deputy Black, and this is Ranger Wilde.” She gestured to Logan. “Are you the manager?”

“I’m Earl Byrd.” He hiked up his jeans. He carried plenty of muscle as well as a small paunch that rode above the waistband of his pants. “I own the place.”

Tessa nodded. “You rented a unit to Aurora Franklin.”

Earl tapped on his keyboard and read the screen. “Yes. She’s renting unit twenty-one for the summer.”

“When was the last time you saw Ms. Franklin?” Tessa pulled out her notepad and pen.

Earl scratched his chest. A thick mat of hair spilled through the V-neck of his T-shirt. “I don’t know. Why do you want to know?”

Tessa ignored his question. “Don’t you need to collect rent?”

Earl said, “She paid up front for the summer.”

“Is that typical?” Tessa asked.

“Yeah. We’ve been screwed too many times. Our season is limited, and we need to book our units ahead of time. We can’t afford to have them sit empty. Now, what’s this all about?” Earl demanded.

“When was the last time you saw Ms. Franklin?” Tessa enunciated each word clearly.

A bead of sweat formed on Earl’s upper lip. “I don’t know. Not recently,” he hedged. “Look, she didn’t complain about anything. No one complained about her. Therefore, no reason to talk to her.” Earl’s gaze darted warily from Tessa to Logan. “Why are you asking about her?”

Tessa didn’t hesitate. “Ms. Franklin’s body was found in Bishop State Park yesterday.”

Earl’s head jerked backward. “What?” Realization dawned in his eyes. “The one on Crone Mountain? I assumed that was a lost tourist.”

“No. It was Ms. Franklin. Please think again about the last time you saw her,” Tessa said.

“I’m sorry.” Earl threw up his hands. “I really have no idea.”

“Do you live on the premises?” Logan asked.

“Yeah.”

Logan shot him an incredulous look. “And you don’t notice when a guest who rented a unit here for the whole summer disappears?”

Earl turned up an indifferent palm. “I’m crazy busy in tourist season.”

The bell rang, and a family of five burst in. Three kids ranging in age from about seven to twelve chattered. The two youngest pushed each other. The oldest rolled her eyes. The

mother separated the squabblers and redirected them to a rack of brochures in the corner. The father walked up to the counter. He cast a concerned look at Tessa and Logan.

Earl smiled at the father and stepped sideways to address him. "Can I help you?"

"We want to rent some kayaks. Is there somewhere we can go that's safe for the kids?" He gestured toward his family, clustered around the brochure rack.

Earl pointed toward the brochures. "I'd recommend Travis's Kayak Tours. He'll send you out with a guide to make sure you stay in calm waters."

The mother plucked a leaflet from the rack. "Got it."

"Thank you." The father tapped the counter, turned, and herded his family out the door.

"Who checked Aurora in at the beginning of the summer?" Tessa pressed, getting right back to business.

Earl looked down at his computer screen. "Wanda."

"Who is Wanda?" Tessa pulled out her notepad and pen.

"Wanda Simms is my girlfriend." Earl wiped a bead of sweat from his upper lip. "She helps me run this place."

"We'd like to speak with her." Tessa made a note. "We would also like a key to Ms. Franklin's unit."

"Yeah. Sure," Earl said.

Before he could move, the bell rang again, and a young couple in their midtwenties walked in, holding hands. Earl stepped aside to assist them.

"Can you recommend a boat tour?" the woman asked.

Earl gave them directions, and they left. "See?" he said to Tessa. "It's like this all day."

"You were getting us the keys to Aurora's unit," Tessa reminded him.

"Right." He opened a drawer and fished through its contents. He pulled out a set of keys, removed one from the

ring, and handed it to Tessa.

“Also, we wanted to speak with Wanda,” Logan prompted.

Earl picked up a cell phone from the registration counter. “Let me get her.”

A couple of minutes after he’d sent a text, a small woman entered the office. About fifty years old, she was curvy but fit looking and clearly a Disney fan. She wore a vintage Mickey Mouse T-shirt. Tiny castles dangled from her earlobes, and her necklace was a silver slipper. Even her tennis shoes sported mouse-ear logos.

She eyed Logan and Tessa with confusion. “Is something wrong?”

Tessa introduced them. “We’re here to search Aurora Franklin’s unit and ask you a few questions about her.”

Wanda’s mouth opened, then closed, like she was connecting some pieces of information. “Is that who was found on the mountain?”

“Yes,” Tessa said.

Wanda propped her hands on her hips. “I didn’t have *that* on my bingo card this summer.”

“When was the last time you saw or spoke with Ms. Franklin?” Tessa asked.

Wanda looked at the ceiling, as if concentrating. “I don’t know. It’s been a while.”

Tessa raised a brow. “But you weren’t concerned?”

Wanda shrugged. “Some guests are a pain in the ass. Others keep to themselves. I don’t have time to do roll call every day. If a guest wants to keep to herself, we’re frankly pretty happy about that.”

Earl nodded at his girlfriend. “We have a few part-time employees, but Wanda and I do most of the work.”

“Do you offer maid service?” Logan asked.

“Not on a daily basis.” Earl shook his head. “Units are only cleaned between guests. We don’t do room service either.”

So they had no reason to go into Ms. Franklin’s unit at all.

“We’re going to search the cottage now.” Tessa turned toward the door. “We might have questions afterward.” Tessa took their contact information. Earl and Wanda lived together in one of the cottages.

“We’ll be around.” Wanda headed for the registration desk.

“Where is the unit?” Logan asked.

Earl picked up a folded brochure from the counter and opened it to a map of the grounds. He used a pen to circle a cottage near the pool. “This is number twenty-one.”

“Thanks.” Logan pocketed the brochure and followed Tessa out the door. They drove through the property and parked in front of number twenty-one.

Before entering, they walked the perimeter of the tiny cottage. An old Ford Escape was parked in the alley behind the unit. A bike rack was mounted on the trailer hitch.

Logan cupped his hands and looked inside the vehicle. A half dozen takeout coffee cups lay on the floor on the passenger side. “She liked coffee.”

Tessa knocked on the front door and announced “Sheriff’s department” twice before unlocking and opening the door. They stepped into a cramped space that smelled sour and musty. Logan left the door open for fresh air. Just inside the entry, a mountain bike leaned against the wall.

The cottage had three rooms: a combination kitchen and living area, a bedroom, and a bath. Tessa handed him a pair of gloves. There was no kitchen table, just a breakfast bar and two stools.

Logan stopped and stared at the small purse and cell phone on the counter. “Girls don’t go out without their purse and phone.”

“No, they don’t,” Tessa agreed. She picked up the phone. “Battery is dead.”

Logan pointed to a charger plugged into the wall on the other side of the room.

Tessa carried the phone across the kitchen and plugged it in. “It’ll need some charge before it’ll turn on.”

A few dirty dishes and empty cups sat on the coffee table, but the living room was otherwise empty.

“I’ll take the bedroom.” Tessa headed through the doorway.

Logan went into the kitchen. There was no dishwasher. The sink was empty. A few dishes dried in the drainboard. Canned soup, cereal, and some other basics occupied the cabinets. The fridge contained moldy carrots, sour oat milk, and yogurt. Nothing stood out. He dropped his gaze. Something glinted on the floor at the base of the cabinet. He crouched to get a closer look. A piece of broken glass lay on the tile. He made a mental note.

Tessa appeared in the doorway. “Everything seems very normal. She wasn’t a neat freak or a slob. I didn’t see anything out of place. No prescription medication.” Tessa glanced around. “Her suitcase is in the closet, and her cosmetic bag is in the bathroom.”

“Doesn’t look like she was planning to leave anytime soon.”

“No.” Tessa pulled a small flashlight from her pocket and shone it around the room. “I don’t see any blood or other sign of a struggle.”

Logan pointed out the broken glass. “What about this?”

“One piece of glass isn’t much of a sign of a struggle.” She produced an evidence bag, photographed the glass shard, and bagged it. “But you never know.”

Logan remembered another kitchen that had turned out to be a crime scene in a past case. “If someone killed her here,

they had plenty of time to clean up. Will you call the county forensic techs and have them bring luminol out here?"

"Not at this time," Tessa said. "The ME thinks Aurora was strangled. There might not have been any blood loss. Unfortunately, we have to keep the budget in mind and focus on more likely forms of evidence."

The primary sheriff's station was on the mainland. The Widow's Island deputies operated autonomously when possible.

"Let's see if her phone will turn on," Tessa said.

Logan picked up the phone. It blinked to life, and the lock screen appeared. "We'll need her passcode. Maybe Tony or Sky know it."

"Girls tell their friends more than their parents. I'll try Sky first." Tessa placed the call. She spoke with the girl for a minute and ended the call. "She gave me a number to try." She repeated it for Logan.

He entered it into the screen, and a selfie of Aurora on the Widow's Island ferry appeared as the background. "That's it."

Tessa sidled up next to him, and they looked at the phone together. "Check her texts."

Logan opened the app and scrolled through a week's worth of messages. "There are a few text chains labeled with women's names. In the text chain with Sky, the last time Aurora responded was on May tenth. Sky texted a few times after that, but Aurora didn't respond."

"Confirming what Sky told us," Tessa said. "Sky and Tony both said she wanted some space."

"Yes." Logan understood the need to be alone. When he'd returned to Widow's after being deployed in the Middle East, all he'd wanted was hours and hours alone in the damp, cool forest.

"We'll have to identify Aurora's other recent contacts. How about phone calls?"

“A couple with Sky.” Logan tapped the screen. “There’s the one with her dad on May fourth. Here’s a number that called Aurora numerous times. It seems like she didn’t answer.”

“Spam maybe? Plenty of people don’t answer calls if they don’t know the caller. We’ll find out who owns that number from the phone company,” Tessa said.

“The last few calls she made were to local exchanges.”

Tessa pointed to the screen. “That’s the Black Tail Bakery’s number. I don’t see any repeats.”

“She was new to the island,” Logan said. “She could have been calling around for business hours, et cetera.”

“We’ll ID all her calls for the last two weeks of activity. But it’s strange. She should have a bunch of calls and texts with the boyfriend. Do you see any pics of the boyfriend in her photos?”

Logan scrolled. “No sign of a recent boyfriend.”

“If they broke up, she might have deleted his messages and photos.” Tessa propped a hand on her hip. “I already requested warrants for her phone and financial records, but it’s been more than thirty days. It’s unlikely the cell phone provider still has them on record.”

“What now?” Logan lowered the phone.

“We start with photos, fingerprints, and evidence collection in the cottage.” Tessa turned in a circle. “Though there’s no sign of a struggle in here, we just don’t know if she was killed in here or elsewhere. For now, we’ll seal the unit as a crime scene.”

“Earl isn’t going to like that.”

“Too bad.” Tessa shrugged. “We also need background checks on Aurora’s dad and Sky, plus Chad, Earl, and Wanda.” She checked her watch. “I’ll see if Bruce will do those while we take care of securing this scene and collecting evidence.” She made a quick call to her fellow deputy. “He’ll do it. Let’s get busy.”

They spent the next two hours searching every inch of the cottage. They dusted high-touch surfaces for fingerprints, photographed every room, and delved into Aurora's personal possessions. Tessa rifled through Aurora's clothes in the dresser while Logan checked the pockets of her clothes in the closet. In the end, they hadn't collected as much evidence as they would have liked. They took her phone and laptop. Tessa called Sky and Tony, but neither of them knew the password for the computer.

Tessa filled out an evidence label. "I'll have to send this to the geeks in the forensic lab on the mainland."

Logan bagged Aurora's purse.

Tessa's phone vibrated. "It's Bruce." She answered the call. "You're on speaker. Logan is here with me."

Bruce said, "I'm headed out on patrol, but I wanted to give you this info first. Aurora Franklin's phone and bank records are in. Chad Nickelson used to be married to Cyndi Nickelson. I texted you her driver's license photo and contact information. Also, I finished those background checks. Tony Franklin and Sky Eastbrooke are clean. So are Wanda Simms and Chad Nickelson."

Logan could hear the *but* in Bruce's voice.

"Chad has a restraining order filed by his ex-wife, Cyndi. He got drunk and threatened her." Bruce sounded excited.

"Sounds like Chad has a temper." Logan tamped down a burst of anger. He hated men who harassed and intimidated women.

"What about Earl?" Tessa asked.

"You need to talk with him again too." Bruce snorted. "Earl is a registered sex offender."

Sitting behind the steering wheel, Tessa turned to her dashboard computer to open the email Bruce had sent detailing Earl's criminal history. She scrolled through the information. "Earl has lived on Widow's for six years. Eleven years ago, he was living in western Washington State, where he was convicted of rape. He served three years in prison before he was paroled. It looks like he moved here after his parole period ended."

"Lucky us," Logan said from the passenger seat.

"The sheriff's department would have been notified, but that was before my time." Tessa checked his motor vehicle records. No tickets. Earl's address matched the one he'd given them. A white F-150 was registered to him. "It seems like he's stayed out of legal trouble since then. Let's go talk to him again." Tessa drove back to the office of the Seaside Cottage Resort. "Bruce is requesting more information from the investigating officer."

Tessa led the way inside. Earl was alone, bent over the computer behind the registration desk. He looked up and scanned their faces. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

Tessa strolled to the counter. "Hey, Earl."

Logan stepped up next to Tessa. His posture was rigid, and his anger palpable.

Earl's gaze paused on Logan. Earl straightened, swallowed, and took a step backward, the retreat seeming unconscious. "What?"

Tessa tapped a hand on the counter. "So we know about the rape conviction."

Earl flushed. "That was bullshit. I didn't rape anyone." But despite his denial, his hands were shaking. He shoved them into his pockets.

"How so?" Tessa asked, trying to keep her voice neutral. As much as sex offenders disgusted her, she wanted him to

talk. If he grew uncooperative, she'd take him to the station for formal questioning. But she'd found people were more forthcoming with information in their own space, where they felt more comfortable. She could always increase the pressure, but once it was applied, it would be nearly impossible to make Earl relax again. The last thing she wanted was for him to lawyer up.

Earl lifted his chin, and his jaw jutted. "I went out on a date. We had a great time, but we both drank too much. We went back to her place, and I spent the night. I woke up the next morning to her screaming that I raped her, that she didn't give consent, which was a total lie. She wasn't unconscious, and she acted willing enough. How was I supposed to know she wouldn't remember being horny? Hell, I was hammered too. I don't remember the whole night either."

"But you were convicted," Tessa pointed out.

"She was real convincing." Earl's voice turned bitter.

"And you went to prison." Tessa nodded. She doubted his innocence, but her opinion was irrelevant. Her current goal was to find out who had killed Aurora Franklin. If sounding as if she commiserated with Earl would make him more talkative, then so be it.

Earl didn't respond. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, as if agitated.

"You seem angry." Logan's voice sounded tight but controlled.

"Of course I'm angry," Earl snapped. "That bitch put me away because she was ashamed she'd slept with me. She ruined my life, and I didn't do a damned thing wrong."

His inflection of the word *bitch* caught Tessa's attention.

"Do you hate women, Earl?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?" Earl fired back. "Why would I hate all women? That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. If you get mad at one guy because he was a dick, do you hate all men?"

Tessa shrugged. “Some women do.”

“Well, I have a current girlfriend, so clearly I don’t,” Earl huffed. “But I do hold a grudge against the one who put me in prison for no reason. Why am I to blame for us having sex when we were both drunk? Why doesn’t she get any of the responsibility? The whole thing was bullshit.”

“Did your case go to trial?” Tessa asked.

“No,” Earl grumbled. “My lawyer told me I’d get ten years if I went to trial, so I copped a plea. The system is fucked.”

Tessa would research his case. Until then, she would move on. “When was the last time you were in unit twenty-one?”

“I don’t remember exactly,” Earl said.

“Have you been in the cottage since Aurora moved into it?” Tessa asked.

“I don’t think so.” Earl bent over the computer and typed on the keyboard. A few seconds later, he said, “I did some routine maintenance on the unit in the beginning of May, before the girl rented it.”

“What kind of maintenance?” Tessa asked.

Earl’s attention returned to the computer. “I have a checklist for each season. I change the filters on the furnaces, check for plumbing leaks, caulk around windows and doors as needed, clean the refrigerator coils and dryer vents—that kind of thing. Letting maintenance slide can cost a lot of money down the road. Learned that the hard way.”

So he’d basically touched everything.

“Call me if you think of anything.” Tessa handed Earl her business card. “In the meantime, I’ve sealed the unit as a crime scene.”

“You can’t do that!” Earl protested. “I was going to rent that unit out.”

Tessa leveled Earl with a look. “It shouldn’t be for long. Besides, Aurora paid for the season, right?”

He broke eye contact and tugged at his shirt collar. “Yeah. Okay. Fine.”

“Don’t go near the cottage.” Tessa turned to the door. “We’ll be back.”

They went outside and climbed into the SUV.

“Do you believe his sob story?” Logan asked, his voice heavy with doubt.

Tessa started the engine. “Criminals all claim to be innocent.” She sighed. “But who knows? Anyway, he’s been all over that unit. So if we find his fingerprints inside, it won’t mean anything.”

“Yep.” Logan shook his head. “Now what?”

“We still need to identify Aurora’s boyfriend.” Tessa drove out of the parking lot. “Let’s stop at the station and check out her financial and phone records. Credit and debit card statements can give us tons of information on Aurora’s movements and habits.” She tapped on the steering wheel.

“And we need to talk to Chad Nickelson’s ex,” Logan added.

“Definitely,” Tessa said. “Pissed-off ex-wives can be great sources of information.”

But they didn’t get a half mile down the road before Tessa’s radio crackled. The dispatcher’s voice sounded. “Disturbance at Harlot Harbor Marina.”

Tessa grabbed the mic. “Unit two, responding. ETA two minutes.” She returned the mic to its holder, switched on the light bar, and gunned the engine.

She stomped the brakes in the parking lot. She and Logan jumped from the vehicle and headed for a commotion in front of the whale-watching tour company’s kiosk, fifty yards away.

“You’re scum!” a redheaded woman screamed at Chad. She grabbed a stapler off the counter and hurled it at him.

Chad ducked, yelling, “You’re fucking nuts!”

Tessa recognized the woman from her driver’s license photo as the ex-wife, Cyndi. She and Logan broke into a run. Domestic disputes were some of the most dangerous situations for law enforcement. They could go south—and violent—in a heartbeat.

“Why, Chad?” Cyndi cried. “Why did you sleep with her? You didn’t humiliate me enough while we were married?” She was a slim woman of about thirty-five. Physically, she was no match for Chad. But her face was red with rage, and a vein in the side of her neck stood out like decorative cording on a cushion. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and her nose was red.

Tessa cranked up the speed. Just twenty more yards.

“What do you care?” Chad shouted back. “We’re not married anymore. I can sleep with anybody I want.”

“Because she’s my niece, you asshole!” She grabbed a broom leaning against the counter and swung it at him. “She’s just a kid.”

“She’s twenty.” Chad blocked the blow, yanked the broom out of her hands, and grabbed his ex around the throat. He slammed her against the side of the booth. “You want to get physical?”

Fear widened Cyndi’s eyes. “I hate you.”

Chad’s voice dropped. “I told you to never come here. This is my place of business. You’re embarrassing me.”

“Like you humiliated me by sleeping with my niece?” Cyndi croaked.

Tessa sprinted for the pair, but Logan bolted past her. She’d been exercising regularly, but Logan was still military fit. He spent most of his days hiking in the forest.

Chad spied Logan barreling at him. He released his ex, backing up as Logan stopped in front of Cyndi. He faced Chad. A six-foot-two former army ranger, Logan commanded

the situation. Though he was only a few inches taller than Chad, he seemed larger. Chad clearly knew he was no match.

Chad took another step backward and raised his hands. “I was just defending myself. You saw her swinging at me.”

Logan said nothing.

Tessa slid to a stop, breathing hard, and approached the woman. “You’re Chad’s ex?”

The redhead nodded, rubbing her throat.

Tessa herded her aside. She wanted Chad and Cyndi out of arm’s reach of each other. “You want to tell me what’s going on here?”

But Cyndi never took her eyes off Chad. “I told my sister not to let Molly work for him, but Chad can be charming when he wants to be. Now he’s sleeping with her.” Cyndi swiped angry tears from her cheeks. “He’s known her since she was a child. Who does that?”

“Your niece is twenty?” Tessa asked.

“Yes. I know she’s legal, but still . . . it’s just wrong.”

Tessa didn’t disagree, but she couldn’t enforce morality—only the law.

Rage boiled in Cyndi’s eyes. “Chad was always a cheater. He never hires ugly college girls.” Something flashed across her face. She backed up two steps and reached into her purse.

Tessa’s instincts screamed. Her heart rate spiked, and she reached for her weapon. “Cyndi, let me see your hands!”

But Cyndi didn’t respond. It was as if she saw no one but Chad. Her attention was still 100 percent focused on her ex-husband. “I loved you.” She whipped a handgun from the purse, aimed it at Chad, and pulled the trigger.

6

“Get down!” Logan rushed Chad as the gun went off. The bullet went wide and pinged off a rock fifteen feet away. He tackled Chad and took him to the ground. Logan heard screaming, and in his peripheral vision, he saw people scattering. Adrenaline hit his bloodstream like a freight train, his heart slammed against his ribs, and the echo of his pulse in his ears drowned out the noise around him.

Scrambling into a crouch, he shoved Chad toward the booth. On hands and knees, they crawled behind the small building. Logan pressed his back to the wood and pulled his sidearm. He drew in a long breath and held it for a few seconds to ward off the tunnel vision that he knew could occur in high-stress situations. Exhaling slowly, he peered around the side. Cyndi held her gun in both hands. Standing between Logan and Cyndi, a female tourist froze. Her eyes were wide open with terror, and a seemingly endless scream erupted from her mouth.

Logan looked beyond her to Cyndi. He could see her body trembling from twenty-five feet away. By her stance, he could also tell she wasn't familiar with guns. She didn't even know how to properly hold the weapon. Logan lowered his weapon. He couldn't shoot around the screaming tourist.

Cyndi pointed her gun in the general direction of the booth, closed her eyes, and pulled the trigger again.

Logan retreated behind the booth, but he heard the bullet strike a boat about ten feet away. Cyndi was barely aiming. She was going to hit some poor bystander like that tourist. He scanned the area. Thankfully, he saw no one else. People seemed to have scattered. He glanced around the booth again and shouted “Get down!” at the tourist.

Where is Tessa?

He spotted her picking herself up off the ground about fifteen feet away from Cyndi. She was holding her mic and talking into it, no doubt requesting backup from Bruce. Seeing

Tessa out of the line of fire, Logan breathed easier—until another bullet pinged into the ground about eight feet from him. The shots were getting closer.

Logan lunged to his feet. Crouching, he ran at the tourist. After grabbing the woman around the waist, he pulled her behind the booth. “Stay down.” But she clung to him as if he were a life preserver. Her entire body vibrated with terror.

Tessa shouted at Cyndi, “Drop the weapon! Now!”

Tessa wouldn’t want to shoot the woman, but she would do it to protect innocent people at the dock.

Cyndi’s hands shook, and it didn’t appear as if she’d registered Tessa’s words. Cyndi screamed, “Now, I hate you!” in Chad’s direction.

“I told you she was fucking crazy.” Chad cringed, covering his head with his hands.

“Shut up,” Logan said without taking his eyes off the shooter. The tourist had stopped screaming and begun sobbing.

“Cyndi!” Tessa yelled. “Drop the gun! Do it now! Or I *will* shoot you.”

That got Cyndi’s attention. She blinked, as if just realizing what was happening. Her gaze shifted from the booth to Tessa. Logan tensed. For one breath, he thought she might swing the weapon around. But instead, she burst into sobs, her shoulders heaving. She lowered the gun, her body shook harder, and the weapon clattered to the pavement.

“Drop the purse. Extend your hands out to the sides.” Tessa rushed in and kicked the gun a few feet away.

Cyndi let her purse fall to the ground. Then she raised her hands on either side of her body, forming the shape of a T.

Tessa spun her around and cuffed her hands behind her back. “You’re under arrest.” She patted down her pockets and moved the purse a few feet away. Then she picked up the gun and unloaded it.

Logan stepped out from behind the booth. Chad followed him. A man ran from a shop and took the tourist in his arms.

“Shhh. It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Bruce’s voice sounded from Tessa’s radio. She tapped the mic and gave him a quick update. “The shooter has been apprehended. But I could use help at the scene and with witness statements.”

“On my way,” Bruce said. “ETA five minutes.”

Tessa pointed at Chad. “I’ll need you to give a statement at the sheriff’s station.”

“Sure.” Chad wiped his palms on his thighs. His face was dead white. Logan should have felt bad for him, but he didn’t.

“Did you really fool around with your wife’s niece?” Logan asked him.

Chad flushed, two bright spots of color popping onto his pasty face. He studied his boat shoes. “Yeah.”

Disgust filled Logan.

Tessa turned to Logan. “Would you search him for weapons?”

Logan nodded and moved in. He patted Chad’s pockets and found nothing but a wallet. “You want me to cuff him?”

“Hey, I didn’t do anything!” Chad protested.

“No,” Tessa said, her voice heavy with regret. “But keep an eye on him.”

“Of course.” Logan knew Chad had been defending himself, but he still wanted to arrest him. If only being a dick were a crime . . .

Chad crossed his arms and leaned on his booth, his face set in an angry scowl. “I want to press charges.”

“I’ll take your statement in a minute.” Tessa marched Cyndi to the SUV and locked her in the back. The fight had gone out of Chad’s ex. She slumped in the seat, looking defeated.

Bruce arrived and began taking witness statements. Logan herded Chad behind Tessa’s SUV. Tessa joined them, then

removed her notepad from her pocket. “Okay, Chad. When did Cyndi arrive?”

“About five minutes before you.” Chad crossed his arms and spread his feet in a defiant stance. “She was already losing her damned mind.”

“Because you slept with her niece?” Logan asked.

Chad shrugged. “She’s an adult.”

Logan wanted to punch him.

Tessa gave Logan a look. “How many of your female employees have you had sexual relations with, Chad?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Chad evaded. “A few.”

Tessa stepped closer, getting in Chad’s face. “Did you make advances on Aurora?”

“No.” Chad’s eyes flickered left.

Liar.

“She was pretty,” Tessa said.

Chad shrugged. “She only worked for me for a couple of days.”

“Right,” Logan said. “She came all the way to Widow’s Island and rented a cottage for the whole summer to work for you. Then she just disappeared, and you didn’t even think to check on her?”

“It’s not my job to play babysitter.” Chad sniffed.

“It’s called being a decent human being,” Logan said. “You should try it sometime.”

Chad flushed but said nothing.

“Is it possible you hit on her, and she turned you down?” Tessa asked. “Maybe you didn’t like that.”

“No!” Chad spat. “That’s not what happened.”

But Logan could see it all too clearly. “You have a nasty temper, Chad. Does it make you mad when women say no? Is

that why you killed her? Maybe you didn't even mean to kill her. You just lost it."

Chad straightened. "Hold on. Fuck. I didn't kill anyone. I like younger women. That's not a crime." He blew out a breath. "But I would never kill anyone."

"You grabbed Cyndi by the throat," Logan pointed out.

Chad met their gazes one at a time. "She was hitting me with a broomstick. What was I supposed to do? Let her? She's nuts. She shot at me in public. You saw it all."

Tessa leaned closer. "Did I mention that Aurora was strangled?"

Chad's face went whiter. He opened his mouth, then closed it with a resolute snap of his jaw. "I'm not answering any more questions about Aurora without a lawyer. Are you going to take my statement so I can press charges against Cyndi? It's my turn to file a restraining order." His face turned smug.

Tessa lifted her pen over her notepad. "Tell me what happened today."

Chad's statement matched what Logan and Tessa had witnessed when they'd arrived on scene. Tessa took notes, then shoved her notepad back into her pocket. "I'll type this up. Stop by the station tomorrow to sign the official statement."

Chad gave her a curt nod and walked away.

"Do you think he killed Aurora?" Logan asked Tessa.

"I don't know," Tessa said. "We don't have enough evidence to think anything, but he's at the top of my list. He has a history of making sexual advances on the girls who work for him. He has a temper, and we saw him grab his ex by the throat."

Tessa and Logan climbed into the SUV, and she drove to the station, where she cuffed Cyndi to the chair next to the desk. Logan didn't think she was still a threat, but then again,

he hadn't expected her to pull a gun and start shooting at Chad either.

He leaned against the wall and watched as Tessa bagged the gun as evidence and locked it in the cabinet. Then she went through the purse and lined up its contents on the desk. A wallet, makeup, sanitary supplies. Nothing out of the ordinary. No more weapons. She set the purse aside and stared at Cyndi. She recited her Miranda rights, then began the interrogation with collecting Cyndi's personal information. The woman responded in a flat, dead voice.

Then Tessa got down to business. "Why did you bring a loaded weapon to the marina today?"

Cyndi sniffed. A tear rolled down her cheek as she repeated her accusation. "When we were married, he cheated with the girls he hired. But I never thought he'd stoop low enough to sleep with my sister's kid."

Logan pictured Chad's fingers around Cyndi's throat. "Did Chad ever try to choke you before?"

Cyndi glanced up at him and shook her head. "No."

"Did he physically abuse you when you were married?" Tessa asked.

"No," Cyndi said. "He never hit me, but there were a few times I thought he was going to. He yelled a lot."

Logan wondered which of them had the shortest fuse: Cyndi or Chad?

Tessa pulled out a photo of Aurora and showed it to Cyndi. "Do you know her?"

Cyndi shook her head. "No."

"She worked for Chad." Tessa watched Cyndi's face. "Now she's dead."

Cyndi's head snapped up. "What?"

The surprise on her face seemed genuine.

"She was murdered," Tessa said.

Cyndi's mouth gaped. She seemed at a loss for words.

"Did you kill her?" Tessa asked.

"God. No. I would never . . ." She stopped, as if realizing that she had indeed taken a loaded weapon to the marina to shoot her ex. "I've never seen her before." Cyndi glanced at the photo. "She's about the same age as my niece."

"Do you have a permit to carry a gun?" Tessa sat down and tapped the keyboard to wake her computer.

Cyndi shook her head.

Tessa typed, then paused. "Where did you get it?"

Cyndi studied her shoes. "I took it from my parents' house this morning. I don't know why." She paused, her head tilting. "I've never been that angry in my life. All the cheating was one thing, but using my niece like that." She inhaled a shaky breath. "She's the closest thing I have to a daughter."

Tessa lowered her voice. "Did you want to kill Chad?"

"I don't know what I wanted to do." Cyndi looked confused. "I couldn't think at all. I don't even remember driving to the harbor."

Tessa leaned back. Then she picked up the phone, called the sheriff's office on the mainland, and requested transport.

Logan asked Cyndi, "How often do you see Chad?"

"I avoid him as much as possible." Cyndi's tone went bitter.

"He said you wanted him to leave Widow's Island," Logan said.

"Yeah. I thought if I could get him away from all the girls, we could save our marriage. But that was just dumb." Cyndi blinked away a tear. "I'm sure he would have cheated on the mainland too."

Logan agreed but kept that to himself. "Now that you're divorced, why haven't you moved away?"

“I’m trying.” Cyndi blew a hair off her face. “I want to go to Seattle, but I haven’t found a job that pays enough. It’s really expensive there.”

Logan couldn’t argue. “Maybe you should try somewhere else. It might be healthier for you to live far away from Chad.”

“Maybe I will.” Cyndi raised her chin and turned to Tessa. “Am I going to jail?”

“That will be up to the judge,” Tessa said.

“I wasn’t thinking straight today,” Cyndi said.

Of that, Logan had no doubt. “You could have killed Deputy Black, me, or Chad today, not to mention all the other innocent people at the marina.”

“I’ve called for a deputy from the mainland,” Tessa said. “You will be transported to the jail, processed, and charged with illegally possessing a firearm, brandishing a firearm in public, firing a gun at your ex-husband, attempted murder, and reckless endangerment. It will be up to the prosecutor to decide which of those charges ultimately stick.”

“Oh, my god. I’m going to jail. I need a lawyer,” Cyndi sputtered, panic lacing her voice, as if the reality of her situation was just now beginning to seep in. She went quiet, staring at the wall while they waited.

Tessa typed reports. It was nearly dinnertime before the deputy from the mainland arrived to transport Cyndi to jail. Logan watched the woman being led away. “Do you think she’s strong enough to have manually strangled a young, healthy woman?”

“Maybe,” Tessa said. “We know she’s jealous, impulsive, and violent, but carrying a dead body to the dump site on Crone Mountain took some strength.”

“I can’t see Cyndi managing that on her own. A dead body is heavy.”

Tessa lifted a shoulder. “What if she killed Aurora in a rage like the one she exhibited today? She was out of her

mind. Then she could have asked someone to help her dispose of the body.”

Logan couldn't argue with that. “It's possible.”

“*Or* she could have killed Aurora on the mountain. Maybe met her there or forced her to walk there. She did have a gun.”

“This is true. We need more information.” Logan checked his watch. “It's almost dinnertime.”

“I know.” Tessa frowned.

Logan knew she struggled with balancing her family responsibilities and her job. “I know you hate walking away from the case, but it will still be here tomorrow.”

“You're right.”

The door opened, and a young blond man stepped inside. At six-two, Logan was tall, but this guy stood nearly a head above him. He had to duck coming through the doorway.

“Can I help you?” Tessa asked.

“My name is Dean Stewart,” the young man said. “I used to go out with Aurora Franklin.”

Tessa assessed the young man. He was about twenty, very tall and lean, with the lanky build of an athlete. He dressed like he'd grown up with money, in khaki slacks and a salmon-colored polo shirt with a little whale logo on the chest. She could picture him on a yacht or playing tennis and golf at a country club. Dean's blue eyes were red rimmed and swollen, as if he'd been crying. His shoulders slumped, and he looked generally miserable.

Pity gathered in Tessa's chest. "Sit down." She gestured toward the chair next to her desk.

Dean eased into the chair as if his bones hurt. Then he burst into tears and covered his face with his hands.

Logan went to the sink and filled a cup with water. He thrust it into Dean's hands with a sympathetic "Here."

Dean straightened, swiped his sleeve across his face, and accepted the cup. He whispered "Thanks" in a rough voice.

Tessa let him calm down for a few minutes. "I assume you know about Aurora?"

"I just heard about it in the coffee shop in town." Dean drew in a shaky breath. For a few seconds, he looked like he was going to break down again. But he pulled himself together. "I can't believe she's dead."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Tessa said. "What brought you to Widow's Island?"

"I came to Widow's to talk to Aurora. We had a fight." His shoulders lifted and dropped with a huge breath. "Right before she left for the island." He paused to study his thumbnail. "She wouldn't return my texts or calls. I figured if I showed up, she couldn't avoid me."

"What did you fight about?" Tessa asked.

"I was too pushy," Dean said. "She kept saying she preferred to take things slow, but I didn't listen." He paused.

Tessa wondered if he recognized the irony of stalking a girl with whom he'd been too aggressive, but she kept quiet and waited out the beats of silence.

Dean picked at a fingernail. "I called her too much and wanted to see her too often. She said she needed some space." A tear leaked from his eyes. He blinked it away. "I gave her a week; then I called her. She didn't answer. I figured she wasn't ready to talk to me yet. But when I tried again last week, and I still didn't get an answer, I got worried and decided to take the ferry over and make sure she was okay." He sobbed, then covered his mouth with a fist. Dropping his hand into his lap, he said, "I guess my instincts were right. She wasn't okay."

"How did you meet Aurora?" Tessa asked.

"We were in the same acting class," Dean said.

"What's your major?" Tessa wanted him to relax just a little. The kid was wound tight.

He held his drink in both hands. "I'm prelaw."

"But you took an acting class?" Tessa retook her seat behind the desk.

He drank some water. "It met a gen ed requirement. Plus, I thought it might be useful if I decide to go into trial law." He made a face. "My father is a corporate attorney, but courtroom law sounds more interesting to me."

"Do you play sports at school?" Tessa asked.

He set down the cup on the corner of her desk. "I'm on the tennis and rowing teams."

Of course you are.

"What about Aurora?"

"She didn't play sports." His expression turned pained. "She was a theater geek." He used the word *geek* affectionately. His mouth turned up at the corner in a bittersweet half smile, as if he had found that part of her amusing.

Tessa continued. “Do you know anyone who wanted to hurt Aurora? Anyone she’d fought with recently?”

“Besides me?” Dean’s snort was sad rather than defensive. “No. I can’t believe I’ll never see her again.”

Logan jumped in with a question, no doubt hoping to derail another breakdown. “How long did you date her?”

“About a month.” He sniffed, a wet, raw sound. “I know that’s not much time, but I never felt that way about a girl before. She was special.”

“Let me make sure I have this straight,” Logan said. “You dated Aurora for a month. She broke up with you and refused to return your calls. So you came to Widow’s Island to speak to her in person.”

Dean nodded. “Now I know she didn’t hate me. She was dead.” He burst into tears again.

Tessa tried to get more information out of him, but he couldn’t stop crying long enough to speak. “Do you have somewhere to stay tonight? Or did you plan on going home?”

He wiped an eye. “I got a room at the Harbor View Inn.”

That confirmed Tessa’s assumption about his income level. The inn was the priciest accommodation on the island. Most college kids booked cheaper digs, like the Seaside Cottage Resort.

“Have you even been to Widow’s before?” Logan asked.

Dean shook his head and squeaked out a breathy “No.”

“When do you plan to leave?” Tessa asked.

“Tomorrow, I guess.” Dean’s brow furrowed. “There’s no reason to stay now.”

“We might have additional questions.” Tessa took his contact information. Unlike TV cops, she had no authority to keep him on the island. A person was either under arrest or they weren’t.

Dean stood. “I’ll do whatever I can to help you find Aurora’s”—he hiccupped—“killer.” More tears followed his

proclamation.

Logan herded him to the exit. After the door closed, he frowned. “He’s driving a BMW.” He read off the license plate number, and Tessa wrote it down.

“I don’t like him,” Logan said.

“I can’t put my finger on what feels wrong.” Tessa tapped her chin.

Logan waved a hand at the empty chair. “His reactions seemed over the top.”

“You think he was acting?” Tessa started running Dean through various law enforcement databases.

“I think it’s possible. He could have taken that acting class because he’s good at it.” Logan dropped into the chair. “I could be wrong. Maybe he’s just emotional.”

Tessa scanned her computer screen. “No outstanding warrants. No criminal record. His driving record is clean. The BMW is registered to fifty-five-year-old Lawrence Stewart, who shares the same address as Dean.”

“Probably his father.” Logan rubbed his palms together. “Where are those financial and phone records?”

Tessa divvied them up. While Logan began reviewing Aurora’s cell phone, credit card, and bank records, Tessa applied for the necessary warrants to obtain personal information for everyone on their suspect list. Some cell providers cooperated with police. Others made her jump through extra hoops. Banks were more rigid and regulated.

Logan flattened his palm on the papers. “Aurora’s phone records show Dean called her a few dozen times in April. She stopped answering him at the end of the month. He called her a few more times in May. She must have deleted his calls and contact information from her phone.”

Tessa looked up from her computer. “Sounds like Dean was obsessed with her.”

“He said he was too pushy.” Logan waved his hand over the pages. “But this seems like more than pushy.”

“I agree.”

Logan said, “Since he primarily called her instead of texting, we don’t have a sense of his mood.”

“Could he have come to Widow’s in the last week of May looking for her? Maybe she still didn’t want to see him. Maybe he got mad and killed her.”

“We could try to check the ferry camera feeds on May twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth. See if Dean’s car appears.”

Tessa picked up the phone and called the ferry station. Two minutes later, she ended the call. “They only keep the feeds for forty-five days. We’re beyond that now. Plus, he could have used a different vehicle.”

“So why would he come here today?” Logan asked. “We didn’t even know who he was until now. We had no way to tie him to her life or death.”

Tessa closed her eyes and ran the interview through her mind. “Dean didn’t know she’d deleted his communications. He would have assumed his calls were on her phone. Maybe he thought that by coming here, he would throw us off his trail. Chad said a young man was looking for Aurora at the docks after she disappeared.”

Logan rubbed his eyes. “Dean isn’t even close to the description Chad gave.”

“True.” Tessa checked her notes. “Chad said he was an average guy with dark hair. Witnesses are notoriously unreliable on details, but Dean is six foot seven and blond. There is no way Chad would have gotten his description *that* wrong.”

“So who went to the dock looking for Aurora?”

Logan’s gaze snapped to hers. “*If there was* a guy. Chad could have invented him to throw us off his trail.”

“True.” Tessa scrubbed both hands over her face. “Let’s show Dean’s picture around town and see if anyone recognizes him.”

“Tomorrow,” Logan said firmly.

“Right,” Tessa said. “Tomorrow.”

She hated to walk away from the investigation, even for a short time, but she needed to make her family a priority.

“I’ll pick up Patience on my way.” Logan gathered up the statements and reports he’d been reviewing and slid them into a folder. “We can review these again after everyone goes to bed.”

Tessa locked up and drove to the house. Her mother and her companion were sitting in rocking chairs on the front porch, drinking lemonade. The companion stood and collected a tote bag at her feet. “I’ll be off.”

Tessa thanked her, then called to her mother, “I’ll be right in, Mom.”

As the companion got into her car and drove away, Tessa veered off toward the chicken enclosure. Better to feed the hens before she got comfortable for the evening. She grabbed a bucket of pellets, opened the wire door, and slipped inside. She stood still for a minute, scanning the clucking birds approaching her. Most of the hens were tame and compliant, with the exception of the alpha hen. Not seeing her, Tessa began tossing feed on the ground. Chickens pecked around her feet. Killer Hen must be in the coop.

A large shape fluttered from the roof. Tessa ducked, but the big hen landed on her back, squawking and flapping her wings. Tessa dropped the bucket and covered her face with her arms. Wings smacked against the back of her head. Something pulled at her hair. She swatted at the bird. “Get off me.”

With an indignant and angry squawk, the chicken fluttered to the ground and strutted in a circle around Tessa. She straightened her uniform and smoothed her hair. “Why do you hate me?”

Killer Hen gave her an unapologetic side-eye. The sound of laughter reached Tessa. Logan’s Range Rover had pulled into the driveway. Patience and Logan stood next to the vehicle. Her sister was laughing her butt off and holding her cell phone.

Is she recording this?

Logan walked toward Tessa, his facial muscles twitching as he clearly worked hard to suppress laughter.

“I’m glad I could entertain you,” Tessa called out.

Patience choked out, “I’m sorry. I can’t help it. That was the funniest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Do you need help?” Logan entered the enclosure. Of course Killer Hen clucked amicably around his boots.

“No.” Tessa waved. “I’ve got it.” She reached for the dropped bucket. The feed was piled on the ground, surrounded by bickering chickens. Tessa scattered the pellets with her boots to allow the less aggressive birds access to food.

“I’ll change the water.” Logan dumped, rinsed, and refilled the containers.

They left the enclosure, and Tessa fastened the lock.

Logan plucked a feather from her shoulder. He chuckled. “Did she scratch you?”

“No.” The corner of Tessa’s mouth pulled. “But I’m glad I was wearing body armor.”

“I don’t think ‘protection from chicken attacks’ is listed on the manufacturer’s website.” Logan lost it, bursting into unrestrained laughter.

Tessa sighed.

He bent double, leaning on his thighs. A few minutes later, he straightened and wiped an eye. “Sorry, babe.”

Patience was bent over her phone. Tessa heard squawking and the sound of her own voice yelling at the chicken. She walked toward her sister. “Do *not* post that video on social media!”

“Too late.” Patience turned and sprinted for the house.

“Get back here! Give me that phone!” Tessa started to give chase; then the sound of soft chuckling from the house stopped her in her tracks. She glanced at the porch. Her

mother's face was bright with a huge smile. Tessa couldn't remember when she'd last seen her mother happy, and it had been even longer since she'd laughed.

Warmth flooded Tessa. She'd let that damned chicken attack her every day if it gave her mother joy.

Logan slung an arm around her shoulders. "Come on. I'll make dinner while you change. You have feathers in your hair."

Tessa let him guide her into the house. She changed into jeans and a T-shirt, washed her face, and removed three chicken feathers from her hair. Then she went to the kitchen. Logan stood at the stove stirring a steaming pot. Patience was setting the table and chattering to Logan about a customer. Their mother sat at the table. Her communication skills had deteriorated. She was verbal enough to answer direct questions but no longer participated in conversations. Tonight, though, she seemed to be enjoying watching and listening to the activity around her.

As soon as Tessa sat down, Patience stopped talking. Tessa tried to engage her, but her sister stuck to one-word answers. Worry nagged at Tessa, but she brushed it aside. She had to have faith. When Patience wanted to talk, she would.

They ate a quiet meal, and Tessa marveled once again at how much Logan's presence had calmed and stabilized the household. She had gone from barely holding her life together to actually enjoying quality time with her mother and sister.

After dinner, Patience volunteered to clean up, another miracle. Tessa helped her mother wash up and change into her nightgown. Mom even allowed Tessa to spray her hair with detangler, then brush and braid it. She gave Mom her pills and tucked her into bed. The medication made her drowsy, and she was asleep soon after.

Patience and Logan were binge-watching *Friends* when Tessa joined them. Though tempted to get back to work, Tessa resisted until after Patience had gone to bed. Then Logan pulled out his files, and Tessa fired up her laptop.

She signed into her email. “Bruce sent me the information from the detective who handled Earl Byrd’s rape case.” She opened the email and downloaded documents. After opening the first, the original rape report, she froze, a chill sweeping over her. A woman’s face stared out from the screen.

“What is it?” Logan was staring.

Tessa showed him the photo. “This is the woman Earl was convicted of raping.”

“She looks a lot like our victim.”

Tessa nodded. “Same hair and eye color, close in age, similar features.”

Logan’s mouth flattened. “We need to question Earl again.”

Tessa shook her head. “We need to search his house, and I don’t want to tip him off beforehand. He might destroy evidence.” She waved a hand at the computer screen. “Unfortunately, the fact that his previous victim had similar basic physical characteristics isn’t probable cause. We need evidence that connects Earl to our victim.” Tessa sprang off the couch and paced the room.

“But how do we get that without searching his residence?”

“I don’t know. Yet. Tonight, I’m going to review Earl’s rape case file. I’ll call the investigating detective in the morning to fill in any gaps. If he’s guilty, then there must be something to tie him to Aurora’s death.”

If Earl was guilty, Tessa would not let him get away with murder.

8

“Earl’s version of his rape case is complete bullshit.” Logan pointed to the laptop screen, where he had been reviewing photos of Earl’s rape victim. He and Tessa had worked late and risen early, studying the old case.

Next to him at the kitchen table, Tessa leaned back. “How do you know?”

Logan turned the computer around. “His victim’s wrists are bruised all the way around.”

Tessa squinted at the screen with tired eyes. “The marks look like fingerprints.”

“He held her down.” Logan clicked to the next photo. “She had other defense bruises too, and her fingernails were broken.”

“Not exactly the vision of consensual sex he portrayed.” Tessa stared at the screen.

“He probably thought she wouldn’t go to the police.”

“Most rape victims don’t,” Tessa said.

“Maybe he raped Aurora. His first victim sent him to prison. Maybe this time, he was determined not to leave a witness.”

“Who says this was his first victim?” Tessa gestured toward the picture. “Sex offenders tend to reoffend. That’s why we have a registry.”

“We should just keep them in prison instead of letting them out after a few years.” Logan turned his attention back to the screen. He rapped a knuckle on the table. “We can’t let him get away with this.”

“We don’t have any evidence that he killed Aurora.”

“He lied to us about the rape case,” Logan suggested.

“True, and we could call him on it. But that would also tip him off to the fact that he’s our prime suspect. I’d rather keep

that under wraps until we have something solid on him.”

“Feels very Catch-22-ish.” Logan closed Tessa’s laptop. The screen had begun to blur. “More coffee?”

“Please.” She propped her elbows on the table and rubbed her eyes.

Logan refilled their empty mugs and returned the pot to the machine. He found a container of cinnamon buns his grandmother had sent over and brought them to the table.

Tessa added milk to her cup and chugged half of it. Then she picked at a bun, her brow furrowing. When she looked up at him, her eyes held a predatory gleam. “I have an idea.”

Logan ate a bun in three bites. “What are you thinking?”

“What are the chances Earl told his girlfriend about the rape?”

“Slim.” Logan reached for another pastry. “And if she does know, I’ll bet he gave her the same sanitized version he gave us.”

“We should talk to Wanda without Earl.”

Logan drained his mug. “We need to do that without tipping off Earl.”

Tessa popped the last of her cinnamon bun into her mouth and stood. “We’ll go back to the cottages on the ruse of searching Aurora’s cabin again. If Earl is there, we’ll make a big deal out of not having any evidence. We’ll boost his confidence and ask him casual questions about Aurora. But if we’re lucky, he won’t be there.”

An hour later, with Tessa’s mom settled with the day’s companion and Patience dropped off at the bakery, Tessa turned the SUV toward the station. “I need to check in with Kurt before we drive to the harbor.”

Her cell phone rang.

She answered, “Deputy Black.” Surprise lifted her brows. “How can I help you, Wanda?”

Logan leaned closer so he could hear better. Tessa tilted the phone.

“I found something,” Wanda said in a low voice. “I need to show it to you.”

Tessa’s posture tensed. “What is it?”

“A charm,” Wanda whispered. “In Earl’s nightstand. It’s not mine. I think it’s *hers*.”

“Why do you think that?” Tessa asked.

“Because it’s Sleeping Beauty’s dress.” Wanda’s tone sharpened. “You know Sleeping Beauty’s name is Aurora, right?”

Tessa was silent for two heartbeats. “Can you text me a picture of it?”

Her phone vibrated. She handed it to Logan, and he swiped the screen to view the text. “The pendant looks like a pink dress. ‘Aurora’ is inscribed on the top.”

Logan set the phone in the console cup holder. “There’s no way Earl bought this for you as a gift?”

“No,” Wanda said. “He thinks Disney is stupid.”

“Where are you?” Tessa asked Wanda.

“At home,” Wanda answered.

“We can be there in ten minutes,” Tessa said.

“Hurry.” Wanda’s voice trembled, as if she was afraid. “Earl went to the market, but he won’t be gone long.”

“Do you want me to stay on the line?” Tessa asked.

“No,” Wanda snapped, then lowered her voice. “Just come here. Don’t tell him I called you.”

“We won’t. Don’t worry.” Tessa drove toward the harbor and the Seaside Cottage Resort.

“She sounded afraid.” Logan gripped the armrest as the SUV whipped around a bend in the road.

“I have a bad feeling,” Tessa said. “Would you call Kurt and Bruce and put them on alert?”

“Yes,” Logan agreed. Other than the three deputies stationed on Widow’s Island, additional help was a boat, helicopter, or seaplane ride away.

Logan called both Kurt, who was on his way home from the station after working the graveyard shift, and Bruce, who was off duty until afternoon. Both agreed to head over ASAP. “They’re on their way.”

“Thanks.” Tessa steered the SUV through a sharp turn. “Wanda said she found a necklace. Would you look through Aurora’s Instagram photos and see if she’s wearing a necklace in any of them?”

Logan pulled out his smartphone and began searching. “Here it is.” He snapped screenshots of several photos with the necklace clearly visible.

As they neared the harbor, Tessa reached for the radio mic and reported their location to dispatch. Then she turned into the entrance and drove through the rows of cottages.

Logan read the numbers. “There it is.”

“It’s close to Aurora’s unit.” Tessa drove past it. “I’m going to park there in case Earl comes back.”

They left the SUV in front of Aurora’s cottage and jogged back to number twelve, just a few short blocks away.

“He drives a white F-150,” Tessa said.

Logan scanned the area. “I don’t see a truck near unit twelve.”

“Good.” Tessa knocked on the door of unit twelve. No one answered. She knocked again. “Earl? This is Deputy Black. Just letting you know that we’re accessing unit twenty-one again.”

The cottage was silent. Gulls cried from the direction of the harbor.

Tessa knocked and identified herself again.

Someone yelled, “Earl, no!” and a dull thud sounded from inside the cottage.

Logan went on alert, his entire body tensing.

Something was wrong. He knew it on a cellular level.

He and Tessa drew their weapons and moved to flank the doorway. After working several cases together, they functioned as a team.

A muffled scream raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Logan went to a front window, but he couldn’t see through the closed blinds. Backup was on its way, but they couldn’t wait. Wanda could be in danger inside.

Tessa reached for the doorknob and tried to twist it. Shaking her head, she mouthed, “Locked.”

Logan made a circling motion with his weapon. Tessa nodded, and he retreated from the front door. He jogged along the side of the house. At each of the two windows, he tried to get a look inside the house, but the blind slats were tightly closed. At the back door, Logan put his shoulder to the frame and waited.

He barely heard the sound of breaking glass over the echo of his own heartbeat in his ears. Tessa was going in the front door.

Logan did the same. He used the butt of his gun to break a pane of glass in the back door. He reached through, turned the dead bolt, and then pushed the door open. He stepped into an empty kitchen. A pair of legs was visible through the doorway that led to the living room.

Wanda.

Logan stopped at the doorway, his shoulder pressed to the jamb, and peered around the corner. Straight ahead, Tessa stood in the empty living room, Wanda’s body at her feet. An arc of blood had sprayed across the carpet and one wall, indicating an arterial wound. To the right, he saw a short hallway and two closed doors. The layout seemed identical to Aurora’s cottage. Those doors should lead to the bedroom and bath.

He crossed the room and knelt to assess Wanda.

She lay on her back, sightless eyes staring up at the ceiling. A deep-red puddle was spreading around her torso. Reaching down, he pressed two fingers to her throat. No pulse. He holstered his gun, dropped to his knees, and began performing chest compressions. Tessa's hand on his shoulder pulled him away.

He rocked back on his haunches; the knees of his pants were soaked with blood.

"You can't save her," Tessa whispered, pointing to Wanda's neck and the gaping wound in it.

Her throat was slashed.

The puddle of blood had turned into a pond. Tessa was right. Wanda had already bled out.

Logan pulled away, battling back memories of an explosion on the other side of the world and a wounded child he hadn't been able to save. The warmth of the blood soaking his uniform was familiar in a way that threatened to incapacitate him, to take him back. He fought it.

You can't lose your shit. Tessa needs you.

He stumbled to his feet and drew his weapon again, one question rocking him to his soul.

Where is Earl?

9

Tessa scanned the cottage, sweeping her weapon from corner to corner, looking for any sign of Earl. In her peripheral vision, she saw Logan tear himself away from Wanda. He wanted to save her, but the woman was clearly beyond help. It appeared as if there was more blood on the floor than in her body. The slash to her throat had been deep and vicious. She'd probably bled out in a minute or two. An OR was a Life Flight away from Widow's Island.

But Tessa had to focus on finding Earl. Logan lurched to his feet and drew his weapon again. His features set in a hard mask. There was a darkness to his expression Tessa had never seen before.

Heaven help Earl if Logan gets to him first.

She led the way toward the hallway and the two closed doors. Earl had to be behind one of them.

And he was likely armed with a large sharp knife.

Shoulder to shoulder with Logan, Tessa headed for the hallway. They flanked the first doorway. Tessa opened it as quietly as possible. A bathroom. Empty.

They continued down the hall to the last closed door. Flanking the doorframe, Tessa reached for the knob. Locked. On the other side of the door, something thumped. Tessa gestured to the door. "Break it down."

Logan stepped back and kicked it in. The door bounced against the wall. Tessa aimed her weapon into the room but saw no one. "Clear."

The window was open. Through it, she could see the fleeing form of Earl as he raced away from the cottage.

Tessa sprinted for the window and climbed through it. She jumped down, landing on the asphalt, the impact ringing through her bones. She charged forward with Logan right behind her. "Earl Byrd, stop! Police!"

About seventy-five feet away, Earl was running toward the rear of the complex. At the sound of Tessa's shouts, he sped up. Sunlight glinted on something metal in his hand.

The knife!

Tessa raced through the busy resort. A young family unloaded luggage from a minivan. A woman held a little boy's hand as they crossed the parking lot. A pair of tween boys rode bikes on the sidewalk. Tessa couldn't shoot Earl without risking hitting a bystander. A handgun wasn't accurate over distance, and her AR-15 was in the back of her SUV.

Tessa yelled for Earl to stop one more time, then saved her breath for running. She plowed ahead, but Logan blew past her. Determined to keep up, Tessa dug her toes into the pavement, demanding more speed. But neither will nor extra effort could make her legs six inches longer, and six weeks of working out couldn't compete with Logan's level of über fitness. There was no way she could outpace him.

On the bright side, neither would Earl.

Tessa's legs ached as she struggled to maintain her speed. Ahead, Earl was flagging too, his strides weakening. Tessa tripped over a crack in the asphalt, pitching forward. Pain slammed through her knees as they hit the pavement.

Damn it.

She'd never catch up now. Logan drew farther away. Now thirty feet ahead, he'd almost drawn even with Earl.

She lurched to her feet. Logan was running full out, his attention focused entirely on Earl. He didn't seem to see the minivan backing out of a parking space in his path.

"Look out!" Tessa shouted.

The minivan nearly clipped Logan. A horn blared. He dodged the rear bumper by inches, and the near miss slowed him. He lost several of the feet he'd gained. He turned on the speed again, closing the gap as Earl passed the cabin Aurora had rented and approached the pool area. Logan was within a few feet of catching up when Earl glanced over his shoulder, panic on his face.

As he raced by the pool, a trio of college-age girls exited the enclosure. They didn't seem to notice him. Tessa sucked in a breath to warn them, but before she could yell, Earl had grabbed a slim blonde, spun around, and hauled her in front of him like a shield.

He held the blade of his knife in front of her throat. "Come any closer, and she's dead."

Logan skidded to a stop, his heart hammering, his weapon pointed at Earl.

"Put down the gun!" Earl yelled.

The girl screamed. Logan's heart jackhammered against his ribs.

"Shut up!" Earl shifted his hold to wrap his hand in the girl's ponytail.

Tears streamed down her face, and she sobbed, "Please, let me go."

Earl took a step backward, jerking on the girl's ponytail and forcing her to step back with him. The knife glinted at her throat, and Logan could see still-wet blood shimmering on the blade.

He felt helpless. He couldn't let Earl kill that innocent girl, but what could Logan do? He couldn't shoot. He'd hit the girl.

"Let her go, Earl!" Logan shouted.

"Fuck you!" Earl glanced behind him.

Logan saw a white pickup truck parked near the pool house. He didn't see Tessa anywhere. Where was she?

"Let me go!" the girl wailed.

"Shut up, or I'll hurt you." Earl raised the knife and nicked her ear with the blade.

Blood ran down her shoulder, and she quieted to low guttural noises that barely sounded human.

Earl pulled the girl's hair and forced her to move with him. They shuffled backward. With every foot of ground they covered, Logan moved, keeping the distance between them the same. Time slowed. It felt as if several minutes had passed before Earl was at the side of his vehicle.

The girl saw the truck. Tears and snot poured down her face. Her eyes pleaded with Logan, and her lips formed the silent plea, "Help me."

Logan maintained eye contact with her for a few seconds, until he could feel her pain and terror.

He couldn't let Earl get that girl into his truck. Earl had cut her in a public place with witnesses. If he took her to a more private location, he'd kill her. Earl had already murdered at least two women. Logan would bet there were more undiscovered victims. The cut to Wanda's neck hadn't been the timid slice of a first-timer. Earl's knife stroke had been deep and brutal. Nothing indicated Earl would release a loose end.

Logan couldn't shoot Earl, but he could keep him from driving away. Logan shifted his aim to the front tire of the pickup truck.

"Don't do it," Earl yelled, as if reading Logan's mind. "I'll kill her."

But Logan knew in his soul that if Earl kidnapped that girl, she was as good as dead anyway. Earl wouldn't get off the island with her. Tessa would have the ferry stopped. Earl would have to go into hiding, and the girl would make that difficult.

Logan had to stall. "Why'd you kill Aurora, Earl? She was just a kid."

Earl's face contorted. "That bitch acted like she wanted it. So I went to her cottage one night."

"Let me guess," Logan said. "She didn't want anything to do with you. That made you mad. Did you rape her?"

Earl's face flushed deep red, but Logan saw the excitement in his eyes. He had.

Logan pictured the shard of broken glass in Aurora's kitchen. "She fought back, didn't she? But you had plenty of time to clean up. You didn't want to go back to prison, and you were afraid she would have reported the rape, like the woman from Seattle did. So you killed her."

Earl didn't look guilty. He wasn't the kind of person who felt guilt, but Logan saw the truth on his face.

Earl lifted his chin in defiance and sneered. "If you're waiting for a confession, you can go fuck yourself." He released the girl's ponytail to reach behind him and open the truck door. Logan still didn't have a clear shot at Earl. He aimed at the front tire and squeezed the trigger. The tire went flat.

There would be no escape now. Earl wasn't going anywhere. His face reddened. Surprise, resignation, and then anger shone in his eyes.

Where is Tessa?

Earl raised the knife over the girl's head, and Logan's heart dropped into his stomach. He'd pushed him too far. He moved forward. If Earl hurt that girl, Logan would kill him with his bare hands. Seeing the knife, the girl screamed and dropped to her butt on the pavement. Logan adjusted his aim, intending to shoot Earl.

Before he could squeeze the trigger, a second shot rang out. The side of Earl's head exploded. Blood and brains splattered across the white paint of the pickup truck. His legs folded like a snack tray, and he collapsed to the ground.

The girl screamed again and started crawling away on her hands and knees, leaving a bloody trail on the asphalt.

Logan lowered his weapon and scanned the parking lot. Twenty feet away, Tessa stood behind a car, using the side mirror like a tripod to steady the barrel of her rifle. Logan turned back to Earl. There was no need to feel for a pulse. A quarter of his head was missing.

While Logan had been confronting Earl, Tessa had fetched her rifle, found a better vantage point, and taken him

out with a head shot. A weird sense of pride filled Logan.

That's my Tessa!

The crying girl was rocking back and forth, her gaze fixed on the bloody mess that had been Earl's head.

Logan holstered his gun and crossed the pavement to her. Dropping to one knee, he put his body between her and Earl. Her entire body shook. When he wrapped an arm around her, she fell into him, sobbing. Blood from her ear stained his shirt.

Tessa hefted her rifle across her body, the muzzle pointed at the ground, and walked toward him. She stopped next to Logan and the girl. Her gaze shifted to the dead body. Her face was the same gray white as the concrete around the pool. "He'd already killed Wanda. I couldn't let him kill her too. She's only a little older than Patience."

Logan tucked the sobbing girl against his side. "I know. You had no choice."

Tessa had done what she'd been trained to do. She'd protected an innocent life. But he knew she would pay a price. Despite need or justification, killing took its toll.

Hours later, Tessa sat on the bumper of her SUV watching law enforcement personnel swarm the scene. She'd killed a man. He'd left her no choice, but she knew when the shock wore off, she'd have to deal with the emotional fallout.

The sheriff, some deputies, and a forensics team had come over from the mainland to process the scene. Tessa had killed the suspect, so she would have to sit this one out.

Logan walked over, carrying two cups of coffee. A white paper bag was tucked under his arm. He handed her a cup. "I feel naked with my holster empty."

"The sheriff took my weapons as evidence too." She sipped. The hot liquid warmed her. Despite the heat of the day, her bones were cold. "We'll get them back after ballistic testing is complete and the results confirm our statements."

Logan opened the white bag and handed her a blueberry fritter. “Kurt made a run to Black Tail Bakery. He thought you could use the sugar.”

Grateful, she took a bite. She hadn’t been hungry, but the sugar and caffeine perked her up.

Henry walked across the asphalt. He stopped in front of them. His gaze moved from Logan to Tessa. “Are you all right? You look pale.”

“I am for now.” Tessa drank more coffee. “Can you tell us anything?”

Tessa and Logan had both given statements and answered the sheriff’s questions.

“Wanda Simms was dead within a minute of being wounded.” Henry met Tessa’s gaze, then Logan’s. “Her left carotid artery was completely severed. There was nothing either of you could have done to save her. If it had happened in an operating room, she still would have died. It was not a recoverable wound.”

Tessa had known but appreciated Henry’s reassuring words.

“Thanks,” Logan said.

“Do you need anything?” Henry asked.

“No, but thanks for asking.” Tessa glanced at Logan. Tonight would no doubt be rough, but he was all she needed.

10

A few days later, Tessa sat in the passenger seat of the Range Rover. She reached for the door handle. “I can’t believe you made me hike all the way up Crone Mountain. My legs are going to hurt so much tomorrow.” She opened the car door and groaned. Her calves were already sore.

“The fresh air is good for you.” Logan climbed out from behind the wheel. “You needed to get out of the house.”

She’d spent the last few days on the couch in her sweatpants, using her automatic administrative leave to decompress. She’d had nightmares, but Logan had been there to hold her afterward. With the number of witnesses and physical evidence, the case would be closed quickly. But she was hoping for another couple of weeks off. Restless nights had left her tired.

Aurora’s necklace had been found in Earl’s pocket. Deputies had also found two unmatched earrings and a ring in Earl’s cottage. None of those pieces showed up in Aurora’s Instagram pictures. Who had they belonged to? Had Earl killed other girls? The sheriff had promised to look for other missing girls and unidentified remains. Everyone agreed that Earl had likely claimed additional victims, but the investigation into who they might be would take a long time.

Tessa adjusted her ponytail and shoved a strand of sweaty hair behind her ear. “You’re barely sweating.”

“Hiking in the woods *is* my job.”

“True.” Tessa limped toward the house. “I’m starving.”

“Me too.”

They stopped on the porch and toed off their boots. Logan held the screen door open for Tessa. She stepped across the threshold.

“Surprise!”

Tessa jumped. Women emerged from behind doorways and furniture. Stunned, she saw Cate, Jane, Samantha, and some women from the knitting group. Sam's little boy, Mickey, bounced at his mother's side. Tessa's mom stood in the middle of the room, looking confused but happy. She held a cupcake in one hand. White icing smeared her face. Silver crepe paper and white balloons decorated the room, and gifts were stacked on the coffee table. On the sideboard, swirly white cupcakes were arranged to form a wedding dress.

They were throwing her a bridal shower.

Cate almost hugged Tessa, then stopped and turned to her brother. "Logan, she's all dirty. Where did you take her?"

"We hiked Crone Mountain," Logan said with pride.

Cate laughed. "When I asked you to get her out of the house for a few hours, that isn't exactly what I meant."

Logan shrugged. "It worked, right?"

"Do you want some food, Logan?" his grandmother asked.

Logan sidled toward the door. "No thanks. I'll just run down into town for . . . something." He turned to Tessa and gave her a quick kiss on the mouth. "Love you." He turned back to the living room. "Sam, can I take Mickey with me?"

She looked down at the little boy. "Do you want to go with Logan?"

"Yay." The little boy raced out of the house.

"Henry went to the Taproom for a burger," Cate said.

"Sounds good." Logan turned and hurried out the door to catch up with Mickey, who was already waiting by the Range Rover.

"We thought it would be best to have the shower here." Cate nodded at Tessa's mother, who was eating another cupcake. "She seems to be having fun."

Tessa watched as women took turns checking on Mom. "She might not recognize everyone, but she knows these are

her people.” And they were Tessa’s people too.

Tessa looked down at her mud-streaked hiking pants and sweat-stained T-shirt. “I’m a mess.”

She glanced into the kitchen, where the smell of cooking food made her stomach rumble. Cate’s grandmother, Jane, pulled a tray of cinnamon buns from the oven. Appetizers and casserole dishes covered the table.

Cate shoved her toward her room. “Take a quick shower. We’ll wait.”

Tessa showered off the dirt and pulled a pale-blue summer dress from the back of her closet. When had she dressed up last? She slipped her feet into a pair of strappy sandals she also hadn’t worn in ages. She even took thirty extra seconds to swipe some mascara onto her lashes.

When she emerged from her room, she felt refreshed—and loved.

The afternoon was spent with tiny sandwiches, cupcakes, and friends. Widow’s Island might have had a small community, but it had everything Tessa needed.

“I was so afraid I was going to give it away.” Patience bit into a cupcake. She was all smiles. “But I didn’t.”

“*That’s* why you were acting so weird?” Relief swept through Tessa.

Patience licked icing from her fingertips. “I wanted you to have the perfect day. You deserve it.”

Tessa’s eyes misted.

Cate shoved a glass of white wine into her hand. “Enjoy your day.”

Tessa savored every moment with her friends and family. Cate and Sam ran the show. Tessa’s mother helped her open gifts. Patience made a hat out of bows and made Tessa wear it.

A few hours later, she helped Cate wash the dishes. Sam gathered used wrapping paper and shoved it into a paper bag.

When the last of the trash had been taken out, Cate, Sam, and Tessa sat on the front porch steps with glasses of iced tea.

“We need to go shopping for a wedding dress,” Cate said, her voice serious. “Tomorrow.”

Tessa flexed a calf. “I don’t want anything fancy.”

“You can’t get married in jeans.” Cate sighed, sounding exasperated. “We’re going tomorrow. Once you go back to work, who knows when you’ll get another day off?”

Guilt poked Tessa. “I don’t think I should be enjoying my administrative leave.”

Cate rolled her eyes. “Do you want to wallow around the farm in sweatpants for another week?”

Maybe.

“The answer to that question should be *no*,” Cate said. “I know what you’re going through. I’ve been there. You’ve had a few days to rest. Now you have to make yourself be present.”

Sam patted Tessa’s leg. “It’s better to keep busy and stay among friends. It’s too easy to let hiding from your emotions, your friends—well, from everything—become a habit.” Sam had suffered the most trauma. She should know. “I fight the temptation to stay in bed with my covers over my head every day. I don’t know if I could do it without both of you.”

“Thank you.” Love clogged Tessa’s throat. Had she ever been this happy? “You are the best friends I will ever have.”

In the middle, Sam wrapped an arm around each of them. “Your wedding will be the happiest day this island has seen for years. You two have been almost sisters your whole lives; now you’ll actually be family.”

“We were always family.” Tessa leaned into Sam. “All three of us.”

Cate clinked her glass against Tessa’s, then Sam’s. “And we always will be.”

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Number one Amazon Charts and number one *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Melinda Leigh is a fully recovered banker. Leigh's debut novel, *She Can Run*, was nominated for Best First Novel by the International Thriller Writers. She's garnered numerous writing awards, including two RITA nominations. Her other novels include *She Can Tell*, *She Can Scream*, *She Can Hide*, *She Can Kill*, *Midnight Exposure*, *Midnight Sacrifice*, *Midnight Betrayal*, *Midnight Obsession*, *Hour of Need*, *Minutes to Kill*, *Seconds to Live*, *Say You're Sorry*, *Her Last Goodbye*, *Bones Don't Lie*, *What I've Done*, *Secrets Never Die*, *Save Your Breath*, *Cross Her Heart*, *See Her Die*, *Drown Her Sorrows*, and *Right Behind Her*. She holds a second-degree black belt in Kenpo Karate, has taught women's self-defense, and lives in a messy house with her family and a small herd of rescue pets. For more information, visit www.melindaleigh.com.