

WIDOW'S ISLAND NOVELLA 10

THE WRONG BONES

A small wooden boat is positioned in the middle ground of a misty lake. The background is a dense forest of tall, thin trees, their forms softened by the fog. The water is calm, reflecting the light and the boat. The overall mood is quiet and somewhat mysterious.

MELINDA
LEIGH

ALSO BY MELINDA LEIGH

Bree Taggart Novels

Cross Her Heart

See Her Die

Drown Her Sorrows

Right Behind Her

Dead Against Her

Morgan Dane Novels

Say You're Sorry

Her Last Goodbye

Bones Don't Lie

What I've Done

Secrets Never Die

Save Your Breath

Scarlet Falls Novels

Hour of Need

Minutes to Kill

Seconds to Live

She Can Series

She Can Run

She Can Tell

She Can Scream

She Can Hide

“He Can Fall” (short story)

She Can Kill

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Midnight Exposure

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Walking on Her Grave (Rogue River)

Tracks of Her Tears (Rogue Winter)

Burned by Her Devotion (Rogue Vows)

Twisted Truth (Rogue Justice)

The Widow's Island Novella Series

A Bone to Pick

Whisper of Bones

A Broken Bone

Buried Bones

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THE WRONG BONES

MELINDA
LEIGH

 Montlake

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

1

Deputy Tessa Black rubbed a gritty eye. Ten o'clock wasn't a late hour for most people, but when she wasn't working the night shift, Tessa was usually in her pajamas by nine.

She drove through the dark, quiet town of North Sound, scanning the businesses for signs of trouble. Not that she expected much. Off the coast of Washington State, Widow's Island was smaller, less populated, and more remote than the neighboring San Juan Islands. September was the tail end of the summer season. Tourism fell off. Kids settled back into their school routines. Most businesses closed by six, even on a Saturday night. Since she'd gone on shift at seven in the evening, she'd issued a single parking ticket and responded to a noise complaint about a rooster that crowed at all hours.

She turned onto a side road and cruised down a residential street that bordered the graveyard. As she braked at a stop sign, movement caught her attention. She squinted through the windshield of her patrol vehicle. Her headlights shone across the flat expanse of the cemetery. Headstones cast long shadows. But she saw nothing.

Tessa turned left and accelerated. A figure darted across the road. She braked hard, and the vehicle lurched to a stop. For a few seconds, she breathed through the rush of adrenaline. Her heart slammed against her breastbone. A boy of about twelve faced her from the middle of the road. Behind him, two more boys stood, momentarily frozen in the glare of her headlights. They reminded her of the small black-tailed deer that overpopulated the island. She half expected the boys to run away, but instead they rushed toward her.

She slipped the vehicle into park and climbed out. "What's wrong?"

Before she could finish her question, the boys clustered around her, all talking—no, whispering—at once. She made out the words *ghost* and *ghoul* and raised her hand. "One at a time, please."

She recognized the tallest boy as Dean Kemp. His family owned Island Market. The other two kids also looked familiar, but their names eluded her.

Tessa focused on the Kemp boy. “Dean, tell me what happened.”

“We were playing flashlight tag,” Dean said, breathless as if he’d been running hard. He pointed toward the north. “Bobby dared me to touch Elias’s headstone. When I got closer”—he glanced around, then lowered his voice further—“I saw something digging in a grave nearby. I think it *saw* us.” His voice shook as hard as his body.

“A man? A woman?” Tessa asked, her nerves prickling.

The kids jerked their shoulders and gave each other questioning glances.

“I dunno.” Dean swallowed. He cast a fearful glance over one shoulder, as if expecting to be chased, then turned back to Tessa. “I couldn’t see the face. It was wearing a black hood,” he whispered, “like the grim reaper.”

It?

“Are we going to get in trouble?” one of the boys asked in a small, trembling voice.

Technically, anyone on the grounds at night—including the boys—was trespassing. The cemetery was closed after dark, but there was no gate. No one physically locked up the property at dusk. The three deputies on Widow’s Island had better things to do than chase kids out of the graveyard, as long as one of them wasn’t vandalizing anything. Besides, Tessa and her two best friends had spent plenty of evenings trying to scare each other in the cemetery when they were teenagers. There wasn’t much for kids to do on Widow’s once they were bored of flashlight tag.

“Not from me,” Tessa assured him. Widow’s Island had a very small law enforcement presence. They needed community support to effectively police the island. The last thing she wanted to do was discourage these kids from talking to her. “What was the person doing?”

“Digging up a grave.” Dean’s sun-bleached hair was too long, and the wind blew his bangs across his eyes. The other two boys’ heads bobbed.

“Where exactly did you see this person?” Tessa asked, lifting her gaze to scan the dark cemetery.

The boy pointed across the graveyard. “Over by the statue.”

Tessa knew exactly where he meant. A life-size statue of the town founder, shipbuilder Elias Bishop, had been erected in the center, where the Bishop family plots were located.

“Wait here.” Tessa locked her vehicle, then turned in the direction he’d indicated.

“You’re going in there?” Dean asked. All three boys looked horrified.

“Yes. I’ll be right back.” She strode away, her steps silent in the grass. As she walked, she used her lapel mic to update dispatch, which was located on the mainland with the actual sheriff’s department. Tessa and two additional deputies worked out of a satellite station to serve the five thousand residents of Widow’s Island. The truth was that rural law enforcement officers were used to going it alone. Backup was often too far away to be useful in a practical sense. Deputy Kurt Olson was off today. Widow’s third deputy, Bruce Taylor, had gone off shift at seven. Either of them would come if Tessa called, but it would take more than twenty minutes to drive out to the cemetery.

After notifying dispatch, she used her cell phone to text her fiancé, park ranger Logan Wilde. As park ranger, Logan was part of the island’s small law enforcement community. The state park bordered the cemetery on the far side, and an evening scouting activity had kept him at the park office late. If he was still at work, he could be here in a few minutes. Graveyard activity was likely nothing more than a prank or vandalism, but she would always choose to have backup if it was an option. She put away her phone and eased her flashlight from her duty belt.

A three-quarter moon shone from the clear sky. As she walked, she listened for sounds beneath the usual buzzing of insects. A gravel lane divided the cemetery into sections and provided access for hearses and heavy equipment. Headstones, monuments, and benches decorated each area.

As she neared the center, she paused and strained her ears. She sensed motion ahead and heard the scrape of a shovel through dirt.

Any doubt she'd had about the kids' story evaporated. Tessa eased around an obelisk. Three rows of headstones separated her from a dark-clothed figure that stood a few feet below the earth. A grave robber in Widow's? That was a first.

The intruder wore dark, baggy clothes and a sweatshirt with the hood pulled up. He—or she—inserted the shovel into the ground and flung dirt out of the grave. Tessa eased forward, trying to get closer before the grave robber saw her. Her boot crunched on gravel. The figure stiffened and turned. With the hood raised, Tessa could see only blackness where the face should have been. The effect was eerie. No wonder the kids had been scared.

Tessa aimed her flashlight, clicked it on, and shouted, "Freeze! Sheriff's department!"

Instead of freezing, the figure spun away from the light, leaped out of the grave like a gazelle, and bolted between two tall headstones. They snatched a rectangular object, maybe a box, from the grass and raced away with it clutched in their arms.

Tessa was armed but wouldn't open fire unless she was faced with a life-or-death situation. She did not see a weapon on the fleeing person, which meant she had only one option: give chase. As much as she loved hiking, running sucked.

Damn.

Tessa sprinted after the figure. Her hand went to her cell phone. She speed-dialed Logan. "I'm in pursuit of suspect, on foot, traveling north toward the back entrance of Bishop State Park."

“I’m on my way,” Logan responded, his voice tense. “ETA four minutes.”

Tessa ended the call and saved her breath for running. Darting between a giant angel and a stone bench, she caught a quick glimpse of the suspect racing between two statues. She increased her speed. With the suspect carrying what appeared to be a box, Tessa knew she should be able to catch up.

She dug the balls of her feet into the earth to run faster. The toe of her boot caught, sending her sprawling face first. She flung out her hands to break her fall and landed on her belly, the air whooshing from her lungs. Her chin scraped on the ground, her teeth snapped together, and her knees struck something unforgiving: the flat grave marker she’d tripped over.

After clambering to her feet, she started running again. Her quarry had gained ground and was nearing the four-foot-tall black fence that surrounded the cemetery. Tessa ran faster, ignoring her screaming lungs and burning thigh muscles, closing the gap between them. She could still catch up. The suspect would not be able to climb the fence while carrying a box. As if reading Tessa’s mind, the suspect glanced over their shoulder.

Tessa pumped her arms. She was only thirty or so feet behind now.

The suspect dropped the box, took two additional long strides, and vaulted over the low fence. Tessa wasn’t tall enough to clear the fence in a vault. She stopped and scrambled over, then broke into a run across the grass. But the suspect had drawn away. Regular hiking kept her fit, but her suspect was faster. Deep woods sat on the other side of a meadow the size of a football field.

By the time Tessa arrived at the edge of the trees, there was no sign of her suspect. She slowed to a stop. Bending at the waist, she rested her hands on her thighs and gasped for air. She swept the beam of her flashlight across the ground. No footprints.

Where would they go? She conjured up a mental map of the area. If the suspect turned left, they'd emerge from the woods near Orcas Road. If they continued straight, they'd run into Bishop State Park.

Headlights swept across the meadow, and Tessa recognized Logan's battered Range Rover. It bounced across the ground and stopped next to her. Logan, still in his dark-green Washington State Forest Ranger uniform, stepped out of the SUV. "Which way did he go?"

She waved toward the woods.

Logan scanned the ground with his own flashlight. "The ground is too dry here for footprints."

"Yes," Tessa agreed.

In the near distance, a high-pitched engine started up.

Logan's head cocked. "Dirt bike or quad."

"Shit." Tessa stared into the darkness of the forest. They didn't stand a chance of catching the culprit tonight.

Logan sighed. "Tomorrow, I'll hike into the forest and look for tracks."

"I'll go with you." She gave him a rundown of the chase. "The suspect dropped the box near the fence."

Logan shone his light at her uniform. Tessa glanced down. Grass stains streaked her uniform.

He frowned. "You're okay?"

She brushed dirt off her sleeve. "I'm fine."

He shook his head. "Let's go see what was in the box." He gave her a ride back to the cemetery fence.

Tired, she hoisted herself back over the fence with far less grace than the first adrenaline-fueled climb. Tall and still army ranger fit, Logan hopped the fence with little effort. Tessa used her flashlight to search the weeds for the box the suspect had dropped.

She spotted a cardboard box in the shadow of a neighboring headstone. Tessa walked to it. Crouching, she opened the flap and shone the beam of her flashlight inside. A human skull stared back at her.

Startled, Tessa dropped the flap and fell backward. The sight was not what she'd been expecting at all.

Bones can't hurt you.

She lifted the lid again.

Logan squatted next to her. "What the . . . ?" His dark brow lowered. "It's a box of bones."

Tessa took several photos of the box with her phone to mark its location.

"I'll carry it." Logan held out his hands and curled his fingers in a *gimme* gesture.

Tessa gave him a pair of gloves, which he tugged on before picking up the box. Then they returned to the Range Rover, and he drove her through the rear gate of the cemetery and back to the graveside. They got out and walked to the grave. Tessa picked up the abandoned shovel with gloved hands, taking care not to touch the handle. She hadn't seen gloves on the suspect, and she was hoping to lift fingerprints.

The suspected robber had dug only a small hole, about three feet square and two feet deep, in the center of an unmarked grave.

"This grave is fresh," Logan said. "The sod hasn't taken root, and there's no headstone."

Headstones weren't usually erected until at least six months after a burial. The ground needed time to settle.

"A fresh grave would be easier to dig up." Tessa looked into the hole, but it was empty. The robber hadn't dug nearly far enough to reach the coffin. She glanced back at the box of bones and understood. "The suspect wasn't trying to dig up a coffin. He or she wanted to bury the bones in the grave."

2

Worried, Logan watched Tessa pace back and forth in an examination room of the island's only medical clinic. A bruise was forming on her cheekbone.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked, pointing to his own face.

She waved off his concern. "I've had worse."

They had taken formal statements from the three boys and driven them home before meeting the doctor at his office with the bones. It was now nearly midnight, and Logan was jonesing for coffee.

The box of bones sat open on an examination table. Dr. Henry Powers repositioned his gooseneck medical lamp to shine into the box and donned gloves. Henry was the island's only doctor, and he'd unknowingly inherited the job of coroner along with his medical practice. "The bones will be sent to a forensic anthropologist. But you probably won't get the analysis back for some time. Let me see if I can give you any information."

Unless they found exigent circumstances to warrant asking for a rush, they'd have to wait their turn.

"First of all, let's make one hundred percent sure it's human." Henry leaned over the box.

Logan had seen plenty of animal bones in the state forest. The bones of a raccoon's paw looked like those from a child's hand. A deer femur could be confused with a human one. He had no doubt the skull in the box was human.

Henry leaned over the box and pointed at the skull. "Turtle shells can be confused with human skull pieces, but an intact human skull is definitely distinctive."

After photographing the bones in the box from multiple angles, Henry began to lay them out on the exam table in the general shape of a person, starting with the skull. A white

sheet covered the table. Henry would send the sheet with the bones to the medical examiner's office on the mainland to retain any trace evidence. He bent closer to examine the jawbone and teeth. "We're lucky that most of the teeth are present. The teeth are straight, and there are several composite resin fillings. Look here." Henry pointed to the back of the lower front teeth. "This metal bar is a permanent retainer. The victim wore braces at one point."

"Someone cared about them enough to make sure they received good dental care," Tessa said.

Henry added pieces of the neck, spine, and pelvis. "A female past puberty, likely older than twelve but younger than eighteen."

Logan felt a little sick. A box of bones was impersonal, but arranged in the shape of a skeleton, the remains became very human. This victim had been a kid. Someone's daughter. He pictured a little girl going to the dentist and picking a prize out of a box, then a teenager with a mouthful of braces.

An image of another dead child—a war victim he hadn't been able to save—flashed in his mind. He felt the heat of the explosion on his skin, choked on the smoke and dust in the air, heard the screams of the wounded.

Stop!

He wasn't in the army or Afghanistan. He breathed and focused on the room around him. The smell of disinfectant in the air. The slight earthy scent emanating from the box of bones. The sound of Henry moving around the exam table and muttering to himself. The squeak of Tessa's rubber-soled boots on the tile floor.

The skeleton being pieced together on the exam table.

This child was long past saving, but Logan could help bring her justice.

Tessa made a note in her spiral notepad. Logan could read her scrawl upside down. *Female teenager.*

"Any idea how she died or how long she's been dead?" Tessa lifted her pen and waited expectantly.

“Not yet.” Henry added more bones of the arms, legs, and pelvis. He filled in some ribs and portions of the spine. Becoming coroner might have been a surprise to Henry, but he clearly took the responsibility seriously. Logan was impressed with the doctor’s continuous efforts to expand his knowledge.

Henry measured a thighbone. “The femur makes up approximately one-quarter of the body’s height. She was approximately sixty-four inches tall, give or take an inch.”

Tessa wrote another note.

Henry placed a few more bones and glanced back into the box. “We probably have about seventy-five percent of these remains. Mostly small bones are missing.” He placed an arm bone, then paused, turning it over in his hands. “This is weird.”

Tessa and Logan moved closer.

Henry set down the bone and pulled out a pair of reading glasses. He adjusted his lamp, then changed to fresh gloves and pointed to the end of the femur. “This looks like a saw mark.” He checked the ends of the other long bones. “Here too. And here.” He straightened, his eyes meeting Tessa’s gaze, then Logan’s.

“Saw marks on the joints of the large bones.” Dread rose in Logan’s throat.

The doctor paled. “I think she was dismembered.”

“Postmortem?” Tessa asked.

“I hope so,” Henry said. “But I can’t say for certain.”

“Still means she was murdered,” Logan said, though he’d known the case was murder from the beginning.

“Yes.” Tessa echoed Logan’s thoughts. “People who die of natural causes or accidents aren’t kept in boxes.”

Henry reached into the box for another bone. “This might be the clue we need. This ulna was broken and stabilized with a bone plate and screws.”

Logan peered over the doctor's shoulder. "Do medical devices have serial numbers we can track?"

Henry shrugged. "Many manufacturers use serial numbers, but there's no centralized database to search."

Tessa tapped her pen on her notebook. "But if there was a missing person report filed, the injury and repair *should* be noted and will make identification of the remains easier."

"Correct." Henry pointed to another mark on a bone. "These look like teeth marks."

"Let's hope those are from animal predation on the corpse," Tessa said in a grim voice.

They all went silent for a few seconds. Logan did not want to think about cannibalism.

Henry cleared his throat. "The anthropologist should be able to give us more information on the type of teeth that gnawed on the bones."

Logan leaned over to examine some shallow gouges in another bone. "The body or body parts could have been left outside or buried at some point."

"Which would also explain some missing bones," Tessa said. "Animals carry off body parts."

Henry gave the bones another thorough inspection, then stepped away. "That's about all I can tell you. I'll inventory these bones and send them to the medical examiner on the mainland in the morning."

"The ferry is down," Logan said. "Might be a day before it's up and running again."

Tessa sighed. "I can't justify the cost of emergency transport. The remains aren't fresh. It's hard to argue that one extra day would make a huge difference in the outcome of the case. She's clearly been dead a long time."

The ferry system in Washington State was typically very reliable, but Widow's was less busy than the nearby San Juan Islands. Outside the summer tourist season, their island wasn't the highest priority for ferry repairs.

“On the bright side,” Logan said, “without the ferry running, our suspect will have a harder time getting off the island.”

“We’ll need to secure the remains until then.” Tessa frowned.

“Evidence locker at the station would be more secure than Henry’s office.” Logan met Tessa’s gaze.

A few weeks ago, Henry had been kidnapped. He’d dislocated his shoulder in a nasty fall. Logan didn’t want him to be a target or suffer any additional physical or mental trauma. Though she said nothing, Logan could tell that Tessa agreed.

She nodded to Logan, then turned back to Henry. “Call me after you catalog the bones. I’ll secure them at the station.”

“Will do.” Henry scanned the rough skeleton. “Give me a couple of hours.”

“Okay.” Tessa turned to leave.

“Hold on.” Henry peeled off his gloves and washed his hands. “Let me have a look at that cheek.”

“It’s okay,” Tessa said. “Nothing’s broken.”

Henry crossed his arms.

Tessa sighed. “Fine.”

Henry changed his gloves, then probed her cheek. “You’re right. I don’t think anything is broken. Ice will help minimize any swelling and bruising.”

Tessa nodded, but they all knew she wouldn’t bother.

Henry stood. “You don’t want a bruise on your face for your wedding.”

Tessa shrugged. “It’s nothing a little concealer won’t fix.”

Logan stifled a laugh at the very-typical-Tessa response. She was practical almost to a fault.

“We’ll touch base in a couple of hours.” Henry made an ice pack for Tessa; then he walked them to the door. Logan

followed Tessa outside. The locks engaged with a snicking sound.

“Do you think the suspect will try to steal them back?” Logan asked.

“Who knows?” Tessa lifted both shoulders. “They tried to run away with the bones, so the bones are clearly important.”

“What do we do now?”

“Go to the station to research missing teenagers. Hopefully, someone reported this girl missing.” Tessa stepped into her vehicle.

Logan drove his Range Rover to the satellite station, which was barely bigger than a double-wide, with two desks and a holding cell the size of an elevator. In the corner, a microwave and coffee machine were stacked on a minifridge.

Tessa dusted the shovel handle for fingerprints, then photographed them before lifting the prints with tape. “I’ll send the digital prints to the fingerprint examiner so he can run them through IAFIS in the morning.” The FBI’s Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System contained tens of millions of fingerprints. She leaned back in her chair and pressed the ice pack to the side of her face.

Logan made two cups of coffee. “Most brides would be very upset with a bruised face a week before their wedding.”

Tessa shrugged. “The wedding will be fun. Why obsess about things I can’t control? Allowing little things to make me crazy would take away from the enjoyment. I have enough responsibilities. I refuse to turn our wedding into another chore.” Tessa’s mother suffered from dementia. In addition to caring for her mother, Tessa had taken over parenting responsibilities for her teenage sister. She tilted her head. “Does it bother you that I’m not worried about the wedding? Am I too practical?”

Logan handed her a cup, then kissed her. “I love every inch of your practicality.”

She kissed him back. “I love every inch of you too.”

“You know how I feel. We already live together.” Logan had moved in to help Tessa manage her mother and sister. “As long as I get to spend the rest of my life with you, I’m good.”

They shared another, slower kiss. Tessa closed her eyes, and Logan felt the tension in his body loosen. She really was all he needed.

Her eyes fluttered open. “We’d better get back to work.” She pointed to a white bag on the counter. “I snagged a couple of blueberry fritters from the bakery before my shift. My brain needs sugar.”

Logan brought her a fritter and a napkin. He ate his in three bites.

“Take the second computer.” Tessa pointed to the desk next to hers. “I’ll search for similar crimes in NCIC.” The National Crime Information Center database was a clearinghouse where law enforcement agencies across the country shared crime details. “Would you start with NamUs?” The National Missing and Unidentified Persons System kept information on both missing persons and unidentified remains.

Logan switched on the computer. While sipping his coffee, he entered his initial search parameters: females who went missing between the ages of twelve and eighteen in the state of Washington. He could always broaden the search if he didn’t get results that matched their bones. There were sixty-three missing females between the ages of twelve and eighteen in the state of Washington. Logan entered an approximate height of five feet two to five feet six to narrow the search, returning thirty-six possible results. He opened each record and scrolled down to distinctive physical features. Hopefully, whoever had reported their Jane Doe missing had given the police the information about her broken arm and the surgical repair.

Two hours later, Logan was nearly at the bottom of the list and considering including records from neighboring states. The majority of records contained appallingly little information, as if no one had cared enough about them to bother entering much data. He opened the file for Alyssa

Collins. Someone had cared about Alyssa. Her file contained plenty of details.

Logan scrolled down to the physical description. In the box for distinctive physical features, the text read: *Scar on left forearm, bone plate and screw in left ulna*. There couldn't be two missing girls with identical injuries.

"I think I found her." Logan moved to the *Circumstances of Disappearance* box and read aloud: "Seventeen-year-old Alyssa Collins lived on Bainbridge Island. She disappeared from her bedroom in the middle of the night nine months ago. She took a backpack of clothes and possibly ran away to meet someone she communicated with online."

Logan stared at the girl's photo. Alyssa had been a pretty young girl, with long dark hair and brown eyes. Her smile was full of straight teeth. Was it really Alyssa? It had to be. How many missing girls had a bone plate on their left arm?

"Is a law enforcement contact listed?" Tessa asked.

"Yes." Logan wrote down the name and number of the detective in charge of the case. He checked the time. "I need to be at the park in the morning. There's a youth group coming in for an overnight. I'll need to check them in."

"I can't make calls or knock on doors until a civilized hour anyway," Tessa said. "I'll wait until later to phone the detective for case details. Once we make contact, Henry can confirm the girl's ID with medical records, but for now, I think we can assume the body is Alyssa. It isn't likely there are two missing girls who had bone plates on their forearms."

"Who will perform the death notification?" Logan asked.

Tessa turned up a palm. "Probably the detective in charge of the missing person case. It should be done in person. That isn't news anyone should receive over the phone."

"No. I shouldn't be relieved we won't have to do it." Guilt washed over Logan.

Tessa shook her head. "It's a terrible responsibility."

They sat in silence for a few seconds. Tomorrow, Alyssa Collins's parents would learn their daughter's terrible fate.

3

At seven in the morning, Tessa's stomach rumbled as she parked in front of Black Tail Bakery. Bruce had come on duty, and the bones were now safely stored in the evidence locker. Logan had headed off to the state park. In lieu of sleep, she needed caffeine and sugar.

She climbed out of her vehicle and walked into the bakery. Tessa's best friend since childhood, Cate, had bought the bakery and bookstore a few months back. Cate was also Logan's sister.

The bell rang as she pushed the glass door open. Tessa inhaled. The store smelled like heaven. She waited until Cate had rung up three customers and the store went quiet.

"Finally, the church lull," Cate said. "We'll have a huge rush before and after services—" Cate stared at Tessa. "You're going to need some heavy-duty concealer for that."

"Yeah. I know." Tessa sighed.

Cate shook her head. "What can I get you?"

"Three breakfast sandwiches." Tessa leaned on the counter. She'd bring food home for her mother and sister too.

"With or without bacon?" Cate asked.

Tessa gave her a look.

"Extra bacon it is." Cate selected everything bagels from the case. "You have good timing. I'm ready for second breakfast."

Tessa followed her into the back of the bakery, where Cate's grandmother, Jane Sutton, was icing a tray of her famous cinnamon buns. At a long table, the third member of their childhood trio, Samantha Bishop, decorated sugar cookies with icing orcas. Tessa gave Sam a quick hug.

Tessa resisted the urge to scarf down five or six of the cinnamon buns. She might be relaxed about the wedding, but

she would like to be able to zip her dress up next week. A loaded breakfast sandwich *and* cinnamon buns seemed excessive.

But she still wanted them.

“How do you feel?” Tessa asked.

“Pretty good.” Cate cut the bagels, put the slices in the toaster, and rested a hand on her belly. Still early in her pregnancy, Cate didn’t look even remotely pregnant yet. “Though I’ve had some weird food cravings. All I want this week is bacon.”

Tessa laughed. “Nothing wrong with that.”

Cate and Henry had married a few weeks ago. Her friend’s happiness made Tessa excited for her own wedding.

Sam picked up the tray of finished cookies and headed to the front of the shop. Tessa waited until she’d disappeared to talk to Cate about the case. Tessa was hesitant to discuss any violence in Sam’s presence. Sam had been kidnapped as a child and held for years. She’d borne a son in captivity. Tessa and Cate sheltered her as much as possible.

“Henry told me about the bones.” Before becoming a local shopkeeper, Cate had been a special agent for the FBI, which was one reason Tessa had stopped for breakfast—to pick Cate’s brain.

“I wanted to ask you if you ever dealt with a case of someone trying to bury remains in a cemetery.”

“No.” Cate broke eggs into a frying pan and warmed up slices of precooked bacon. “Usually, people are trying to steal from graves.”

“Right?” Tessa poured herself a cup of coffee.

Jane returned the icing to the cooler. “Will you need someone to sit with your mother today, Tessa? I assume you’ll be working the case.” Jane ran the Widow’s Island Knitting and Activist group. The island had an official government, but the knitting group was the organization that really kept the

island running like a slightly rusty machine. Tessa's mother needed constant supervision, and the knitters took turns.

"That would be very helpful." Tessa tried not to overburden her younger sister. "Patience is supposed to hang out with a friend. I hate to ask her to give up her whole Sunday, and I could use Logan's help with the investigation."

"I'll arrange it." Jane pulled her cell phone from the pocket of her apron and stepped out the back door. A second later, she returned. "It's done. Someone will be there within the hour."

"Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you." But Tessa knew the answer. Without the group's assistance, her mother would need to be moved to a memory-care facility. The closest one was on the mainland. Even with help, Tessa knew that caring for her mother would become more challenging over time, which was why she and Logan had rushed their wedding plans. She wanted her mother to be there when she married.

"It's a two-way street," Jane assured her. "You serve us, and we help you do so. We are a community." She tore off a piece of a cinnamon bun and popped it into her mouth. "Some people are connected to the island and don't do well once they leave. I think your mother is one of those people."

Tessa didn't believe in superstition, but she did trust Jane's instincts, which was the reason she was doing everything in her power to keep her mother at home. "I think you're right."

The bagel slices popped. Cate plucked them from the toaster and assembled the sandwiches. She wrapped each in wax paper, put them in a bag, and handed the bag to Tessa.

Tessa sniffed it and smiled. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Cate refilled her own coffee mug.

Tessa drained her coffee, then wiped her mouth. "My suspect went to considerable effort to attempt to bury some bones in the cemetery. They could have just tossed them out with the trash, thrown them off a boat, or stuck them in a hole

anywhere. Choosing the cemetery was risky, with a much greater chance of being seen. Can you think of a reason someone would do this?"

Cate leaned against the stainless steel prep table and sipped her coffee. Her face went thoughtful. A minute later, she said, "Respect and guilt come to mind."

Tessa let the words sink in. "Giving the remains a proper burial."

Jane agreed with a solemn nod. "A cemetery is consecrated ground."

"Maybe they knew the victim," Tessa mused.

Cate added, "Or they're religious and had an attack of guilt."

"So burying the victim somehow absolves them?" Tessa asked. "Now I wonder if *they* killed the victim, or did they acquire the bones another way?"

"Both good questions." Cate wiped her hands on her apron.

The doorbell rang, and Cate headed for the front of the shop.

Tessa said goodbye to Jane and followed Cate. "Thanks for the help and the breakfast."

"Glad to help." Cate turned to her customer.

Tessa drove home. In the yard, her sixteen-year-old sister, Patience, waved from the chicken enclosure. Tessa stepped out of her vehicle and carried the bakery bag to the wire-and-frame door. "I brought breakfast sandwiches."

"Great." But Patience looked worried. "I can't find Killer Hen."

"She's not in the coop?" Tessa glanced around. Most of the chickens were friendly, but the alpha hen despised Tessa with every feather of her fluttery being. If Killer was outside the pen, she typically attacked Tessa.

“No. I walked the yard too.” Patience scattered the last of the chicken feed from her bucket. “No sign of her.”

“Does Mom know she’s missing?” Tessa didn’t see any blood or loose feathers that would indicate the hen had been taken by a fox or hawk.

“Not yet.” Patience left the enclosure and fastened the door. “I don’t know how she got out. The door was latched when I came out.”

“Who knows how she ever gets out?” Tessa turned in a circle and scanned the yard but saw no sign of the chicken.

“What are we going to tell Mom?” Patience headed for the house.

“Nothing.” Tessa fell into step beside her sister. “The hen usually turns up.”

“I hope so.”

Killer was their mother’s favorite. Tessa would have given the birds away a long time ago. They required a surprising amount of upkeep. But they gave her mother joy, something she had very little of these days.

Patience left her rubber boots on the porch, and they went inside. Their mother sat in the kitchen, staring into a cup. Patience had helped her dress, but Mom’s hair was still tangled around her face. Her focus was vague as she watched Patience and Tessa wash their hands.

“She wouldn’t let me brush her hair.” Patience went to the cabinet and took out plates.

“You did good.” Tessa unwrapped the sandwiches.

Patience flushed. She tried to help care for their mother, but Tessa tried just as hard to give Patience as normal a life as possible.

“I have to go back to work today,” Tessa said. “But Jane is sending someone to sit with Mom.”

Relief crossed Patience’s face, then guilt. “I shouldn’t be so happy about passing off Mom’s care.”

“You’re too hard on yourself. You need to recharge. We all do. That’s why we share the load.”

“I want to do my share,” Patience said.

“And I appreciate that.” Tessa set a sandwich in front of her mother. “Hi, Mom.”

Without acknowledging Tessa’s greeting, her mother disassembled her sandwich and picked up a slice of bacon. They ate a peaceful meal. Then Tessa showered and donned a fresh uniform. By the time she left the house, her mom was settled in a rocking chair on the front porch. Another woman sat in the rocker beside her.

“Bonnie, would you wind this yarn?” the woman asked. Tessa’s mother took the yarn with shaky hands and began to ball it up on autopilot.

Grateful, Tessa said goodbye and climbed back in her vehicle. She drove to the station, studied a map of the island, and found four houses with a view of the cemetery. Out of the four, three were full-time residences. The fourth appeared to be a vacation home, as the owner listed a permanent address in Oregon. Initial background checks found nothing more serious than traffic tickets for any of the homeowners.

At nine o’clock, she felt it was late enough to start making calls and knocking on doors. While she drove, she called the law enforcement contact listed for Alyssa Collins’s missing person case, Detective Hillary Kreisler of the Bainbridge Island PD. The call went to voice mail, and Tessa left a message.

Tessa parked in front of the first house on her list. Municipal records listed the homeowner as Lillian Marshall. Ms. Marshall had purchased the home the past July. Her previous residence was registered as Seattle, Washington.

She stepped out of her vehicle and walked to the door. A slim woman in her midtwenties answered her knock.

Tessa started to introduce herself, but the woman stopped her. “I know who you are.” She tucked her smooth black hair behind her ear. “I’m Lillian Marshall.”

“I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Of course.” Lillian stepped back and gestured for Tessa to enter. “Please come in.”

They walked back to a sunroom. Walls of glass overlooked the graveyard.

“Can I get you coffee or iced tea?”

“No, thank you.” Tessa sat on a wicker sofa. A lean, muscular dog lifted its head and gave her a side-eye before getting up and shuffling over for a head scratch.

“That’s Einstein.”

Tessa rubbed the dog’s ear. He leaned into her hand. “What kind of dog is he?”

“Who knows? The vet thinks he’s a pit-bull-and-sight-hound cross of some sort.” Lillian lifted a shoulder. “He’s my running buddy. I feel safer living alone with a dog in the house.”

“Do you not feel safe living here?”

“I don’t know many people. I only moved here over the summer.”

“Not many people move *to* Widow’s.”

“I’m a sixth-grade science teacher. Your school had an opening.” Lillian followed Tessa’s gaze to the graveyard. “People think I’m crazy for buying a house next to the cemetery, but it’s quiet. I never have issues with those neighbors.” Her blue eyes sparkled with humor as she eased into a wicker rocker. “The house was a really good deal, and I’m not afraid of ghosts. It’s the living who will hurt you.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Tessa said.

“Now, what can I do for you, Deputy Black?”

“Were you home last night?”

“Yes.” Lillian nodded.

“Did you see any unusual activity in the cemetery?”

“I don’t know if I’d call it unusual, but there was activity.” Lillian shifted forward in the rocker. “Some kids were running around with flashlights, like they do.” Her tone was unconcerned.

“You don’t mind?”

Lillian waved. “Not at all. I like kids, and they don’t mean any harm. What’s the point of being kids if you can’t scare each other in the graveyard?”

“Did you see anyone else?” Tessa asked.

“I saw someone walking around the cemetery just after dark. They were carrying a box.”

“Can you describe this person?”

Lillian studied the ceiling. “Tall and thin. Dark, baggy clothes. Hoodie.” She lowered her gaze. “I couldn’t even say for sure if it was a man or woman, but the way they moved made me think it was a young person. I’m sorry. I didn’t really pay that much attention. I thought maybe they were carrying flowers or a grave blanket.”

“That’s a totally reasonable conclusion.”

“But that’s not what they were carrying,” Lillian guessed.

“No.” Tessa hesitated. How much should she tell Lillian? Did it matter? The unusual find would no doubt soon be on the news. Plus, Widow’s Island was a small community. Secrets didn’t remain secret for long. “The box was full of human bones.”

Lillian’s eyebrows rose, but she didn’t appear upset. “I didn’t expect to hear that.”

“It surprised us as well. It seems this person was trying to bury the bones in the cemetery.”

“That’s strange.” Lillian’s face creased.

“Have you noticed any unusual activity around the cemetery lately?”

“Maybe. This road turns into a dirt lane. The house at the dead end is a rental. A couple moved in about a month ago.

Einstein and I used to run that lane every morning. One day a few weeks ago, I saw the man watching us through a window.” She shivered. “Now we take a different route.”

“Did they say or do anything to intimidate you?”

“No. But there was something about the way he stared . . .” Lillian hesitated. “It made me very uncomfortable. All the hairs on my neck stood up, and I’m not normally nervous. Anyway, the person in the graveyard could have been him. He’s tall and about my age.”

“Thanks for the information. I didn’t know anyone was living there. If you think of anything else, please call me.” Tessa left her business card on the coffee table.

Lillian followed her to the door. As she stepped outside, Tessa heard the sound of an axe hitting wood. She glanced back at Lillian. “I thought you lived alone.”

Lillian blushed. “That’s my brother. He’s just visiting.”

Suspicion crawled up the back of Tessa’s neck. “When did he arrive?”

Lillian glanced away. “I don’t know. A week or so ago.” When she turned back to Tessa, she didn’t quite meet her eyes. “I don’t remember exactly.”

But Tessa could see the lie in her eyes. Lillian remembered but didn’t want to say.

“What’s his name?”

Lillian’s jaw shifted back and forth. “Duncan.”

Tessa waved goodbye, then started around the house after Duncan. When she reached the backyard, a tall man was positioning a log upright on a stump. He lifted an axe and swung it downward in a smooth arc. The log split, the pieces falling to the ground.

“Hello? Duncan?” Tessa called out.

He lowered the axe, but he clenched the handle tight enough to whiten his knuckles.

Tessa introduced herself. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"About what?" Duncan rocked back on his heels. His features were similar to his sister's, but his straight black hair was cut short. Lillian's blue eyes held humor. His projected anger.

"There was a disturbance in the cemetery last night. Did you see or hear anything unusual?"

Duncan's shoulders relaxed. "No. I went to bed early."

"It wasn't late. About ten o'clock."

He stamped the head of the axe on the ground. "I was asleep."

"So you didn't see or hear anything?"

"No." He positioned another log on the stump and cleaved it in two with one powerful swing of the axe.

"Thank you." Tessa backed away. She returned to her vehicle and drove to the end of the lane, stopping fifty feet from the quaint A-frame. She saw no sign of occupancy. No vehicle in the driveway. No people visible through the large windows. She got out of her vehicle, walked to the front door, and knocked. No one answered.

Her skin tingled. She felt eyes on her. Stepping back, she scanned the house. A flash in one of the windows caught her attention, but she wasn't sure if it had been the reflection of sunlight on the glass or if someone was actually inside.

Watching her.

When nothing moved in the next few minutes, she returned to her SUV and used the dashboard computer to access property and tax records. The property seemed to be a second home, owned by Nicolas Gorzala, whose primary address was in Oregon.

Maybe he'd rented the house or let a friend use it? She pulled up Mr. Gorzala's contact number, which was listed as a cell phone. The call went to voice mail, and she left a message asking for a return call.

Next she ran a background check on Duncan Marshall. It didn't take long to find him. He'd been released from prison a year ago after serving almost eight years for manslaughter.

It was almost time to meet Logan. She used her radio to call Bruce, who was on patrol. He was tied up with a fender bender but volunteered to help her with background information on Duncan. A violent felon immediately went to the top of her suspect list.

4

Logan had stopped at home for a combat nap, a shower, and breakfast before filling his thermos with coffee and driving out to the state park. He'd barely left his Range Rover when the cars pulled in and a dozen teenagers piled out. He checked the group's permit, reviewed their planned hike, and gave them the standard park rules and safety spiel. Due to dry conditions, the entire park was under a fire ban. The group would have to survive on cold meals.

He handed out trail maps. Each teen wore a backpack. They were well equipped with sleeping bags and tents. Luckily, the weather in September was generally mild, and they should be comfortable enough without a campfire. The leader's backpack was larger, containing emergency and first aid supplies and a satellite phone. Cell coverage in the park was spotty.

Satisfied, Logan watched them walk off, the boys bouncing and jostling for position as they made their way to the trailhead. Then he grabbed his pack, left the office, and drove to the area of the park closest to the cemetery. He parked in the same location as the night before and waited for Tessa.

A few minutes later, she pulled up next to his SUV. They met behind their vehicles and opened their cargo hatches. Instead of her regular daypack, Tessa shrugged into a large backpack. "I interviewed a woman who lives next to the cemetery. Her brother is staying with her. He just served time for manslaughter."

"Do you know what he did?"

She shook her head. "Bruce is digging into the case details for me."

"Definitely a red flag."

"Yes," she agreed, adjusting the straps on her pack.

"What are you bringing?" Logan usually carried a full pack. As a ranger, he liked to be prepared for emergencies.

Tessa changed into her hiking boots. “I have a small crime scene kit, including impression-casting materials in case we find a decent footprint or tire track.”

“Then let’s go.” Logan led the way to the spot where they’d lost track of their suspect the previous night. In the daylight, he found a rough game trail and followed it.

A short distance down the trail, they crossed a shallow stream. Logan stopped and pointed to the ground. “Look here.”

Dirt bike tracks dug into the muddy stream bank. She squatted to examine the impressions. “I can cast these.”

Logan spotted an area of flattened weeds at the base of a tree. “Looks like a heavy object was parked here.”

“Like the suspect left the bike leaning against the tree,” Tessa suggested. She stood and squinted down the trail. “We’re only fifty feet from the edge of the woods. This would be a good place to park it if you wanted to keep it out of sight.”

Tessa lowered her backpack to the ground, took out her camera, and handed it to Logan. He captured the tracks at multiple angles and noted the GPS coordinates while Tessa organized the casting materials she’d brought with her.

He lowered the camera. “I’m finished.”

She added water to the plastic bag containing the powdered dental stone, then kneaded the bag and added more water until the material reached a batter-like consistency. When the mixture was ready, Tessa held a paint stirrer over the track to gently disperse the mixture into the impression. Swift work was important. The materials would set quickly. After the entire impression was filled, Tessa used the paint stirrer to smooth the top of the material.

“What are you doing?” Logan asked.

“I need a flat area to write on so I can label the finished cast with the case number, GPS coordinates, and date.”

Twenty minutes later, the cast was dry and felt like ceramic. She lifted the cast, leaving a thin layer of dirt attached to its surface, and set it in an open cardboard box. The cast was set enough to lift and handle with care but should be allowed to dry completely before being stored in a closed container. They carried it back to her patrol vehicle and locked it inside before returning to the trail.

The ground was dry and the soil packed. The dirt bike had left only the occasional mark when it had strayed to the deeper, looser soil at the edges of the trail. But if the suspect had turned off, Logan would see broken foliage. He reached a sharp turn in the trail. He gestured toward a section of flattened underbrush and a fresh scar on a tree trunk. "It looks like the bike skidded off the trail into this tree."

Tessa bent and examined a trail of smashed underbrush. "This could be where they dragged the bike back to the trail."

"The driver probably isn't an experienced rider if they didn't slow enough to navigate this tight bend in the dark." Logan studied the trail. Sunlight glinted off a metal object. "Hold on. I see something." He moved closer and spotted a metal ring nestled in the weeds.

"A key ring," Tessa said.

Logan studied the ground again. "Could have fallen out of their pocket when they crashed the bike."

"Would you get pictures?" Tessa lowered her pack and rummaged in it for an evidence-collection bag. She filled out the label while Logan took photos and noted the GPS location. All evidence needed a clear chain of custody, beginning with discovery and collection.

After putting on a glove, Tessa picked up the key ring. A single key dangled from the metal circle. Silver and shaped like a ferry, the key chain itself was a souvenir from the Anacortes ferry station, where visitors caught the ferry from the mainland to Widow's Island.

"It would be nice if we found the lock this key opens." Tessa put the key ring in an evidence bag and stuffed it into

her backpack. “Where do you think they went?”

“Up the trail.” Logan pointed north. The trail curved and became steeper.

Tessa looked up and grimaced. “Thankfully, we’ve been hiking regularly.”

He grinned at her over his shoulder. “You’re keeping up just fine.”

“If this trail gets any steeper, I’ll be saving my breath.”

Logan’s muscles warmed, and he settled into his stride. He loved hiking in the cool forest. After being deployed in Afghanistan, he never wanted to set foot in a desert again. In the lush Pacific Northwest, he could hike all day—and often did. The trail continued with a steady but not steep incline. An hour later, he caught a faint whiff of smoke in his nostrils.

He stopped and turned. “Do you smell that?”

Tessa sniffed. “Smoke.”

He turned, scanning his surroundings.

“Can you tell where it’s coming from?” Tessa asked.

“This way.” He followed the scent into the brush for about twenty feet. The trail opened into a small clearing, where someone had made a crude campsite. In the center, the remains of a fire smoldered near a small tent. Anger flared in Logan’s chest. “They could have started a major wildfire.”

Tessa propped her hands on her hips. “Careless idiot.”

Campers needed to make reservations to book an authorized campsite in Bishop State Park. This was not an authorized location, and the only reservation for tonight had been the youth group. Annual or one-day passes were required for all visitors. A ranger wasn’t always at the entrance. Logan was the only park ranger, though he sometimes employed a part-timer for the busiest weeks of summer. The park utilized an automated pay station and depended on the honor system. Most people respected the rules, but there was always one.

Like this one.

Cursing, he took a small collapsible shovel from his pack and piled dirt on the embers until he was sure the fire was extinguished. Once safety had been addressed, Logan took in the crude campsite. The ring of rocks encircling the fire was a sorry effort to contain the blaze. A mere five feet separated the fire from the surrounding underbrush, and it wouldn't have taken more than a breath of wind to carry an ember to the bone-dry fir needles carpeting the ground.

Logan surveyed the area. He spotted a metal can next to the fire. He picked up the can. Water. Probably boiled in the can. Socks and boxer briefs had been hung to dry over a low branch. "He's male, from the clothes." He gauged the ashes in the fire. "Doesn't look like he's been camping here very long."

Tessa stuck her head inside the tent. She glanced back at Logan and lowered her voice. "And he isn't far away. He left his backpack here." She emerged. A dirty green pack dangled from her hand by the shoulder strap.

"Do you see any food?" Logan asked.

"Not in the tent. All he has in there is a sleeping bag." She set the backpack on the ground and opened the zippered compartments one by one. "He has some extra clothes, a couple of books, a flashlight." She pulled out a small bag of peanuts.

The faint whine of a dirt bike came from the west. It grew steadily louder. The hairs on the back of Logan's neck lifted. "Sounds like he's coming back."

"Let's get out of sight and surprise him." Tessa brought the pack with her.

They backed out of the clearing and crouched behind a patch of thick underbrush twenty feet from the campsite. The dirt bike approached and came to a stop on the other side of the clearing. Logan peered around a tree trunk. Through the foliage, he saw a teenage boy of about sixteen dismount and make his way to his tent. The kid obviously had little experience in the woods. He sounded like a bulldozer plowing through the brush. Tessa tapped Logan's arm, pointed to

herself, and then motioned to the other side of the clearing. Logan nodded, and she eased away.

The boy brought an armload of sticks to the campfire. Squatting, he arranged the wood in the circle of rocks, then dug in his pocket and produced a small box of matches.

Logan stepped out from behind the underbrush. “Do not light that match. The entire state is under a fire ban.”

The boy jumped to his feet and whirled around. “Who the fuck are you?” He wore jeans, a filthy gray T-shirt, and sneakers. His blond hair was cut short on the sides and a little longer on the top.

“Ranger Wilde,” Logan said. “Who are you?”

The boy took a few steps backward. He glanced at his tent. Calculating the distance, Logan thought, and deciding if he could grab the pack and take off.

“This is an illegal campsite,” Logan said in a calm voice. “You could have started a major forest fire.”

The boy shrugged. “It’s out.”

“Because *I* put it out.” Logan took in the kid’s dirty clothes and leanness. Teen boys were often skinny, but this kid seemed stressed as well.

“I need the fire to boil water,” the kid said.

“Right now, hikers and campers need to pack their own water into the park or use a purification system,” Logan said. “What’s your name?”

Instead of answering, the teen spun and darted toward his tent. He ducked inside for a second. Straightening, he glowered at Logan. “Where’s my pack?”

On the other side of the clearing, Tessa stepped out, holding up the backpack. “Looking for this?”

“Hey! That’s mine!” the teen yelled. “You can’t steal my stuff.”

“I’m Deputy Black, and you are breaking the law here.” Tessa used a stern voice.

The boy glared at them, his eyes full of resentment.

“How old are you?” Tessa asked. “You don’t look eighteen.”

“Fuck you.” For all his bravado, the kid was trembling. “I can camp wherever I want. I have rights! This is a free country.”

“That’s a slogan, not reality.” Logan didn’t bother to disguise his irritation. “You need a permit to camp, and you have to use an authorized site. The state park isn’t free. Land and facilities don’t maintain themselves.”

“Fuck you!” the kid repeated before spinning around and running toward the woods.

Logan sprinted after him, with Tessa right behind him. He could hear the kid’s ragged breathing already. The teen glanced over his shoulder.

“Look out!” Logan yelled. “There’s a drop-off ahead.”

The boy skidded to a stop mere feet from a twenty-foot cliff. Turning, the teen whipped a folding knife from his pocket and extended the blade. He backed up, glancing down at his feet and behind him at the drop. He shifted the knife back and forth in the air. Sweat beaded his forehead. “Give me my backpack.”

Tessa automatically put her hand on her gun. “Drop the knife. Now.”

The last thing Logan wanted to do was hurt a scared teenager. Plus, it was more of a multitool than a knife. The blade was small. But it was pointy.

Logan assessed the wind and pulled the bear spray off his belt. Tessa would have pepper spray on her duty belt, but Logan’s had a twenty-five-foot range. “Drop the knife. You can’t get away, and you don’t want a spray of this. Trust me.”

The kid swallowed. A tear leaked from his eye. “You can’t make me go back.” He looked behind him again.

“Go back where?” Logan asked. “Home?”

The kid didn't answer, but his eyes projected misery and desperation.

Logan softened his voice. "You look hungry."

The kid licked his lips. "Are you going to arrest me?"

"I won't lie to you. I can't make any promises," Tessa said in a coaxing voice. "I don't know what's going on. Put down the knife, we'll get you a meal, and we'll talk, okay?"

The kid dragged the toe of his black Converse through the dirt. "I don't know."

"How long do you think you can live out here?" Logan asked. "It's going to get cold. You don't have any food."

Defeat weighed down the boy's entire body. He slowly lowered the knife to his side. He opened his hand, and it dropped to the dirt.

"Kick it away," Tessa instructed.

The teen flipped the knife's handle with the toe of his shoe, sending the knife a few feet across the ground. Logan walked closer and picked up the weapon. After folding the blade, he slid it into the cargo pocket of his pants.

The kid stepped away from the cliff, turned around, and put his hands behind his back, as if expecting to be handcuffed. Logan and Tessa shared a glance. She shook her head.

"Turn around," Logan said.

The boy did, surprise in his eyes.

"We're not going to arrest you at this time." Tessa gestured for him to walk with them. They returned to his camp and helped him gather his belongings. Logan pulled a protein bar and a bottle of water from his pack. He offered them to the boy. "Do you think you can walk out of here?"

The boy accepted the food and water. "Yeah."

Logan and Tessa flanked the boy—not that Logan was afraid he'd run off. The teen didn't seem to have much energy left.

“What’s your name?” Logan asked.

“Chandler Dooley.” The boy stared at his feet as he walked.

“How old are you, Chandler?” Tessa handed him his backpack.

Chandler shrugged into the pack, and they headed for the trail. He sighed, his chest deflating. “Sixteen.”

In case Chandler was tempted to run again, Logan pushed the dirt bike. He considered waiting until they got to the station to begin questioning the kid, but the woods were relaxing. The sheriff’s station would be more official and intimidating.

“Want to tell us why you’re camping out?” he asked.

“I had a fight with my parents.” Chandler’s voice grew soft.

Logan waited. A hawk circled overhead, its cry piercing the quiet forest with the sharpness of a blade.

Chandler kept his eyes on the ground. “They split up a few years ago. My dad got a job on Bainbridge. He sells insurance. Things were a little better without him around.” He sighed. “He came back a few weeks ago. They got into it. He hit my mom. She hit him back. I tried to get between them.” His voice caught. He swiped a tear off his cheek. “And Mom took his side.” Disbelief and hurt filled his voice. “She said I was ungrateful.” He sniffed. His eyes took on a broken look. “She always takes him back. She says she loves him.”

The kid had defended his mother, and she’d turned on him. Logan suppressed a curse.

“What’s your address?” Tessa asked.

“Please don’t call my parents.” Fear widened the boy’s eyes. “I can’t go back there. I’ll never get away.”

“What are you afraid of, Chandler?” Logan asked.

Chandler stared at the ground.

“Does he hit you?” Tessa asked in a gentle voice.

Chandler didn't respond for a few seconds. "When I was younger, he locked me in the shed for a week. He brought me bread and water so I would learn what prison was like. Told me that's where disrespectful little brats end up. This time, he said he'd pull me from school and teach me at home. I wouldn't leave the house again until I showed him the respect he deserves." He paused, gulped air, and swallowed. "But it's different this time. They're toxic together. I can't be there all the time. I need to get away. I can't explain."

Can't? Or won't?

Logan could sense the boy was holding something back. Something big. The fear of returning to his father was too great.

Tessa's face was calm, but Logan could see the tension in her jaw. She was plenty mad. "Do you have any other relatives?"

Chandler nodded. "My brother lives in Seattle. I was going there as soon as the ferry is fixed. He sent me the money for a ticket and told me to hide it in case I needed it."

"How old is your brother?" Logan asked.

"Twenty-five. He told me I could come anytime. Once he left home, he swore he'd never come back. I wanted to stay to help Mom, but now . . ." Chandler's voice fell away. "She'd rather have *him*." He spat out the last word with venom.

Logan wanted to hit something. How could people treat their own kids so badly? He wasn't naive. He knew they did, but he would never understand.

"Have you called your brother?" Tessa asked.

Chandler shook his head. "A cell phone is a privilege I haven't earned." He was clearly parroting his father.

"What's your dad's name?" Logan glanced at the boy.

Bitterness creased Chandler's face. "Simon."

"And your address?" Tessa asked.

The boy gave it, albeit reluctantly.

“When did this fight happen?” Logan continued.

Chandler paused. “Last night.”

“What time?” Tessa pressed.

“I don’t remember exactly.” Chandler sounded suspicious. “Maybe ten or eleven. I lost track of the time. Why?”

“There was a trespasser in the cemetery. That wasn’t you, was it?” She turned to him, watching his face.

Chandler looked away. “Why would I go to the cemetery?”

Tessa just shrugged. Logan summoned a mental map. Chandler’s house wasn’t anywhere near the cemetery, but the kid had a dirt bike.

They hiked back to the vehicles. The late-afternoon sun heated the top of Logan’s head as he put the dirt bike in the back of the Range Rover and offered Chandler the passenger seat. Without discussion, he and Tessa both simultaneously decided not to put the boy in the back of her cruiser.

“Meet me at the station?” Tessa said.

“Will do. We’re going to stop and grab lunch for all of us on the way.” Logan waited for Chandler to close the door of the vehicle. He turned to Tessa and kept his voice low. “We’re not charging him with anything?”

“I might regret it, but no. I feel like he’s more damaged than dangerous. Arresting him would only exacerbate the damaged part. I’ll call social services,” she said quietly. “Hopefully, they can contact the brother and arrange for Chandler to go to him, but who knows if he’s even telling the truth.”

“It could have been him in the cemetery last night.”

“I know,” Tessa agreed. “And his father just came back from Bainbridge Island.”

Logan finished her train of thought. “Which is where Alyssa Collins lived and was kidnapped.”

5

“Thank you.” Frustrated with the response from social services, Tessa set the phone on her blotter. She cast a glance at Chandler, who slumped in a chair on the other side of the very small sheriff’s station. Before she’d called child services, she’d taken his statement and watched him devour a turkey sub in huge, hungry bites.

She lowered her voice and leaned closer to Logan, who perched on the corner of her desk. “The only social worker on Widow’s today is tied up with another case right now, and she doesn’t think she’ll be able to line up a foster home until tomorrow anyway. There aren’t any beds available on Widow’s.”

She’d also told Tessa that Chandler’s family had no previous contact with the agency. Tessa had checked Simon Dooley’s background. His criminal record was clear.

Logan crumpled his brown paper takeout bag. “It’s probably best if Chandler goes to the mainland anyway. I’d like to see some distance between him and his father.”

“You’re probably right,” Tessa agreed. “But we have to look after him tonight, and we still have a case to work.”

Logan tossed his crumpled bag into the trash can like a basketball. “We’ll take him home with us and work out the rest later.”

“I love that you didn’t even hesitate.”

Logan smiled. “We brought him in, so we’re responsible for him. Besides, we don’t have evidence backing up Chandler’s statements, but he seems to be afraid of his father. I’d rather he be with someone who won’t put up with any nonsense from Chandler or his father.”

“Yes,” Tessa said.

Logan checked the time on his watch. “It’s almost dinnertime. Let’s go home and eat an early dinner. Maybe we

can talk my sister into hanging out at our house this evening for a couple of hours.”

Tessa nodded. “You go ahead with Chandler. I’ll lock up the station.”

After Logan and the boy left, Tessa pulled Chandler’s fingerprints from the Coke can and sent them to the fingerprint examiner, just in case the boy was hiding something from them. Then she locked up and drove home. After parking next to Logan’s vehicle, she stepped out of her SUV and spotted her sister scattering feed for the chickens. Logan and Chandler were on the outside of the chicken enclosure. Patience left the chicken enclosure and approached them. Stopping, she gave Tessa a quizzical look, then shoved her hands into the front pockets of her jeans. “Hey, Chandler.”

Tessa wasn’t surprised the teens knew each other. They were the same age, and the island was a small community.

“Hey.” Chandler slung his backpack over one shoulder. “Cool. You have chickens.”

“I don’t know how cool they are, but fresh eggs are pretty tasty.” Patience grimaced and turned to Tessa. “Killer Hen is still missing. I hope a fox or hawk didn’t get her.”

“Has Mom noticed?” Tessa asked.

Patience shook her head.

“Good.” Tessa exhaled.

“She’s been less aware the last couple of days.” Patience stared at her rubber shoes.

“I know.” Tessa slung an arm around her sister’s shoulders. There wasn’t anything to say. No words of comfort. The situation was terrible, and they were doing their best. Nothing would change the course of their mother’s illness.

“My money’s on the chicken.” Logan started toward the house. “Come on, Chandler. You can use the shower before dinner.”

Patience fell into step beside Chandler. “We’re having lasagna.”

“We are?” Tessa laughed. “Thanks for making dinner.”

“I transferred it from the freezer to the oven.” Patience lifted a skinny shoulder. “That’s it.”

Tessa shed her boots on the porch and went inside. Her mother was sitting in a chair in the corner, staring at the window, but she showed no sign that she was enjoying the view. Her eyes were vacant. Tessa crossed the room, kissed her mother on the cheek, and said, “Hi, Mom.”

Mom mumbled something incoherent, and Tessa returned to the kitchen. The scents of cooking cheese and pasta hit her nose. Tessa’s stomach rumbled. “That smells amazing.”

Logan escorted Chandler to the hall bath, then returned to the kitchen. “We have some leftover Italian rolls. I’ll make garlic bread.”

Thirty minutes later, they sat down at the table. Mom picked at her food, but Chandler’s appetite made up for her lack of one. After dinner, Mom went directly to bed. Chandler volunteered to help Patience with the dishes. Cate arrived carrying a tray of her grandmother’s cinnamon buns, which she set on the kitchen counter.

Logan gave his sister a peck on the cheek. “How do you feel?”

“Good. Hungry.” Cate took a bite of a cinnamon bun.

“Thanks for helping out tonight,” Logan said.

Cate chewed and swallowed. “You’re welcome. Now go solve your case. People in town are a little freaked out about the box of bones. All kinds of occult and serial killer rumors are floating around town.”

At the front door, Tessa stepped into her boots. “Everyone knows?”

Cate snorted. “Of course everyone knows. I’m surprised it took a whole day for the news to circulate.”

“Great.” Tessa mentally crossed her fingers that people wouldn’t panic.

As she and Logan stepped out the front door, she heard Patience ask Cate if she wanted hot cocoa, and Cate answered, “Of course.”

Grateful for the close-knit community of Widow’s, Tessa slid behind the wheel. “We have two suspects so far—Simon Dooley and Duncan Marshall—although we have no physical evidence tying either to Alyssa’s murder or the attempt to bury her bones.”

In the passenger seat, Logan buckled his seat belt. “If Duncan Marshall is a felon, his prints will be on file.”

“Yes. I emailed the fingerprint examiner to compare the prints from the shovel with his.” Tessa drove toward the cemetery. “But that would only address the burying part. We need to verify where Marshall has spent the past year.”

“What do you think will happen to Chandler?” Logan asked.

“We can only hope he gets to live with his brother.” Tessa couldn’t fix everything, as much as she wanted to.

“Do you think it was him trying to bury the bones in the cemetery?”

“I don’t know.” She tried to picture the running suspect. “Let’s say his father had Alyssa’s bones. Chandler could have stolen them to get even or because he thought what Simon did was wrong. Or taking them could have been what started the fight.”

“It would certainly explain why Chandler ran away.”

“And why he seemed afraid of his father—but why wouldn’t he tell us?” Tessa asked.

“Maybe he doesn’t think we’ll believe him.”

“We heard his dirt bike, but that could have been a coincidence. Our suspect could have continued on foot, which would make someone closer to the cemetery a better fit.”

Logan agreed with a nod. “Like Duncan Marshall.”

“Or whoever is living in the A-frame.”

Tessa's phone rang. Bruce's name was displayed on the screen. She answered the call on speakerphone.

Bruce said, "I made some calls about Duncan Marshall. His second-degree manslaughter charge came from a drunken bar fight. He elbowed the other guy in the head and killed him."

"Did he have priors?" Tessa asked.

"None," Bruce answered.

"Yet he served the maximum sentence," Tessa said.

Bruce continued. "He was offered a plea deal but refused. Reading between the lines, it seems the judge wasn't happy the case went to trial."

Defendants who agreed to plea bargains were often given lighter sentences than those who exercised their constitutional right to a trial.

"What was his defense strategy?" Tessa asked.

Bruce shuffled papers. "Self-defense. The other guy threw the first punch. But Marshall was a former amateur MMA fighter, and the prosecutor argued he responded to the threat with excess force. His opponent was smaller and unskilled."

"Sounds suspicious," Logan said.

Bruce exhaled. "The judge said he should have been able to respond proportionally to the attack, especially since he'd trained for years in a sport that requires discipline. Multiple witnesses testified Duncan got nasty and violent when he was drunk."

Logan folded his arms. "If he killed one person in a drunken rage, it's reasonable to suspect him of a second killing."

"We'll talk to him this evening," Tessa agreed. She ended the call with Bruce and turned to Logan. "Let's talk to Simon Dooley first. Then we'll head to the cemetery, question Duncan Marshall, and see who's living in the rental at the end of the road."

“Sounds like a plan.”

Her phone rang again as she started the engine. She answered the call. “Deputy Black.”

A woman said, “This is Detective Kreisler from the Bainbridge PD.”

“Thanks for returning my call. I’m putting you on speaker. Also present is forest ranger Logan Wilde.” Tessa switched the call to Bluetooth. “You’re still handling Alyssa Collins’s missing person case?”

Kreisler hesitated. “Yes.”

“We found skeletal remains of a teenage girl on Widow’s Island.” Tessa described the bone plate and screws attached to the ulna.

“Shit.” Kreisler sighed.

“The bones are with our coroner.” Tessa gave her Henry’s name and number. “If you have medical and dental records, he can officially ID the remains.”

“I can coordinate that.” Kreisler blew out a long breath. “In addition to the bone plate, she had orthodontic work.”

“Yes, the remains had a permanent retainer on the lower front teeth.”

“It’s been nine months. I really didn’t expect to find her alive, but it’s still hard to learn she’s probably dead.” Kreisler paused. “Do you know the cause of death?”

“No. The bones will need to go to a forensic anthropologist, but our coroner suspects she was dismembered.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Tessa agreed and described the discovery and general appearance of the remains.

“Someone tried to bury her bones in an existing grave?” Kreisler asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s a new one,” Kreisler said.

“Tell me about her disappearance.”

The clicks of Kreisler tapping on a keyboard sounded over the line. “Last December, Alyssa disappeared from her bedroom in the middle of the night. Alyssa had missed curfew, and her parents grounded her. Alyssa was very angry with them. Unbeknownst to her parents, Alyssa had been communicating with someone online. This person appeared to be a seventeen-year-old boy named Jefferson Davis.”

“Jefferson Davis?” Tessa asked. “Like the president of the Confederacy?”

“Yep,” Kreisler said. “It was clearly a fake account. He used an anonymous email account and spoofed his IP address. Frankly, we never made much headway with the case. From all appearances, Alyssa ran away, and she would have turned eighteen back in July anyway, so . . .”

Tessa suspected Kreisler hadn’t put much effort into the case. In her defense, runaways were damned hard to find, and most departments simply didn’t have adequate resources to devote to the case in the absence of clear foul play. “Do the names Duncan Marshall or Simon Dooley sound familiar?”

Kreisler typed on her keyboard, then said, “I don’t see either of those names in the computer files, but I’ll double-check with the print files at the station and get back to you.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep you updated on my investigation as well. Will you perform the death notification?”

“Yes, as soon as I have an official ID. I won’t tell the family anything until it’s certain.”

“I don’t blame you.” Tessa ended the call.

Logan said, “Sounds like the ID is all but definite.”

“Yeah.” She drove along Bishopton Road to Chandler’s home address, a large, expensive cedar-and-glass home on the top of a hill with a spectacular view of Widow’s Bay.

Logan stared through the windshield. “I don’t know why I expected them to be poor.”

Tessa rested both hands on the steering wheel. “Domestic violence breaches all socioeconomic boundaries.”

They climbed out of the SUV and approached the front door. Tessa pressed the doorbell.

A blond man in his midforties answered the door. He wore khaki slacks and a white polo with the logo for a local private golf course. He raised an eyebrow at Tessa’s uniform, then gave Logan an equally haughty look. “Can I help you?”

“Are you Simon Dooley?” Tessa asked.

“Yes.” Suspicion filled Simon’s voice.

“We’re here about your son, Chandler,” Tessa began.

Simon’s brow lowered, and his tone grew angry. “What did he do?”

“Nothing serious,” Logan said. “Unauthorized camping.”

“Then why are you here?” Simon crossed his arms over his chest. “Is he under arrest?”

“We’ve called social services. Chandler claims you threatened him,” Tessa said.

“That’s absurd.” Simon inhaled deeply, unfolded his arms, and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Chandler is a liar. He’s also dramatic.”

“So you didn’t threaten him?” Tessa asked.

“What do you mean *threaten him*?” Simon snapped.

Tessa pulled out her notepad and read from her notes. “You said you’d make sure he was sorry.”

“Then yes, I did say that, and I meant it.” Simon stood taller. “He’s a spoiled, ungrateful brat, which is partially my fault. I haven’t been around for the last few years. A boy needs a father to teach him how to behave. It’s literally my job as his father to make him sorry when he misbehaves.”

“How did he misbehave?” Tessa took a pen from her pocket and poised it over her pad.

“For one, he tried to put his hands on me.” He gave her a nasty look. “Before you ask, I did *not* strike him.” He seemed proud. “Though it took great self-restraint.”

Logan chimed in. “Chandler said you hit his mother, and he was defending her.”

“As I’ve already said, he’s a liar.” Simon licked his lips. “His mother and I had a fight. Admittedly, our arguments can be passionate. But our marriage is none of his business.”

Tessa pressed. “Do you care if he comes back?”

“Of course I care.”

“You didn’t report him missing when he left home last night,” Tessa pointed out.

“He’s hardly a toddler. One night sleeping outside won’t kill him, especially in this weather.” He circled a hand in the air. “I assumed he’d come back after he’d cooled off. I also noticed that he took his camping gear, along with that bike he thinks I don’t know about.”

Tessa wrote a note. “Is your wife at home?”

He stared down at her. “She’s busy.”

Tessa felt Logan tense next to her. He said, “We need to speak with her.”

“Why?” Simon tilted his head back.

Anger emanated from Logan.

“Because we do.” Tessa breathed through her own irritation, but her face hurt from clenching her teeth. She shifted her jaw to ease the tension. She couldn’t make him bring his wife outside. She couldn’t charge them with anything. Having a kid run away for one night wasn’t a crime. Social services would open an investigation into Chandler’s claims of abuse. Until then, the teen was in limbo.

“I’ll let her know.” Simon stepped back, as if he was going to close the door.

Tessa stuck her foot in the doorway. “Don’t you want to know where your son is?”

“You said he was with social services.” Simon stared down at her. “Now move your foot.”

Tessa didn't. “That's not how this works. Chandler is your minor child, and he's made accusations of abuse against you.”

“What kind of accusations?” Simon asked.

“That you subjected him to physical and emotional abuse.”

“Emotional abuse?” Simon rolled his eyes. “He's such a drama queen.”

“He also said you hit your wife,” Tessa said.

Simon leaned into the house and yelled, “Shannon! Would you come to the door, please.” He said *please*, but it was an order.

A woman with long blonde hair scurried down the hallway and stood next to her husband.

“Did I hurt you?” Simon asked.

Shannon stared at him with almost adoration. “You'd never do that. You love me.”

“There. Now that's settled. We've established my earlier statement about Chandler lying.” Simon looked pointedly down at Tessa's boot, still on the threshold.

Tessa continued to ignore him. “Shannon, I'd like to speak with you outside.”

Shannon looked up, clearly alarmed. “Why?”

“Please step outside.” Tessa used her official tone. Protocol in a domestic abuse situation was to separate the parties and question them outside each other's hearing.

Shannon glanced at her husband. A look for approval? Tessa ground her molars.

“Go ahead.” Simon held Tessa's gaze, his expression smug.

Tessa gestured for Shannon to come with her. The woman reluctantly stepped outside. As soon as she was on the

doorstep, Logan placed himself between Simon and his wife. Logan towered over him.

Tessa led the woman twenty feet away. “Shannon, your son claims your husband hit you.”

“Chandler needs to mind his own business,” Shannon said bitterly. “I love my husband.”

“So you deny that Simon hit you?”

“Simon loves me.” Shannon evaded the question again. “He would never hurt me.”

Tessa noted she used the word *hurt* instead of *hit*, as if she was making a mental distinction.

“But you were separated until recently?”

Shannon sniffed and wiped her nose with her sleeve. “But now he’s back.”

“Chandler said it was better while he was gone.”

“Maybe better for him, but Chandler didn’t work three part-time jobs to pay the bills. I’m tired. Simon is a good provider. Chandler needs to appreciate the roof over his head and the food on his table.” Shannon turned. “Where is my son?”

“Social services will contact you.” Tessa evaded the question.

“Is he all right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tessa said.

“You can’t take him away,” Shannon protested. “I’m his mother. He belongs with me.”

Tessa felt a little better that at least Shannon seemed to care about Chandler. “Ma’am, it’s not up to me. A judge will make that determination.”

Shannon’s face hardened. “Then we’re done here.”

They returned to the door, where Logan was winning a stare down with Simon. Logan wore his army ranger face. Simon didn’t stand a chance.

“One more question, Mr. Dooley.” Tessa pulled out her phone and scrolled to a photo of Alyssa Collins. “Does this girl look familiar?” She turned the phone to face him.

Simon didn’t even glance at the screen. “No.”

Logan maintained his combat stare. “You lived on Bainbridge, right?”

Simon didn’t answer, but his posture stiffened. “Yes.”

“Why did you come back to Widow’s?” Tessa asked.

Simon answered, “Shannon and I reconciled, and I missed my family.”

“Where are you working now?” Tessa asked.

“I’m working remotely,” he said.

“As an insurance agent?” Tessa pressed.

“Yes,” Simon snapped. “Greater Pacific Insurance.”

“And where did you work while you lived on Bainbridge?” Tessa asked.

Simon said, “Callaway Insurance. It’s a small family-owned firm.”

“This girl also lived on Bainbridge.” Tessa lifted the phone and shoved it closer to him. “Before she was murdered.”

Simon reflexively glanced at the phone in his face. His smugness evaporated, but Tessa couldn’t tell if he recognized Alyssa or not because his eyes shuttered, closing off all emotion in a hard, blank stare. “I won’t speak to you again without my lawyer.” He slammed the door before she could say anything else.

Logan glared at the door. “He’s an asshole, and I hate him.”

“Same,” Tessa agreed.

“Now what?” Logan started toward the SUV.

“I don’t know.” Tessa’s mind whirled. There must be something she could do. “Technically, Chandler never accused

Simon of hitting him. He said Simon hit his mother. She denied he hurt her. I didn't see any marks on Shannon. There are no other witnesses. It will be Chandler's word against both his parents, and they'll stick together. We already know Simon's record is clean. I don't even know if they'll lose custody. The court might make him go back. Simon's whole kids-need-discipline spiel resonates with some judges."

"Maybe the brother will corroborate his story. Do you think Chandler was lying?"

Tessa considered the boy. "No. I don't. And the thought of him being forced to go home makes me sick." She took a breath. "I want to keep Simon on our suspect list. He lived on Bainbridge when Alyssa disappeared." While she drove, Tessa phoned Detective Kreisler and gave her a quick update. "I'd like to know if Alyssa's family recognizes either of these men."

"Send me their names and photos," Kreisler said.

"Will do. And thank you." Tessa ended the call and glanced at Logan. "Would you email Duncan Marshall and Simon Dooley's photos to Detective Kreisler?"

"Sure." He used the dashboard computer. "The court won't make Chandler go back home if we prove his father is a killer."

6

Still seething about Simon Dooley's attitude, Logan scrolled on his smartphone. "Simon doesn't have social media accounts. Google searches still link him to Callaway Insurance. But if I go to the company's website now, he isn't listed on the 'About Our Agents' page."

Tessa tapped a thumb on the steering wheel. "I wonder if he quit or if he was fired from Callaway."

He clicked on the company's phone number, but the call went to a voice mail message. Logan ended the call. "They're not open today. I'll try in the morning. No one is available at Greater Pacific Insurance either." He clicked through the menu on the website. "I don't even see agents listed on this site. Quotes are online only."

Tessa's phone rang. She glanced at the screen. "The call is from Oregon. Looks like the owner of the rental property." She answered the call on speaker. "Deputy Black."

"This is Nicolas Gorzala, returning your call," a male voice said.

"Hello, Mr. Gorzala. I have a question regarding your rental property on Widow's Island."

"That's not a rental property. It's a vacation home," Mr. Gorzala clarified.

"So you haven't rented it out or loaned it to a family member or friend?" Tessa asked.

"No," he confirmed. "The house should be empty."

"In that case, you might have trespassers." Tessa explained that a neighbor had seen a man in the house.

"Well, he definitely doesn't have my permission to be there," Mr. Gorzala said.

"I have not seen the man. I'm headed there now to verify his existence in relation to another crime." Tessa turned the

SUV toward the cemetery. “If there is a trespasser, I’ll get back to you. Do I have your permission to enter the premises?”

“Yes, and thank you,” Mr. Gorzala said. “There’s a hidden key box.” He gave her the exact location and combination. “Let me know what else you need from me. I’ll fly up there if necessary.”

“I will. Thank you.” Tessa ended the call.

Logan glanced at Tessa. “Trespassers. Fun.”

She drove to the end of the lane. She came to a stop in front of the small A-frame house. She reported their location to dispatch before climbing out of her vehicle.

He sniffed the air and caught the scent of burning leaves. “I smell smoke.”

Tessa inhaled. “Me too.”

They walked around the side of the house. The smell of smoke intensified. They stopped at the corner of the A-frame and peered into the backyard. The house stood on a half acre of cleared ground. A row of evergreens separated the property from the cemetery, but Logan could see headstones through breaks in the foliage. A beat-up white pickup truck was tucked behind some bushes. Logan snapped a photo of the Washington State license plate.

The landscaping was no-fuss natural. Moss and dead leaves carpeted the ground. In the center of the yard, a man in jeans and a black T-shirt stood in front of a burn barrel, feeding items from a wooden box into the flames.

“Wonder what he’s burning,” Tessa said.

Horrified, Logan watched a spark drift through the air. “He’s going to start a wildfire.” He started forward to put a stop to the burning immediately.

Tessa touched his arm. “I’ll circle around behind him so he can’t run. Give me a minute.” Tessa veered off, sliding behind the evergreens.

Impatient, Logan gave her thirty seconds; then he walked past a picnic table covered with fish scales, feathers, blood, and bones. A swarm of flies hovered around the general gore of fish and bird cleaning. A fishing pole leaned against the table. Whoever this guy was, he knew how to survive.

Logan called out, "Hey! Did you know we're under a fire ban?"

The man spun, clutching the box in both hands. Long brown hair hung in greasy waves alongside his face, and he sported an unkempt six-inch beard.

"There's a statewide ban on fires due to dry conditions. You're breaking the law."

"What?" The man took a step back.

An ember jumped from the barrel, floated through the air, and landed on a pile of dead fir needles. Rushing forward, Logan kicked dirt over them. "What are you burning?"

"None of your fucking business." The man glared at him. "This isn't the state forest, Ranger Rick."

"The name is Ranger Wilde," Logan said. "And the fire ban covers the whole state, not just the park."

"Whatever." The man started to turn away, reaching into his box before pulling out another handful of paper. "You can't do anything. You're out of your jurisdiction."

"But I'm not." Tessa stepped out of the trees. "Sheriff's department. Set down the box, and step away from the fire."

The man eyed her uniform and circled behind the barrel. "Stop right there, or I'll dump this barrel. I'll set the whole place on fire."

"Do you really want to be responsible for a wildfire?" Logan asked. "You can get ten years for arson."

"You're not taking me in." The man held the papers over the barrel.

Logan didn't think he was talking about arson. *What has he done? And what is he burning?*

“Step away from the fire,” Tessa ordered.

“Fuck you.” The man threw the papers on the fire, then tossed the wooden box on top. The fire crackled. Sparks sprayed into the air.

Cursing, Logan stomped around the yard, but he couldn't put out all the sparks before the dried foliage ignited. Small embers caught on fir needles. *Shit.*

The man turned to run.

“Stop!” When he didn't, Tessa drew her Taser from her belt and fired.

The man went down, his body twitching. While Tessa removed the barbs, Logan raced to the SUV and grabbed a fire extinguisher from the back. He returned to the yard and sprayed foam on every smoking ember. Then he sprayed the barrel. When he was sure all the sparks were extinguished, he set down the tank.

Tessa stood over the still-twitching man, no empathy on her face.

“You . . . bitch,” he gasped.

“Well, I'm a bitch with a badge and a Taser, so behave yourself.” Tessa hauled him to a sitting position. “What's your name?”

“Fuck you.”

“And your first name, Mr. Fuck You?” She began emptying his pockets, pulling out a folding knife and a box of matches. “Where's your wallet?”

He seethed, then shuddered again. “I don't have to answer your questions.”

“Not talking?” Tessa asked. “Fine. We'll go to the station and run your prints.” She hauled him to his feet by the biceps. “Logan, did that box burn?”

Logan peered into the barrel. “It did not.” He reached in and lifted the sopping-wet wooden box from the slimy mess. The wood was too thick to easily burn.

“That’s mine!” the man yelled.

“Are you going to cooperate?” Tessa asked.

He snapped his mouth closed.

“Fine.” Tessa started tugging him across the yard. Logan followed, carrying the box.

She gave the picnic table a side-eye. “What kind of bird did you eat?”

“A chicken,” the man said.

“Did you steal it?” Logan asked. He was thinking of Killer Hen, and he knew Tessa was also.

“No,” he said in a smug voice. “I caught it. It was wild.”

Tessa swore. She frog-marched the man back to her vehicle and locked him in the back.

Standing next to her, Logan said, “There are tons of chickens on this island. We’re pretty far from our place. The chances that he ate Killer are slim.”

“I know.” But she looked worried. Killer Hen made her crazy, but Logan knew Tessa was attached to the feisty bird.

“You miss her,” he joked.

Tessa snorted. “We have a complicated relationship.” She motioned to Logan. “Let’s do a quick check inside the house.”

“Do you have gloves?” Logan asked.

Tessa handed him a pair, and he tugged them on before lifting the lid on the wooden box. The inside was filled with photographs of a dark-haired woman in her late twenties. Logan moved a few pictures aside. “These were all taken at a distance.”

Tessa glanced inside. “Without her knowledge.”

“Was he stalking her?”

Tessa tilted her head to get a better look. “I don’t recognize any of the scenery.”

“I don’t think the pictures were taken on Widow’s.” Logan studied a photo of the woman crossing a parking lot. “This looks like a Walmart sign in the background.”

Widow’s didn’t have a Walmart.

“Let’s check inside the house,” Tessa said.

Logan closed the box, and they opened the front door. A foul odor filled the air. Logan set the wooden box on the floor by the front door. Tessa drew her gun as they went inside. The small house consisted of two bedrooms, a single bath, and a combination living room and kitchen. They quickly checked the rooms and found them empty.

Holstering her gun, Tessa scanned the second bedroom. “It doesn’t look like he’s been using the bedrooms.”

They returned to the main living area. A backpack sat on the coffee table, and blankets were piled on the couch.

She gestured toward the makeshift camp. “Looks like he’s been sleeping out here.”

Logan walked to the sink, which was filled with dirty dishes. The trash can overflowed with garbage. On the stove, a cast-iron pan held oil and burnt bits of food. More flies buzzed everywhere. He turned the faucet handle, but no water came out of the tap. He flipped a wall switch, and an overhead light turned on. “The water is off, but the electricity is on.”

“Found his wallet,” Tessa yelled from across the room, where she was searching the backpack. “And some drugs.” She held up a prescription bottle that held a couple dozen white, oblong pills. “Looks like Vicodin.” She turned the bottle. “Not his prescription.”

“Not surprised.” Logan opened the fridge to find milk, bread, eggs, and bulk bags of onions and oranges. “He’s been using the house for a while. He went grocery shopping and cooked more than a few meals.”

Tessa opened the wallet. “His name is Webb Dwyer. The address on his license is Suquamish.”

“It looks like he’s been squatting here.”

Tessa rested her hands on the duty belt. “Mr. Gorzala probably turns off the water when he’s not in residence to prevent a burst pipe or other leak.”

“But he’d need to leave the electricity on for the sump pump and fire alarms.”

“We’ll need Mr. Gorzala to make a list of anything that’s missing or damaged,” Tessa said. “Let’s get Dwyer to the station. With the way he reacted to our presence, I won’t be surprised if he has warrants outstanding.”

They transported Dwyer to the sheriff’s station. Kurt, having gone on duty at seven, was inside typing on the computer at the second desk. He looked up as they walked inside. “What’s going on?”

“We have a trespasser.” Tessa explained why Dwyer was in custody.

Logan added, “He violated the fire ban too.”

“Idiot.” Kurt glared at Dwyer. “We only have a completely volunteer fire department. We can’t respond to a major wildfire.”

Tessa scanned Dwyer’s fingerprints electronically. Now that he was in custody, he seemed compliant. She gestured toward the chair next to her desk. “Sit.”

Dwyer did. “Can you take off these cuffs?”

“No.” Tessa sat behind her computer.

Logan pulled up a second chair. Sitting, he faced Dwyer and studied him while Tessa read him his Miranda rights.

She typed on her keyboard. “Well, look at that. You have a warrant outstanding, Mr. Dwyer.”

“This is my shocked face,” Kurt deadpanned from across the room.

Dwyer frowned but didn’t respond.

Tessa leaned closer to her screen. “You stalked your ex-girlfriend and violated a restraining order. You urinated on the side of her house and set her car on fire.”

Dwyer admitted nothing, but his face tensed, and his eyes closed halfway. He glared sideways at Tessa. Logan knew she could handle herself. She was smart and well trained. The fact that he still didn't want her to be alone with Dwyer was completely irrational. Except that there was something about Dwyer . . .

Something disturbing.

As much as Logan hated the term *evil*, that's the word that came to mind. Dwyer looked like the type of man who would have a box of bones on hand.

Logan shifted forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "Were you in the cemetery last night, Mr. Dwyer?"

Dwyer shook his head. "No. I went fishing, cooked my catch, and turned in early."

"Did anyone see you?" Tessa asked.

Dwyer gave her a look. "I try to stay out of sight."

"Wanted men usually do." She pulled up a photo of Alyssa. "Do you know this girl?"

Dwyer squinted at the screen. Logan couldn't read his expression.

Dwyer jutted out his chin. "I'm not answering any questions without a lawyer."

Dwyer couldn't be compelled to speak. His silence was protected by the very rights Tessa had read him a few minutes before. But innocent people tended to be more cooperative. Criminals always knew their rights. Dwyer was no innocent.

Did Dwyer have more to hide than the outstanding stalking and destruction-of-property charges?

"Why are you on Widow's?" Logan asked.

Dwyer's mouth twisted in a smug frown. "I just said I won't talk without a lawyer."

Tessa shot Logan a look, and he sat back in his chair, staring at Dwyer until she finished the paperwork and locked

Dwyer in the holding cell. “Would you get a status on the ferry?”

“Will do.” Logan shifted to the second desk and pulled up the website on the computer. “Good news: the ferry will be up and running in the morning.”

“Great!” Tessa said. “Bruce can take Dwyer and the bones to the mainland when he starts his shift. We just have to babysit Dwyer until then.”

“I’ll do it,” Kurt volunteered. “I’ll take them on the first ferry at the end of my shift, then have breakfast with my daughter.”

Tessa stretched.

Kurt got up and crossed to the coffee machine. “Go home, and get some sleep. You’ve been on duty too long. I’ll babysit his ass until morning.”

“Thanks, Kurt.” Tessa gave him a tired smile.

Logan followed her outside. The night air cooled his face. “What’s next?”

“It’s too late to call on people.” Tessa stretched her shoulder as they walked to the SUV. “We’ll talk to Duncan Marshall first thing, and hopefully, the fingerprint examiner will have some results for us tomorrow.”

Logan glanced back at the station. “We’ll find out more about Dwyer and his movements over the past year as well as identify the woman in the photos. I could easily see his stalking escalate into murder.”

The morning sun peered over the trees as Tessa poured a cup of coffee in the kitchen. The brightness hurt her eyes. Her mother had slept poorly, which meant Tessa had slept poorly. Behind her, bare feet shuffled across the floor. Tessa whirled. Her mother stood in the doorway, her body bent and trembling from the effort of walking. Her exhaustion showed in the deep circles under her eyes and the translucent paleness of her skin.

Tessa started toward her mom. "Let me help."

Before she could get ahold of her elbow, her mother tripped. Her mom's legs folded. Tessa reached for her, but the awkward angle gave her no leverage. She couldn't prevent the collapse. The best she could do was slow the descent as they both went down.

"Oh!" her mother cried.

"It's all right." Tessa tried to keep her voice calm as she called out, "Logan!"

He hurried from the bedroom, shirtless. Half his face was shaven, the other half still covered in shaving cream.

"Are you both okay?" He bent down.

Tessa looked over her mother. "I don't think she's hurt."

"What about you?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

Her mother was crying and muttering. The words were gibberish, but Tessa understood the panic behind them.

"I'm going to help you up now." Logan slowly scooped her mother off the floor and stood with her in his arms. His face tightened as he shifted her thin body. Bonnie trusted Logan completely. Maybe because he'd been coming to the house ever since he and Tessa were children.

Or maybe because her mother sensed his innate goodness.

“Should I put her back in bed?” Logan asked.

Tessa nodded, her throat too tight for speech.

Logan took her mom back to bed, and Tessa tucked her in. She was asleep in minutes. Logan went into the bedroom to finish dressing.

Tessa walked onto the front porch. In the morning sunlight, Chandler and Patience fed the chickens. She could hear the kids joking as they tossed chicken feed and blueberries on the ground. The door opened behind her, and she heard Logan’s footsteps. His arm slipped around her waist. She rested her head on his shoulder for a few seconds, just absorbing his strength and support. How would she have survived these last few months without him?

Going forward, she would need him even more. There were hard decisions Tessa would have to make.

He squeezed her against his side. “She’ll see you get married.”

“That’s all I have left to give her,” Tessa said. “Thank you for agreeing to rush our wedding.”

“The sooner we’re married, the better.” Logan shrugged. “Besides, she has bad days and good days. Today is a bad day. Tomorrow might be a good day.”

“I love that you’re an optimist.”

“Whatever happens, we’ll manage together.” Logan turned to face her. He moved his hands to her shoulders.

“I love you.” She cupped the side of his face. “But I don’t know what I did to deserve you.”

“Back atcha, babe.” Logan kissed her on the lips.

A car pulled up. Cate and Jane climbed out. Tessa breathed in relief. Logan’s grandmother might not be physically strong, but she had more common sense than anyone else Tessa knew. She’d manage her mother just fine. And Cate would see to Chandler until the social worker collected him later that day.

Jane let herself into the house and gave Tessa a hard hug. Tessa's mother had always been volatile. Jane had been a stabilizing force in Tessa's life forever. Choking back a few tears of gratitude, Tessa described the morning.

Jane patted her arm. "I'll keep her in bed and try to get some calories and fluids into her."

"Thank you, Jane." Tessa stepped into her boots.

Logan kissed his grandmother's cheek. "You're the best."

"I know," Jane said with a smug grin.

"And thank you, sis." Logan gave his sister a one-armed hug.

"You are welcome." Cate hugged him back.

"The social worker's name is Mona Lawrence. She'll pick up Chandler in a couple of hours," Tessa said.

"No problem. We've got this. Go fight crime!" Cate waved them away.

Tessa and Logan left the house. Patience was waiting by the SUV. They dropped her at school.

"Now we talk to Duncan Marshall?" Logan asked as Patience disappeared into the building.

"Yes." Tessa drove away. She rubbed a tired ache in her temple. "I feel guilty for being happy to leave my mother at home and work on the case."

"You really need a vacation if investigating a box of bones is a welcome distraction."

"I do not deny that." Tessa headed for Lillian Marshall's house near the cemetery.

When they arrived, Lillian was on her knees, weeding the front flower bed. The dog rose to greet Tessa and Logan.

Logan bent to give the dog a head rub. Einstein leaned into his legs.

Lillian stood still, her face drawn.

Tessa got right to the point. “We’d like to talk to Duncan again.”

“You know.” Lillian’s face paled.

“Yes.” Tessa introduced Logan.

“That was an accident,” Lillian stammered. “Duncan is —”

“Lillian!” Duncan rounded the corner of the house. “Stop.”

Lillian’s mouth snapped closed.

Her brother came to stand next to her. “It’s okay. I’ll talk to them.”

Lillian put her hand on his arm. “It’s not okay. You made one mistake, and they just won’t let it go.”

“I appreciate that you want to protect me, but a man died,” Duncan said. “I have to live with the repercussions of that moment of stupidity for the rest of my life.”

Nodding, Lillian covered her mouth with one hand, as if that was the only way she could stop herself from defending him.

“Please go inside. I’ll handle this.” Duncan’s voice was gentle.

She turned and headed for the house, the dog at her heels.

Duncan faced Tessa and Logan. “I’m sorry about that. My sister is protective. Now, why are you here?”

Logan jumped in. “Why did you come to Widow’s?”

“I tried to get by on my own. When I first got out of prison, I took a job with a roofing company. The first year was all right. Then the roofing company went bankrupt, and I lost my job. I couldn’t pay my rent. Not many companies will hire felons, so here I am.”

“Have you spent any time on Bainbridge Island?” Tessa asked.

“I’ve never been there,” Duncan said.

“Do you know this girl?” Tessa showed him the picture of Alyssa.

He looked at the photo, then met Tessa’s gaze. “No.”

“She’s dead.” Tessa watched his eyes.

He looked horrified. “Dead?” His gaze dropped to the phone again. Something that seemed to be sadness passed over his face. Lifting his chin, he slowly shook his head. “I would never hurt a kid.”

“You killed a man,” Logan reminded him.

“And she was seventeen,” Tessa added. “That’s practically an adult.”

“A seventeen-year-old is a high school kid.” Duncan enunciated each word. “And I’d never hurt a female of any age.” Duncan closed his eyes for a long second. Anguish aged him ten years. He opened his eyes. “I know I did a terrible thing, and I can never undo it. We were both drunk. He knew I was a fighter, and he had something to prove. He’d been trying to provoke me all night. I’d successfully ignored him, but he wouldn’t stop. Finally, he grabbed my date and started feeling her up. When I made him let her go, he punched me, and I lost it.” He scrubbed both hands down his face, leaving red streaks. He dropped his hands to his sides. “I had a temper back then, and alcohol made it worse.” He met Tessa’s eyes, then Logan’s. “I haven’t had a drop since, and I practically majored in anger management in prison. I’m not that same guy. I’m trying to make a life for myself.”

Tessa studied him for a few seconds. Her lie-o-meter wasn’t alarming, but there were people who could fake the right emotional response. “We’ll probably be back with more questions.”

He nodded. “I’ll be here.”

Back in the SUV, Logan fastened his seat belt. “He seemed sincere, but he also killed a man with his bare hands.”

“Yep.” Tessa’s phone rang. She glanced at the screen. “It’s Detective Kreisler.” She answered the call. “Deputy Black here.”

“I’ll get right to the point. Alyssa’s doctor verified her ID. So I drove out to her parents’ house to give them the news.” She hesitated; a deep breath indicated she was composing herself. “I showed them the pictures of Duncan Marshall and Simon Dooley. Alyssa’s parents didn’t know Duncan, but they recognized Simon right away. He sold them their homeowner’s insurance.”

“He knew Alyssa?” Tessa asked, excitement warming her blood.

“He’d been to the house several times while Alyssa was at home.” Kreisler’s voice went tight. “Alyssa’s mother said she hadn’t liked the way Simon looked at Alyssa. There was nothing specific, just a feeling she had.” The detective paused. “I’m on my way to Widow’s Island. I’d like to be present when he’s questioned.”

“We’d like you to be here as well,” Tessa said. “The ferry is up and running. I’m going to bring Simon to the station for questioning. I don’t want him to decide to run. He can sit and stew until you get here.”

“I’ll be there in a couple of hours,” Kreisler said. “I want this bastard.”

“So do we.” Tessa ended the call and turned toward Logan. “Let’s go get Simon before he gets spooked.”

A few minutes later, she turned onto Bishopton Road and headed toward the Dooley residence. Outside town, the landscape opened to rolling hills.

The radio crackled, and Kurt’s voice sounded through the speaker. “Disabled vehicle on Bishopton Road, between the winery and the harbor.” Kurt was on his way to the ferry to deliver the box of bones and Dwyer to the sheriff’s department on the mainland. Knowing Kurt, he wouldn’t want to drive past anyone in need. But if he stopped to help, he might miss the ferry.

Tessa grabbed her mic. “I’m four minutes away. Responding.”

“Roger that.” Kurt’s voice slowed, and Tessa imagined him easing off the accelerator as he approached the vehicle. “It’s a white F-250.” Kurt read off a license plate number. “I don’t see anyone in the vehicle—” Three popping sounds, at one-second intervals, interrupted Kurt’s response.

Tessa’s heart rate spiked. She glanced at Logan.

“Gunshots.” Logan’s hand curled around the armrest.

Kurt’s voice, breathless and rushed, echoed in the vehicle. “Shots fired! I’m shot!”

Shock floored Tessa for a single breath; then she shook her head and shouted into the mic, “ETA three minutes.” Tessa pressed the gas pedal to the floor. “Kurt? Kurt? What’s going on? Talk to me.”

An ominous silence fell over the radio. Then the dispatcher repeatedly requested a status, but Kurt didn’t answer him either. The road passed in a rush of lights and sirens. There was no hospital on Widow’s, and the closest thing to an ambulance was, ironically, the funeral home’s hearse. In a life-or-death situation, they would need to call for a medical evacuation and hope an aircraft was available. Deputies were usually the first responders to almost every emergency, medical or criminal. Whatever had happened to Kurt, Tessa and Logan would be the first on scene.

Logan pointed ahead. “There’s Kurt!”

The cruiser was angled across the road. The passenger door stood open. Adrenaline sharpened Tessa’s senses as they approached the vehicle. “I don’t see an F-250.” Tessa slowed her SUV, scanning the surroundings for the shooter.

Logan’s head swiveled. “Me neither.”

She reported her location to dispatch and parked behind Kurt’s cruiser. Weapons drawn, she and Logan stepped out.

Logan assessed the landscape with a practiced eye.

On the west side of the road, the sun sparkled on Widow’s Bay. To the east, a vineyard stretched into the distance. No high ground. No close structures.

“Shooter likely left.” Tessa holstered her gun, but she was glad Logan had her back.

“If I shot a cop, I’d take off.” But Logan kept his sweeping gaze on the fields as Tessa turned to Kurt’s vehicle.

She approached with caution. Behind the wheel, Kurt slumped sideways. The back seat was empty. Dwyer was gone. Tessa opened the driver’s door and pressed two fingers to Kurt’s blood-covered neck. Relief flooded her when she felt his pulse throb against her fingertips. “He’s alive!”

Blood matted his hair, ran down his face, and soaked his uniform shirt. Tessa glanced in the passenger seat. Empty. The box of bones was gone. She turned back to Kurt, looking for the source of bleeding. She found a long furrow in his scalp and another bullet wound high up on his shoulder, at the edge of his body armor vest.

Tessa called Henry and relayed the details of Kurt’s injuries. “He’s unconscious and bleeding heavily from two bullet wounds.”

“Bruce is here. We’re on the way. I’ll call for a medical evac,” the doctor said and then ended the call.

The closest air ambulance was based on San Juan Island, but there were no guarantees that it was available.

Tessa gestured to Kurt. “We need to stop this bleeding.”

Logan helped her pull Kurt from the vehicle. They laid him on the shoulder of the road. Tessa retrieved her first aid kit and a blanket from her vehicle. Logan applied a stack of gauze to the head wound.

Tessa applied pressure to his shoulder. “Kurt, can you hear me?” The older deputy didn’t respond. His breathing seemed shallower, or was that her imagination?

Tessa and Logan applied pressure to Kurt’s wounds until Bruce brought Henry to the scene. The doctor checked under the bandages and started an IV. Then Logan and Bruce loaded Kurt into the back of Bruce’s patrol vehicle. Henry climbed in the back with Kurt. Bruce slid behind the wheel, and the cruiser sped away in the spray of dirt and gravel, headed for

the airport to meet the air ambulance plane en route from Friday Harbor.

As Bruce's vehicle disappeared and the blare of the siren faded, Tessa breathed. She looked down at her hands, covered in Kurt's blood. Her adrenaline ebbed, leaving her shaky and nauseated.

She looked at Logan, her own feelings reflected back at her. "He'll be okay."

"He will." But Logan's voice lacked conviction.

If Kurt were a younger man, Tessa would be more optimistic. But the only thing she could do now was find the shooter and solve her case. Kurt's life would soon be in the hands of the Life Flight crew.

She went to her SUV. After opening the back hatch, she found sanitizing hand wipes. She and Logan cleaned their hands. Tessa wiped at the blood on the sleeve of her uniform but simply made the stain larger. Logan was using a wipe under his nails.

Tessa's phone buzzed. She reached for her duty belt and tilted it to read the screen. "It's a text from Cate. Mona Lawrence just picked up Chandler."

"Good. I'll feel better when he's off the island."

"Me too." Tessa opened two water bottles and handed him one. They drank, then turned back to Kurt's vehicle.

Tessa crouched beside the driver's door. Two holes pierced the laminated glass of the windshield. The passenger window, comprised of tempered glass, had shattered. Glass pebbles covered the passenger seat.

Logan leaned into the vehicle. "Do you see a bullet?"

She scanned the interior. "No."

Logan stepped back. "The shooter must have opened the door to let Dwyer out."

The steel mesh separating the front and back seats was intact, and the rear doors could be opened only from the

outside.

“Were Simon and Dwyer working together?” Tessa asked.

“It’s possible,” Logan agreed. “Dwyer is from Suquamish. That’s not far from Bainbridge.”

Tessa radioed dispatch and provided an update of the situation. “Put out a BOLO alert for Webb Dwyer.” She supplied his physical description. “And for the F-250 Kurt reported. I’ll notify the ferry operators to be on the lookout.”

“I’ll call the harbor masters at the marinas in case he tries to steal a boat.” Logan pulled out his phone. “We have a license plate number for the truck, right?”

“Yes!” Tessa’s brain whirled. How had she forgotten? Tapping her mic, she contacted dispatch again. “Give me the information for the license plate Deputy Olson called in.”

Dispatch replied in seconds, repeating the number. “The vehicle belongs to Simon Dooley.”

Tessa grabbed the extra body armor vest she kept in her vehicle. She handed it to Logan. “Let’s go get that bastard.”

8

Fifteen minutes later, Logan stared through the windshield of Tessa's cruiser at the Dooley house. "Looks empty." But he had an itch he couldn't scratch between his shoulder blades. Could be the sweat drying under his thick body armor.

Or his instincts telling him something had gone seriously sideways here.

Those instincts had kept him alive on deployment, and he'd learned to listen to them.

While she was driving, Tessa had called the sheriff and given him a detailed update. He and several deputies were heading to Widow's in a sheriff's department boat. He'd be there in forty-five minutes.

"He could be hiding." Tessa grabbed the mic and reported their arrival to dispatch.

"Vehicles could be in the garage." Logan pointed to an oversize three-car garage about a hundred feet away.

Tessa climbed out of the SUV and pulled her weapon. They circled the garage, but the only windows were twelve feet above the ground.

Logan adjusted the Velcro strap on his vest and drew his handgun. They approached the front door. Normally, they'd prefer to have more deputies on hand, but neither of them was willing to wait for backup to arrive from the mainland. That would take hours. An active shooter had to be stopped.

The ferry operators were on the lookout for Dwyer and Simon, but there were other ways off the island. For someone who had already killed a teenager and shot a cop, stealing a boat wouldn't seem like a stretch.

The house was still. The sun shone on the glass, the reflection making it hard to see inside.

"I doubt he's here." Tessa pressed her shoulder to the doorframe.

“He wouldn’t know that Kurt called in his license plate number.” Logan took a position on the opposite side of the door, avoiding the center in case someone shot at them.

Tessa banged on the door. “Sheriff’s department.”

Nothing moved inside.

Fresh sweat dripped down Logan’s back.

Tessa tried the doorknob. “Locked. Let’s walk around back.”

They crept along the side of the house, shielding their eyes and peering in windows when possible. “I don’t see anyone.”

The three-car garage had no windows, so they couldn’t see if any vehicles were present. They reached the back of the house. Three sets of sliding glass doors spanned a huge deck that overlooked Widow’s Bay. They climbed a flight of wooden steps. Crouching, Tessa jogged to the side of the end set of doors. Logan followed her, feeling exposed. They stopped for a breath, their backs to the cedar siding.

Tessa reached for the door handle. They both startled when it slid open. Their eyes met, and Tessa inclined her head toward the open door. She peered around the frame. Logan did the same, gazing into a great room. A huge stone fireplace dominated the living room. In the kitchen, modern stools surrounded an island the size of an SUV. But Logan saw no one.

They went through the door as a unit. For obvious reasons, Logan took the high targets, while Tessa aimed low. They sped through the great room, checking behind the huge island and opening a pantry. They went down a hallway to the foyer. Light poured into the two-story space. An office was empty. They headed for the stairs leading to the second floor. On the upstairs landing, Logan paused.

They crept down the hallway, then stopped at the first doorway. Logan’s heart pulsed in his ears. He fought the tunnel vision effect brought on by adrenaline. A twin bed with navy-blue bedding occupied the first bedroom. Chandler’s?

Tessa opened the closet door. Jeans, T-shirts, and sweaters were folded on shelves. No room for a person to hide.

They moved down the hall to the next door. Logan peered around the frame. A double bed and plain dresser occupied the space. No personal effects. Guest room? He looked under the bed. Tessa checked the closet before they left the room.

Logan eyed a set of double doors at the end of the hall. The primary bedroom.

They crept down the hall, their boots silent on the cream-colored carpet. The right-hand door stood ajar. Logan put his eye to the crack at the hinge to view a skinny slice of room. He saw no one. Tessa nudged the door. It swung to the opposite wall, giving them a view of the whole room. Clothes hung over the edges of dresser drawers. The closet doors stood open.

They went through the doorway and scanned the room for threats.

Logan checked the walk-in closet.

Tessa checked the bathroom. "Clear."

They stood in the middle of the space.

Tessa turned in a circle. "Someone packed up in a hurry."

Logan scanned the closet. "Things are so pulled apart that I can't tell whose clothes are missing."

"Maybe Simon is taking the bones and running with them," Tessa suggested.

"Why would he do that?"

"The bones are important for some reason." Tessa continued to study the room. "With some crimes, the whys never make sense to us but are clear to the perpetrator."

"I'm glad I can't understand." Logan had seen enough senseless death and destruction to know people did the unimaginable every day. "Simon is probably on the run. But where's Shannon?"

Tessa crossed the room and studied the partially opened drawers of the dresser. “Looks like they both took clothes. Maybe she went with him. She said she loved him.”

“He could have forced her.”

“True,” Tessa said.

“Let’s see what’s in the garage.” Logan headed for the hall.

Tessa jogged to catch up. “I’m not taking the time to apply for a warrant.”

“Nope.” Logan didn’t have a single fuck left for procedure or paperwork.

“I’m calling an active shooter an exigent circumstance,” Tessa said. The set of her jaw told him she didn’t have any fucks left either. Normally, they needed a search warrant to enter a private citizen’s home, but if lives would be endangered by procedural delays, the requirement could be bypassed.

Tessa retraced their steps to the back door, went outside, and jogged down the deck steps. They ran across the side yard to the garage. They’d have to break in. They approached a human-size door on the near side of the building. Logan tried the knob. Locked. But there was no dead bolt, just a cheap doorknob lock. He pulled out a credit card and slid it into the crack next to the knob. A little maneuvering, and he had the door open in thirty seconds.

He glanced back at Tessa. She nodded, and he pushed open the door. An F-250 stood in the middle bay. The spaces on each side were empty.

A metallic scent hit his nose. He froze. The smell brought images of Afghanistan back to his mind that he had no interest in reliving. He fought the memories. *Not now. Focus. If you fuck up, Tessa could die.*

He glanced at her, using the eye contact to ground him. Her eyes widened. She recognized the smell too.

Blood.

He flexed his fingers. He'd cleaned off Kurt's blood, but he could still feel it coating his skin. Or was that sweat? He wiped his palms, one by one, on his thighs, then adjusted his grip on his weapon. Logan crouched and scanned the concrete under the truck. He froze for two seconds. On the other side of the truck, dirty bones were scattered on the concrete, and a hand stretched out from behind the far front wheel. He gestured toward the hand and mouthed, "Person down," to Tessa.

With a nod, she started across the space, leading with her weapon. They moved around the front of the truck. Logan stopped when a red puddle came into view.

He jerked his head back and mouthed, "Blood," to Tessa. Her mouth flattened into a grim line.

Had Simon killed his wife before going after the bones and shooting Kurt? Had he then traded his vehicle for hers?

Logan continued around the truck. His gaze swept over the body, ignoring it until he'd made certain the rest of the space was cleared of threats. They were alone.

He and Tessa stood side by side, staring down at the lake of blood, the tipped-over box of bones, and the body of Simon Dooley.

9

Shocked, Tessa shoved her gun into its holster and crouched to touch Simon's neck. No pulse. No surprise. No one could survive a blood loss that great. The garage looked like a slaughterhouse. She rocked back to sit on her heels. Three blood blossoms stained the front of Simon Dooley's shirt.

"Damn." Logan holstered his gun. "Not what I expected to find."

"No. Not at all." Tessa spotted a long brown hair lying on the concrete, one end stuck in the edge of the blood puddle. "Do you see that?"

"Dwyer has long dark hair." Logan rubbed at the stubble on his jaw. "Simon and Shannon are both blond."

Tessa sorted through the possibilities. "When we first saw the blood, I thought Simon had killed Shannon."

"Same."

"Speaking of Shannon . . ." Tessa used her shoulder mic to ask dispatch to identify any vehicles registered to Shannon Dooley and to put out a BOLO on her and her vehicle and to notify the ferry operators not to leave port if she was on board.

Dispatch said, "A black 2018 Honda Accord is registered to Shannon Dooley."

"Ten-four." Tessa released the mic.

"Ten-four," Bruce repeated on the radio.

Tessa checked the time on her phone. "The next ferry doesn't leave for another hour." Staff shortages and budget cuts had reduced the number of ferries servicing Widow's Island.

"For once, I'm glad the ferry system is underfunded."

"Me too." Tessa studied the body and scene. "Simon's truck was used in Kurt's shooting. Now it's here. We arrived here about an hour after Kurt was shot. I suspect he came back

here and was killed almost immediately.” Tessa pointed to the edges of the blood puddle. “These smaller blood spatters are still wet in the center. But he’s very pale, so it happened at least fifteen to twenty minutes ago.”

Blood stopped moving through the capillaries, causing the skin to lose color after death.

Tessa’s knees cramped, and she stood. “Kurt was shot, the bones were stolen, and Dwyer was sprung free.” She gestured to the remains. “But the bones were left behind, presumably by Dwyer and Shannon.”

“Maybe the bones were only important to Simon.” Logan motioned toward the dead man.

“He’s the one who had a verified connection to Alyssa.” Tessa rested her hands on the front of her duty belt. “Dwyer could have known Simon.”

“So Simon shot Kurt to steal the bones. He freed Dwyer. They come back here, and Dwyer kills Simon? What about Shannon?” Logan asked. “Is she Dwyer’s hostage?”

Tessa frowned. “Either that or Dwyer and Shannon are in this together. Could be they double-crossed Simon.” She reached for her phone and called Henry.

He answered immediately. “The air ambulance just took off. Kurt was stable when I handed him over to the team.”

“Good. Are you still with Bruce?” Tessa asked.

“Yes,” Henry answered.

“Put the call on speaker,” Tessa said. When the call shifted to an airy sound, she continued. “We have a dead body.”

“Where?” Henry asked.

Tessa gave him the address. “This one is very fresh.”

“Any details?” Bruce asked. On their end of the connection, an engine started.

“Three gunshots to the chest,” Tessa said. “The victim was a prime suspect in Kurt’s shooting.”

Three heartbeats of silence ticked by; then Henry said, "I'm stopping at my office for my vehicle and coroner kit."

"ETA to your location is fifteen minutes," Bruce added.

Tessa had a quick vision of Dwyer, armed with a rifle, forcing his way onto the ferry, maybe taking hostages. Had he kidnapped Shannon? "We need to check the passengers and vehicles waiting for the ferry. Dwyer could be desperate to escape. They might be in Shannon's Honda or a stolen vehicle."

"I'll drop Henry at his office and head to the ferry." Bruce ended the call.

Logan stared at Tessa, his face grim. "Chandler is headed to the ferry too."

"Damn it." Tessa called Mona. The social worker's voice mail picked up. Tessa asked for an immediate callback. Then she sent a text but got no response.

Tessa used her radio to update dispatch. Deputies were already on the way to Widow's, but they couldn't beam themselves to the island. For now, the Widow's team was on its own.

What now?

According to procedure, she should stay with the body and secure the murder scene. But she hated every second of waiting. They needed more uniforms on the island. Now.

She turned back to the body. Simon lay on his back near the wheel well of his truck. The vehicle door was closed. She analyzed the angle of his body. "Looks like he got out of his truck with the box of bones. He closed the door, turned around, took a step or two, and someone shot him."

"He dropped the box, and the bones spilled." Logan squatted next to the body, taking care not to step in any blood.

"He was shot in the chest," Tessa said. "If he was carrying the box . . ." She held her hands in front of her body, spaced apart as if holding the wooden box. "Why didn't the wooden box block the bullets?"

Logan stood. “His torso is longer than yours. The two shots to the upper chest would have been above the box.”

“And the third?” Tessa asked.

Logan shrugged. “Either he was carrying the box tucked under one arm, or he was shot the third time after he dropped the box.”

“Or after he was on the ground.” Unease crawled up Tessa’s spine. “Dwyer didn’t have a gun on him when you put him in Kurt’s cruiser.”

“Had to be Simon’s,” Logan suggested.

Tessa’s phone buzzed. “The Flying Fin?” Why was a restaurant in Bishopton Village calling her? She answered.

A rush of panicked, unintelligible words sounded over the phone.

“Wait!” Tessa used her calm, official voice. “Who is this?”

“This is Sheila Rodriguez at the Flying Fin. I just saw something strange. I don’t know if it’s a crime or not, but . . .” Sheila paused. “It didn’t feel right.”

Tessa’s stomach cramped. “What did you see?”

She turned toward the garage door. Procedure would have to wait. Something was very wrong. Her bones ached with the certainty.

“Mona Lawrence just pulled up at the stop sign of Bishopton Road and Third Street. She was looking right at me and moving her lips. It looked like she was trying to say *help*.”

Tessa motioned to Logan for him to follow her, but he was already falling into step beside her. “Can you describe the vehicle?”

“It was a silver Toyota Corolla,” Sheila said.

“Could you see who was inside the car?” Tessa followed Logan out of the garage. They jogged toward her SUV.

“Mona had her window partway down, so I could see her,” Sheila said. “But with the sun and tinting on the windows, all I could see were shapes of other people in the car.”

“How many passengers?” Tessa asked.

“Definitely one in the passenger seat and probably someone in the back seat as well.” Sheila sounded uncertain about the additional passenger.

“And which way did Mona go at the stop sign?” Tessa pictured the town.

“Straight,” Sheila said with more confidence.

Toward the ferry.

“Thanks, Sheila. I’ll get back to you.” Tessa ended the call.

Logan used the dashboard computer to search for vehicles registered to Mona Lawrence. “She drives a silver Toyota Corolla.” He noted the license plate. Tessa relayed the information to Bruce.

They reached the vehicle and climbed in. Tessa punched the gas pedal, and the SUV shot down the driveway, lights flashing, siren screaming. As she drove, she updated dispatch and Bruce while Logan called Henry and told him to wait on viewing the body. Tessa didn’t want him responding to an unsecured scene—not with a shooter on the loose—after he’d been kidnapped and almost killed just a few weeks before.

“Henry doesn’t like it,” Logan said. “But he agreed.”

“The sheriff’s ETA is thirty minutes.” Tessa’s tires squealed as she took a curve in the road at high speed.

Neither she nor Logan commented. They both knew whatever was going to happen would likely be over by the time backup arrived. The minutes ticked by in slow motion. As they approached Bishopton Village, Tessa turned off the siren and eased off the accelerator. She didn’t want to warn Dwyer and/or Shannon.

The tourist town was designed to be quaint, with ice cream parlors, coffee shops, and gift boutiques. With the busy season coming to a close, the narrow streets were mostly empty. Tessa halted the car at the stop sign next to the Flying Fin. She continued straight, as Sheila had indicated. The ferry dock was at the end of the street. Tessa cruised while she and Logan scanned the tiny side streets for Mona's vehicle.

Tessa reported her location to dispatch, then called Bruce. Since they were the only two law enforcement officers on scene, she preferred direct communication without radio chatter. And on the slight chance the suspect had a scanner, it was best if he didn't hear the location or strategy of responders.

She put the call on speakerphone. "See anything?"

"No," Bruce said.

"Where are you?" Tessa asked. He should have been in Bishopton Village before her.

"I'm circling around to the marina, in case they try to rent a private boat," Bruce said.

"Good thinking." There were a few charter boats available for hire, though those trips typically needed to be arranged in advance.

Logan stiffened, then pointed through the windshield. "Over there."

She looked past the few dozen cars lined up at the tollbooth and spotted a silver Toyota Corolla in the back half of the line. Sunlight turned the windshield into a mirror. "I can't see who's in the car."

"Me neither," Logan said. "Can't read the license plate either. But the car is blocked in by other vehicles. It's not going anywhere."

"I need to get closer. I don't even know what we're dealing with." Tessa notified dispatch, then parked the SUV behind a bush and got out of the vehicle. She rose on her tiptoes. The Toyota hadn't moved. "We'll split up. Don't move

in, though. I don't want to endanger bystanders with a shoot-out."

She called Bruce and described the situation. "We're going to get closer to see if it's the right vehicle and get a look inside." Hopefully, without being seen by the suspect. The last thing she wanted to do was increase the risk to Mona. But she couldn't let an armed shooter get on the ferry.

"I'm on my way," Bruce said.

After shoving her phone into her duty belt, she motioned to herself, then to the south, then pointed at Logan and the north side of the street. He nodded. Crouching, he circled backward, using a passing van to cross the street unseen.

Tessa crept along the opposite side of the road, keeping cars between her and the Toyota, until she was approximately fifty feet from the vehicle. After ducking behind a tree, she leaned around the trunk to get a better view. She could see the outlines of a driver and a passenger. The sun disappeared behind a passing cloud. Mona was behind the wheel. Shannon sat in the passenger seat. Tessa could see the shadow of at least one person in the back seat. The area behind the driver was a blind spot. Was Chandler in the vehicle? Dwyer?

The passenger door burst open, and Shannon Dooley stepped out, leveling a rifle right at her.

10

Logan stopped dead, his heart slamming as Shannon Dooley pointed a rifle at Tessa.

He drew his weapon. But before he could take aim or even shout, Tessa withdrew behind the tree. A shot rang out. But Tessa was no longer in sight.

Sunlight blinded him for a second; then Logan squinted at the car. It seemed Mona was behind the wheel. Was that Chandler in the back seat?

There were too many civilians in the area. Logan did not want to shoot, but he needed to stop Shannon. She was raising the rifle again.

Logan brought up his weapon and aimed at Shannon. "Freeze!"

She swung the long gun around to aim at Logan; then she pivoted back to Tessa. Shannon kept the rifle barrel up while opening the car's rear door. She dragged Chandler out and tugged him in front of her. Clearly unable to keep the rifle barrel level one handed, she dropped the long gun and yanked a handgun from her waistband at the small of her back. She pointed it at Tessa over Chandler's shoulder.

Horror seized Logan. She was using her own child as a shield.

She shuffled backward to the sidewalk, pulling Chandler by the arm. Attached shops lined the street. Chandler resisted. She grabbed a handful of his hair and leaned close to his ear. With a glance behind her, she pulled him through the door of the first shop, Island Gifts. The tiny bell rang as the door swung closed.

"Shit!" Tessa raced toward the car.

Logan went to the Corolla and peered inside. Mona still sat at the wheel, her eyes vacant and terrified. Blood dripped from a gash in her temple.

“Are you all right?” Tessa stopped next to the vehicle. She’d been on her radio updating dispatch.

“Yes.” Mona pressed a hand to the cut. “Please save Chandler. She did not look rational.”

“Where’s Dwyer?” Logan yelled.

Mona looked confused. “Who?”

“The man with the long hair?” Tessa asked.

She shook her head. “There isn’t anyone else. It’s just her. She carjacked me at the gas station while I was filling my tank.” Mona touched her head. “She hit me with the butt of the rifle.”

Logan and Tessa shared a glance. Then they ran for the gift shop. Tessa approached the front door and motioned for Logan to cover the rear exit. He raced around the building. The alley was clear. Logan turned the doorknob slowly and opened the back door. Leading with his weapon, he scanned the cluttered shop, but stacks of displays and revolving racks provided plenty of hiding spots.

He heard the bell of the front door jingle. Tessa coming inside, he hoped.

He crept up and down the rows of island-themed merchandise. The shop sold everything from stuffed orcas to salt and pepper shakers shaped like orcas.

A muffled moan sounded from somewhere inside. Logan spotted Tessa over a table stacked with hand-painted tableware. He moved carefully, keeping low, sweeping his weapon into the many nooks and crannies of the shop.

Two doors opened off the side wall. One was likely a restroom. Who knew where the other led? A closet? To the neighboring store?

Logan’s heart jackhammered against his sternum. Across the store, Tessa jerked her head toward the doors.

Logan skirted a revolving postcard display to move beside Tessa. They moved down the aisle badge to badge. Something crashed in the rear of the shop. Logan whirled, aiming at the

noise: a tipped-over display of hand-painted greeting cards. Sweat trickled between his shoulder blades and pooled at the base of his spine. A cat shot out from under the debris.

Next to him, Tessa exhaled.

As a unit, they turned toward the doors. Logan listened hard. From behind the door, he heard the scrape of a shoe on the tile floor. Stepping to the side, Tessa touched the door handle. She yanked the door open. Logan took aim on the doorway. A bathroom. Empty.

Tessa moved back. They sidestepped to the second door. She reached for the knob and pulled it open. An elderly woman crouched in the corner of a storeroom, her hands over her head, her face turned away.

Logan couldn't remember her name, but he recognized the shopkeeper.

"Where did they go?" he mouthed.

The old woman moved to the doorway and pointed to a folding screen on the other side of the shop. She mouthed, "Door to the next shop."

Tessa motioned for him to go out the back door and cut off Shannon's escape. As much as he hated to be separated from Tessa in a crisis, he knew she was right. With a nod, he slipped through the store and out the back exit. The rear door to the next shop was unlocked. Logan eased inside. Whispers came from the front of the store.

"Move it!" Shannon hissed. "You're my blood. I know you won't betray me like he did."

Logan followed the voices. He ducked behind a table piled with T-shirts. Between the stacks, he could see Shannon pulling Chandler toward him. They were heading for the back door. They disappeared behind a stack of boxed merchandise. Logan waited for them to emerge on the other side.

A click sounded from the side door.

Tessa.

He crept a few feet toward Shannon and Chandler. Peering through a one-inch gap between boxes, he spotted them.

Shannon had spun toward the sound. She clutched Chandler in front of her and aimed the gun toward Tessa.

“Stop right there, bitch.”

Tessa froze, her gun up and aimed toward Shannon. Except Tessa didn't have a clear shot. Once again, Shannon held Chandler in front of her own body. Her handgun was aimed at Tessa.

Where is Logan?

Shannon moved sideways, carefully skirting an open and partially unpacked box on the floor. Behind Shannon, a long table overflowed with more boxes. The shop must have received a recent shipment.

“Don't take another step,” Shannon threatened.

“You don't want to hurt your son,” Tessa reasoned.

“He's *my* son. No one is going to take him from me,” Shannon said in an “If I can't have him, no one can” tone.

“Put down the gun, Shannon. You can't get away,” Tessa said. “They won't let you on the ferry.”

“I'll get away if you back the fuck up. Me and Chandler are going to start over. We'll find a way.” Sweat beaded her upper lip, and there was far too much white around her eyeballs. She was losing control.

Chandler's gaze pleaded for help. A tear rolled down his cheek.

Tessa silently swore that woman was not taking that boy anywhere. “Put down the gun, Shannon. You're scaring your son.”

“He's *mine!*” Shannon screeched. Her lips peeled back in an angry snarl.

“That doesn't mean you can hurt him,” Tessa said, her voice calm.

“Chandler loves me. We’re all that’s left for either of us. He wants to go. Get out of our way.”

“If he wants to go, why are you holding on to him?”

“Shut the fuck up!” Shannon screamed. “Chandler would never betray me. Not like Simon did.”

“What did Simon do?” Tessa used an empathetic tone.

“He was weak. He fucked that little whore, Alyssa.” Shannon all but spat out the words. “She learned her lesson. No more stealing other women’s men for her.”

“You killed Alyssa?” Tessa couldn’t completely hide her shock.

She heard a faint scratch in the back of the shop and silently prayed it was Logan.

A chilling, smug smile curled Shannon’s lips. “I did. It was simple. Stupid little slut was easy to lure.” Her eyes darkened. “But Simon couldn’t let go of her, even after she was gone. I made him bury her. He still couldn’t accept the fact that she was dead.” She huffed, her chest heaving. “I finally convinced him to come back to me, but he fucking brought her with him.”

Tessa’s stomach turned cold.

Shannon’s smile faded. Disgust flattened her lips. “Can you believe it? He dug up the bitch’s bones and brought them with him. He thought he could hide her from me, just like he thought I wouldn’t find out he was fucking her.” She shook her head. “Did he think I was stupid?”

Tessa didn’t respond.

The room went silent for a few seconds. Then Shannon moved sideways, toward the rear exit. “You can’t stop me.”

Tessa held her ground, keeping her gun aimed at the woman. The last thing in the world she wanted to do was shoot Shannon while Chandler watched. On the other hand, Tessa didn’t want to get shot either.

Chandler met Tessa's gaze. The fear in his eyes filled Tessa with rage. How dare this woman terrorize her own son? Keeping her eyes locked with Tessa's, Shannon inched closer to the door. Chandler gave Tessa a solemn nod that made her pulse spike. What was he going to do? Shannon took her eyes off Tessa to glance behind her, likely making sure the floor was clear. The gun shifted slightly to the side. Chandler took the opportunity, shoving his mother's arm upward with both hands.

A split second later, the pile of boxes behind her tumbled toward her in a huge crash. A box struck Shannon's back. She stumbled. The gun went off. An overhead light shattered, and glass rained down. Shannon ducked and shoved her son. But the boy held on, keeping her arm pointed at the ceiling.

Logan emerged from behind the table, moving toward them.

The boy was still in the way. Tessa couldn't risk a shot. Instead, she shoved her gun into its holster and lunged forward. Grabbing Chandler, she pushed him toward Logan. With both hands, she grabbed Shannon's gun arm and kept it pointed toward the ceiling.

The gun went off again, sending bits of ceiling tile scattering.

Tessa drove Shannon into the wall and banged her arm against the edge of a shelf. "Drop the gun!"

Shannon struggled.

Tessa slammed her arm into the shelf again. The gun clattered to the floor. She shifted her grip, putting Shannon in an armlock, then spun her around and twisted her arms behind her back. After snapping handcuffs onto her wrists, Tessa turned out Shannon's pockets and patted her down for additional weapons. When she was certain the threat had been eliminated, Tessa breathed.

Her pulse echoed in a crazy rhythm in her ears, and her knees went soft. The sweat under her body armor went cold.

She glanced around. Behind her, Logan had shielded Chandler with his own body.

Bruce's voice burst through the shop. "Tessa!"

"We're okay. We're in here," she called out. Then she used her mic to notify dispatch of the shooting and the arrest of the suspect.

Bruce appeared in the doorway.

"Would you take her?" Tessa shoved Shannon at him.

"Of course." Bruce took the handcuffed woman. "I'll put her in the car."

Chandler emerged from behind Logan. The teen's entire body was shaking. Tessa wrapped her arms around him, and he began to cry. Logan turned away, giving them a moment.

Holding the sobbing teen, Tessa had no excuses to offer for his mother's behavior. She'd risked her own son's life. Whether or not she'd intended to hurt him, she'd acted with cruel and callous disregard. Tessa held him while he cried and murmured the only words of comfort that applied. "It's over. You're safe."

12

Several hours later, Logan filled out what felt like his thousandth report. “If I have to fill out another report, I’m going to lose it.”

“Same,” Tessa said from the next desk. “But I’m happy not to be at either crime scene. I’ve had enough blood and death.”

The sheriff and deputies from the mainland had taken over. CSI teams had been brought over as well.

The door opened, and the sheriff entered the tiny station. “First of all, Kurt is out of surgery and stable.”

Logan and Tessa both audibly exhaled in relief.

The sheriff continued. “Next, we found Shannon’s Honda Accord. There was a very unhappy man inside the trunk.”

“Long dark hair?” Tessa asked.

The sheriff nodded. “Name is Webb Dwyer. He’s on the way to the mainland hospital to be treated for heat exhaustion and dehydration before he goes to the county jail. The car was parked in full sun. It was damned hot in that trunk.”

Tessa pushed away from her keyboard. “What did he know?”

“He filled in a few details,” said the sheriff. “Says Simon pulled him out of the patrol vehicle and forced Dwyer to go with him. But when they went back to Simon’s place, Shannon took one look at the wooden box of bones, freaked out, and shot Simon. She forced Dwyer into the trunk of her car at gunpoint. When she carjacked Mona, she left him in there.”

“Why would Simon take him?” Tessa wondered aloud.

The sheriff shrugged. “Who knows? Distraction, maybe. Taking Dwyer definitely made the whole situation more confusing. Plus, Dwyer saw Simon shoot Kurt. Can’t leave a witness behind.” He took off his hat and wiped his brow on his

sleeve. “Do you want to hear about Shannon’s unhinged rant now or tomorrow?”

Logan stood and stretched. “I have to know now.”

The sheriff nodded. “The whole time she and Simon were separated, she stalked him. They shared a cell service account. She monitored his calls and texts. She went to Bainbridge, followed him. She caught him having sex with Alyssa in a motel. She strangled the girl and made Simon help her dismember the body in the bathtub and sneak it out in pieces.”

“She admitted all of this?” Logan couldn’t believe it. “Why would she do that?”

“She seemed almost proud.” The sheriff sighed hard. “They buried the pieces in the woods. She says Simon was still obsessed with the girl. He dug up her bones and brought them with him when he came back to Widow’s. Had them on a high shelf in the garage, and Shannon found them. She was enraged. Even as she told the story, she was spitting mad when she got to that point. Seems she was as obsessed with him as he’d been with the girl.” The sheriff paused for a breath. “They were planning on running because they thought you’d figured out that they killed Alyssa. Simon wanted to take the bones along. Him stealing the bones back was the final straw for Shannon. She was jealous of the dead girl and furious that Simon couldn’t let go of her.”

“That is the most fucked-up thing I’ve ever heard.” Logan rolled his head on his shoulders. The emanating cracks sounded like Bubble Wrap popping.

The sheriff shook his head. “She’s the scariest woman I’ve ever encountered.”

Tessa yawned. “The fingerprint examiner called. The prints on the shovel belong to Chandler.”

“He was the one who tried to bury the bones,” Logan said.

The sheriff nodded. “He told us. Simon and Shannon were arguing over the bones the night he left. He knew. So when he left, he took the box with him. He couldn’t stand the thought

of human remains being kept like that. He also thought removing the bones might make his parents stop fighting.”

“Did he know Shannon killed Alyssa?”

“He thought Simon had killed her.” The sheriff shook his head. “But he overheard them talk about the way they’d disposed of the body. It scared the hell out of him. They’d always been abusive, but this was the first time Chandler thought maybe they’d kill him at some point.”

Tessa grimaced. “That’s why he was so petrified at the thought of going home.”

“Poor kid,” Logan said. “Where is he?”

“His brother has already applied for guardianship. While he completes the paperwork, inspections, et cetera, we have a temporary foster family lined up.” The sheriff settled his hat back on his head. “They’ve dealt with traumatized kids before. He’ll get counseling.”

“I hope it works,” Tessa said.

But will it be enough?

How did a teenager recover from that much emotional damage?

After the sheriff left, Tessa took Logan’s hand. “Let’s go home. We did all we could. We can’t fix everything for everyone. This is the kind of case that leaves everyone involved with lasting damage.”

“I know.” Logan followed her to the door. Chandler wasn’t the only person traumatized by his parents’ crimes. Alyssa’s family, law enforcement, and the social worker would all struggle—including Logan and Tessa. He took her hand, not caring if anyone saw their PDA. “At least we have each other.”

13

Tessa smoothed her dress in the full-length mirror in her bedroom. She'd been calm about the wedding until today, but this morning had brought a flurry of nerves.

"Tess, you look amazing." Patience looped an arm around Tessa's shoulders.

"Hold still." Cate wielded a makeup brush and applied powder to Tessa's cheek. Cate stepped back, her mouth twisted as she assessed her work. The bruise, which had faded to a gross yellow-green color, had disappeared. "You're perfect."

Tessa turned to the mirror, pleased. Normally, she wasn't very glam, but this was her wedding day, so a little vanity was allowed, right? She straightened the tiny pendant, her *something old*, one-third of a heart. Cate and Sam wore the other two pieces. They'd owned the matching set since childhood.

"That dress is lovely." Sam brushed a happy tear from her own cheek.

Tessa had chosen a simple sleeveless A-line dress with a modest V neck and gathered bodice. "Look! Pockets." She shoved her hands into them.

All four of them laughed.

"It's gorgeous," said Sam as she poured bubbly into two glasses. She filled Patience's and Cate's flutes with sparkling cider, then handed out the glasses. "I'm so happy we're together again." She raised her glass. "To Tessa and Logan!"

"To new beginnings." Cate clinked her glass against theirs. "And best friends that last a lifetime."

"Don't make me cry. You'll mess up all your hard work." Tessa dabbed a tear from under her eye.

The door opened, and Jane walked in. She smiled wide. "You look lovely! I'm so happy for you and Logan. You were meant for each other."

“Don’t tell me you always knew.” Tessa laughed.

“Okay. I won’t tell you.” Jane grinned. “Now let’s get you married. I’ll go out and get things started.”

Jane would officiate the ceremony, just as she’d married Cate and Henry a few weeks before.

“I have something for you,” Tessa said to Patience. She handed her sister a small box. “For my maid of honor.”

Patience opened it. Inside, a small heart pendant hung on a delicate chain. Patience said, “Ooh. It’s just like yours.”

“I couldn’t get through a day without you.” Tessa gave her sister a one-armed hug. She took another sip of her bubbly, then touched up her lipstick. “Ready!”

They walked through the house to the front door. Tessa looked through the screen. Rows of chairs formed an aisle. At the top, Logan stood, waiting for her, in a blue suit that matched his eyes. The moment she saw him, Tessa’s nerves vanished.

They were meant to be together. She felt it in her bones.

When Herb from the inn started playing “Here Comes the Bride” on his oboe, Tessa had to contain a burst of giddy laughter. He’d volunteered. They hadn’t been able to say no without hurting his feelings. The whole island had come together to throw the wedding. Vases of donated flowers flanked the yard. Cate and Jane had made the cake—a giant cinnamon roll topped with a tiny bride and groom. The knitting group had prepared all the food. On the porch, a long table was covered in casserole dishes.

Tessa walked down the porch steps, her eyes locked with Logan’s, her own love reflected back at her. She stepped into the grass, her low heels sinking into the earth. Guests stood and smiled as she started for the aisle. In the front row, Tessa’s mother was supported on both sides by members of the knitting group. The ladies had worked hard to get her into a dress. Her hair was combed and arranged in a neat bun. Tessa’s heart nearly burst when she saw her mother was wearing lipstick.

Cate and Sam followed her down the aisle. As she approached Logan, a loud squawk sounded. A chicken fluttered from an overhead branch, right into Tessa's face. Wings flapped around her head. Logan leaped forward, grabbing the chicken with both hands and restraining it.

Killer Hen.

Tessa heard her mother croon to the bird. Logan set it on the grass, and it ran to her mom like a dog.

Cate plucked a feather from Tessa's low bun. Her eyes met Tessa's, and they burst into laughter. Joy bubbled over in Tessa's heart. She didn't care if the chicken had ruined her hair and makeup. Mom was happy. She was having a good day, and Tessa would savor every moment.

"We should have made the chicken the ring bearer," Logan said, deadpan.

Tessa stepped up next to him, trying to keep it together and only partially succeeding.

Jane cleared her throat. The corner of her mouth quirked as she clearly fought to remain serious. "Neighbors, family, and friends, we are gathered here today . . ." She married them without fuss and declared them husband and wife. "You may kiss the bride."

Logan took both of Tessa's hands. "I feel like I've been waiting for this moment my whole life."

"Same." Tessa rose onto her toes, and they kissed. "I've loved you forever."

The crowd exploded in applause, hoots, and whistles. Henry, Cate, Sam, and Patience hugged and congratulated them. Jane beamed. Tessa looked around at the community that surrounded them. She considered all of them family. Some were related by blood and others bonded by love.

She knew deep in her heart they all would meet life's joys and challenges together.

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Melinda Leigh

Kendra Elliot



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Number one Amazon Charts and number one *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Melinda Leigh is a fully recovered banker. Melinda's debut novel, *She Can Run*, was nominated for Best First Novel by the International Thriller Writers, and she's garnered numerous other writing awards, including two RITA nominations. Her other books include *She Can Tell*, *She Can Scream*, *She Can Hide*, and *She Can Kill* in the She Can series; *Midnight Exposure*, *Midnight Sacrifice*, *Midnight Betrayal*, and *Midnight Obsession* in the Midnight Novels; *Hour of Need*, *Minutes to Kill*, and *Seconds to Live* in the Scarlet Falls series; *Say You're Sorry*, *Her Last Goodbye*, *Bones Don't Lie*, *What I've Done*, *Secrets Never Die*, and *Save Your Breath* in the Morgan Dane series; and *Cross Her Heart*, *See Her Die*, *Drown Her Sorrows*, *Right Behind Her*, and *Dead Against Her* in the Bree Taggert series. She lives in a messy house with her family and a small herd of rescue pets. For more information, visit www.melindaleigh.com.