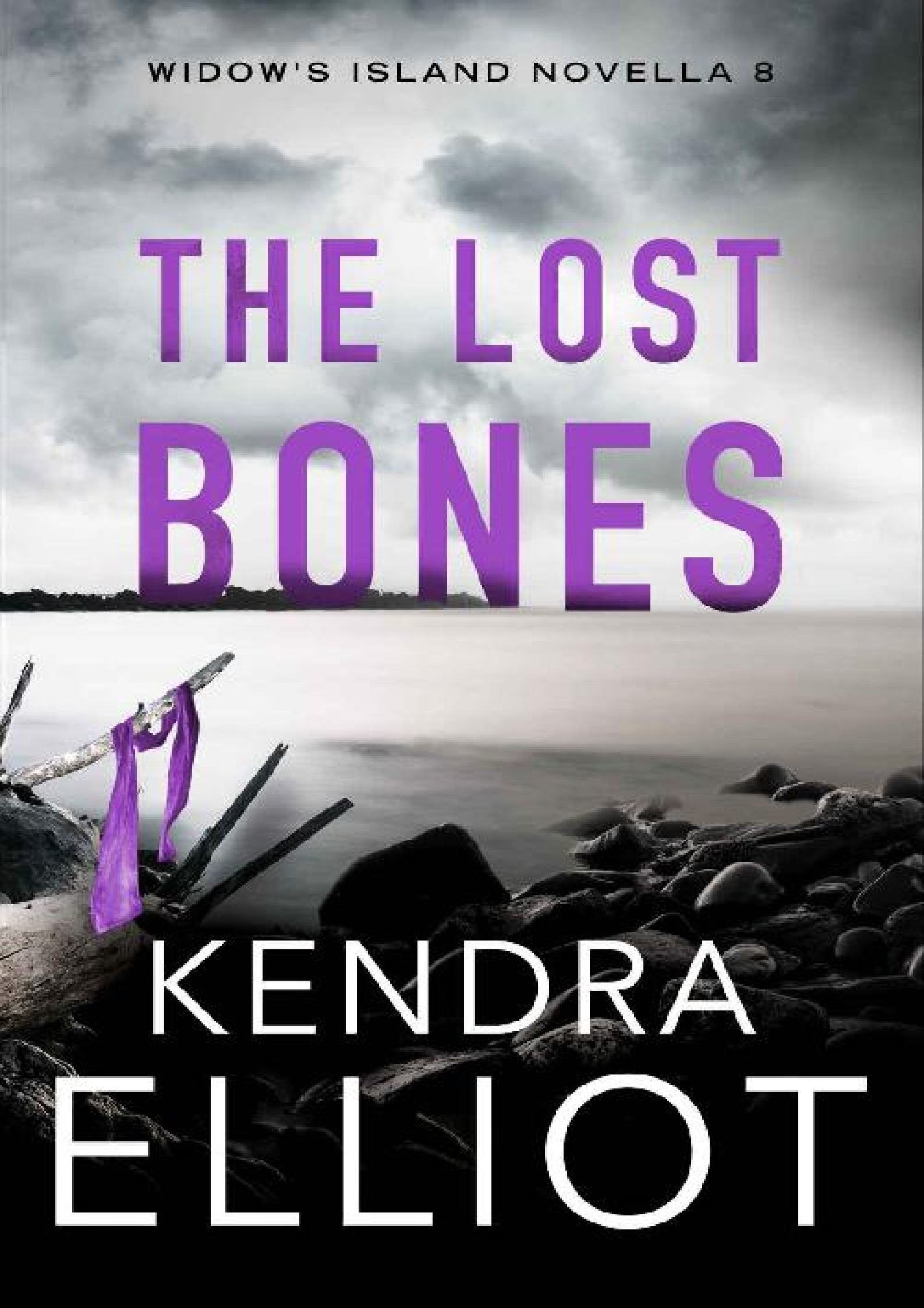


WIDOW'S ISLAND NOVELLA 8

THE LOST BONES



KENDRA
ELLIOT

THE LOST BONES

ALSO BY KENDRA
ELLIOT

COLUMBIA RIVER NOVELS

The Last Sister

The Silence

MERCY KILPATRICK NOVELS

A Merciful Death

A Merciful Truth

A Merciful Secret

A Merciful Silence

A Merciful Fate

A Merciful Promise

BONE SECRETS NOVELS

Hidden

Chilled

Buried

Alone

Known

BONE SECRETS NOVELLA

Veiled

CALLAHAN & MCLANE
NOVELS (PART OF THE BONE
SECRETS WORLD)

Vanished

Bridged

Spiraled

Targeted

ROGUE RIVER NOVELLAS

On Her Father's Grave (Rogue River)

Her Grave Secrets (Rogue River)

Dead in Her Tracks (Rogue Winter)

Death and Her Devotion (Rogue Vows)

Truth Be Told (Rogue Justice)

WIDOW'S ISLAND NOVELLAS

Close to the Bone


Bred in the Bone

Below the Bones

WIDOW'S ISLAND NOVELLA 8

THE LOST BONES

KENDRA
ELLIOT

 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.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

1

Cate Wilde jerked Henry's hand into the air as three boys darted between them. The children were playing an intense game of tag, weaving in and out of the crowds strolling the streets of North Sound during the outdoor market. Dr. Henry Powers whirled to say something after the boys and then shrugged it off, a grin crossing his face as he met Cate's gaze. "I don't think they'd hear me, let alone care, if I told them to slow down."

"Nope," Cate agreed. The daily outdoor market during July and August brought locals and tourists together on Widow's Island. Moods were cheerful and smiles were plentiful. The sky was blue, the few clouds were fluffy and white, and the temperature was perfect. Music filled the street as a young man with a guitar and speaker sang halfway decent covers of Bruno Mars. No one noticeably winced as he hit an occasional flat note.

They headed for the shade in front of the Shiny Objects trinket store and joined Henry's nurse, Julie Sanchez, who was taking a break from the warm sun.

"Watch this," Julie told them with a nod to direct their attention across the street. Julie's fiancé, Bruce Taylor, was in his deputy uniform and deep in conversation with the Bruno Mars wannabe. The young man handed the deputy the guitar, gestured at the microphone stand, and stepped back.

Bruce strummed the guitar for a few seconds and began to sing. Cate recognized Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues."

"Bruce is amazing," she murmured, unable to take her gaze away from the deputy. People stopped in the street and turned to listen, pointing at the law enforcement officer with the incredible voice.

"I know," Julie said smugly. "His whole family is musically talented. Did you know he can play a half dozen instruments? His sisters are going to be in town for the

Widow's Day celebration. He's scheduled to do a set with them that evening at the park."

"We won't miss it," said Henry.

Cate and Henry had been together for eight months. She barely remembered what life was like before she'd returned to Widow's Island last winter and met Henry.

That's a lie. My life was work and not much else.

Cate had come to her childhood island home to recover mentally and physically after being shot on the job. Her FBI coworker had died in the shooting. After several months of indecision, Cate had resigned from the bureau. It'd been a hard choice. She'd loved her job, but the stress had worn her down, and she'd reconnected on a deep level with her island home after being away for nearly fifteen years. Now she was a bakery and bookstore owner, her stress at an all-time low and her happiness at an all-time high.

Bruce finished his song, and Julie gave a whoop as she dashed across the street and rewarded the deputy with a hug and big kiss.

"They're cute," Cate admitted. *So young.*

"I expect a wedding date announcement any day," Henry said. "Speaking of . . ." He lifted a brow at her.

Cate knew exactly what he was speaking of. He wanted to set their wedding date, but Cate had struggled to find a date that felt just right. "I talked to Tessa about it the other day," Cate told him. Tessa Black was her best friend and was engaged to Cate's brother, Logan.

"She thinks I'm having a hard time deciding on a date because I don't want to detract from her and Logan's wedding plans. I believe she's right. They're working frantically to get everything arranged by September. It's important that it goes smoothly, and I'm focused on doing what I can to help."

Henry's face cleared. He understood what Cate hadn't said out loud. Tessa's mother was losing her memory day by day, stolen by worsening dementia. Because of that the couple had planned a short engagement.

It really wasn't that short. Tessa had had a crush on Logan ever since they were kids.

"What about late December for us?" asked Henry, pulling her into his arms. "A Christmas wedding? Maybe we'll even have snow."

Cate pictured the island with a light dusting of snow, its hills and trees gently frosted in white. She lived in one of the most beautiful places in the world. A cluster of hilly evergreen islands far off the Washington coast. A piece of the Pacific Northwest completely surrounded by blue ocean.

The image of Widow's covered in a rare snowfall made Cate's heart skip a beat, and she felt the perfection of Henry's suggestion down to her toes.

"I love that idea," she said, surprised by her acceptance.

Talking with Tessa gave me freedom to decide.

"Good," said Henry. "I was starting to worry that you were having second thoughts about getting married."

She looked quickly at him but saw only teasing in his eyes. "How about if I tattoo our names on my arm? Would that reassure you?"

"That doesn't sound like something you'd do."

She laughed. "You're absolutely right."

A woman spoke behind her. "Hey, Cate. I've got something for you."

Cate reluctantly pulled away from Henry's embrace, recognizing the voice of Marsha Bishop, owner of the Shiny Objects store and mother of her other close friend, Samantha.

"Morning, Marsha," she said, visually evaluating the woman. Samantha's mom had been a wreck for years after her daughter had been kidnapped, but Sam's return last winter had turned Marsha into a new woman. For too many years Marsha had been a wisp, floating around the island, never quite mentally present.

Now she held a small flat cardboard box.

“This was addressed to you at the bakery,” Marsha said. “I don’t know why they delivered it here.”

“Because in the end, it would get where it needed to be,” Cate said absently. It was true. Widow’s Island was a very small community. They looked out for each other, and nothing was ever misplaced for very long.

She noted the box didn’t have a return address or a postmark. “Did UPS deliver this?” She scanned each side of the box. It was addressed to Cate Wilde c/o Black Tail Bakery.

Marsha frowned. “Well, I’m not sure. The delivery people leave mail or packages on my counter if I’m busy when they come in. Didn’t see who left it.”

Henry offered the Leatherman tool he always carried. Cate slit the packing tape, opened the small box, and pulled out crumpled old newspaper and tipped the box, sliding the contents onto her palm.

The small delicate arch of bone made her catch her breath.

It has teeth. Baby teeth.

Someone had sent her the mandible of a small child.

Henry, Cate, and Deputy Bruce Taylor stood in the back room of Cate’s bookstore, staring at the mandible on top of the thin box. Henry watched Cate closely, noting her intent expression as she ran a search on her phone. She had flattened out the old newspaper packing on a table, and Henry had already read the circled article twice.

It was about a kidnapping seven years ago. The case had been Cate’s.

Her face showed she had directed all her attention to the matter at hand. Her bakery owner persona had been replaced by that of an FBI agent two seconds after she’d seen the mandible. He’d felt a thin wall insert itself between them as she shifted into work mode, but it didn’t bother him. He’d met her when she was still with the FBI and knew that this was how she operated.

Absolute focus.

“I can’t find anything new on the case,” Cate muttered, still studying her phone. “I know Phillip would have told me if it’d been solved. I just sent him an email asking for an update.”

There was a sharp knock on the door, and Deputy Tessa Black let herself in the room. “Where is it?” she asked without greeting anyone. Bruce pointed, and Tessa stepped closer, her gaze locked on the bone on top of the box.

“Are you sure it’s real?” she asked.

“Yes.” Henry had no doubt.

“Age?” asked Tessa.

“Three,” said Cate, still focused on her phone.

“That’s assuming it belongs to who you think it does,” said Tessa. She lifted a brow at Henry, silently asking his opinion.

“Age two to five,” he said. He’d done his own Google search to age the mandible by eruption of the teeth. “There’s a lot of leeway.”

“You’re sure this is related to your old case?” Tessa asked Cate.

“I’m ninety-nine percent positive this is from my old case. See the tiny silver crowns on her front teeth? And the silver fillings in the back? During the investigation, I talked to the dental student who did that work on Jade before she vanished. The FBI has dental x-rays of the girl’s mouth before and after the work was done. She had rampant tooth decay from the mother putting her to bed every night with a bottle.”

“I’ve seen toddlers with that before,” added Henry. “Sometimes they have to sedate the child to do the dental work. The parents are always upset to learn that what they thought was a comforting measure to help get their kid to sleep resulted in pain and a lot of dental work.”

“The mom, Kori, asked the dentist if it would be better to put diet soda in Jade’s bottle at night,” Cate said. “The poor

guy was stunned. He said he had to tell her a dozen times that water was the only acceptable liquid.” Cate gave a sad smile. “Kori never finished high school and was very naive in many ways.”

“But there is a chance this bone could be from a different child,” Tessa stated.

Henry grimaced. “It’s possible but highly unlikely. Why would someone go to the extreme measure of finding a mandible of the right size with extensive dental work and deliver it to Cate if it wasn’t about her old case?”

“Who knows why people do anything these days,” said Tessa. “Who delivered it to Shiny Objects?”

“There’s no delivery label on the box,” said Cate. “I think it was dropped off by someone who didn’t want to be seen. Marsha assumed it was from a legit delivery service. And no, she doesn’t have cameras.”

“Hardly anyone on the island uses cameras,” said Bruce.

“I use them,” Henry stated firmly. A break-in at his medical clinic had once resulted in the loss of important police evidence. He’d installed cameras soon after. He wasn’t just the sole doctor on the island; he was also the coroner.

“Why wouldn’t they want to show their identity?” asked Bruce.

“Good question,” said Cate. “Someone feels nervous contacting law enforcement. Or they’re involved or don’t want to answer questions . . . but they want some truth to come out.”

“Start from the beginning, Cate. Tell me the whole story of this little girl,” Tessa ordered.

Cate pulled out a chair at the table and sat, taking a deep breath. “It’s been seven years this coming September. It was a kidnapping by the father. The mother came to us—”

“She went directly to the FBI?” Tessa asked sharply.

“No.” Cate pressed her lips together as she thought. “The case started with the Snohomish County Sheriff’s Office. A young woman reported her three-year-old daughter had been

kidnapped by the father. The three of them lived together in a small house near Oso, Washington, which is about an hour north of Seattle. It's not really a town; it's too small for that. It's more like a community . . . the type of area that has a general store, a gas station, and not much else. The FBI was contacted two days after Jade Causey disappeared."

"Why so long? I thought the FBI immediately jumped on missing-children cases," Bruce asked.

"They do, but the sheriff's office was familiar with the dad, Rich Causey. They assumed it was a simple domestic dispute and that he hadn't gone far with his daughter."

"Assumed." Tessa looked furious.

"Exactly," said Cate. "The mom, Kori Causey, had tried to convince them that Rich had no intentions of returning the girl, but no one believed her." Cate grimaced. "Kori was young—only twenty-five—and Rich was nearly twenty years older. One of the responding deputies had been a drinking buddy of Rich's and assured the other law enforcement that Rich would never leave his wife or hurt his daughter."

"But the daughter was sick," Henry pointed out. This was the part of the story from the news article that he couldn't wrap his head around. "And Rich didn't believe in modern medical care—especially for children."

"He kidnapped his own daughter to keep the mother from taking her to the doctor?" Tessa looked stunned.

"I've come across it a few times," said Cate. "Especially in some of the more rural areas. Either modern medicine goes against their faith or they simply don't understand it, so it's easier to simply refuse."

"Who isn't willing to try everything when their kids are ill?" asked Tessa.

"Too many people," answered Cate. "Anyway, from Kori's description back then it sounded like Jade might have had measles. Runny nose with a fever, and then a rash showed up."

“Isn’t measles something kids normally get?” asked Bruce.

Henry tightened his jaw. “It didn’t used to be normal thanks to vaccinations, but we’re seeing a resurgence of it. One to three in a thousand will die from it. Maybe that doesn’t sound like many children, but it’s too many when it’s your child.”

“How sick was Jade?” asked Tessa.

“Kori had said that Jade wouldn’t wake up at one point,” continued Cate. “The child was still breathing, and she could feel a heartbeat, but she couldn’t get the girl to respond. Kori was about to take the girl to the hospital, and her husband refused to let her go. Kori said she was on her knees pleading, and it made him angry. They’d already been arguing for a few days about Jade’s condition. Rich claimed Jade would pull through and that Kori just needed to wait it out.” Cate paused, blinking rapidly. “Kori had told me that she knew her daughter would die even if they made it to a hospital. She simply knew.”

“What happened?” asked Bruce.

“By the time we got the case and I met with Kori Causey, Rich and Jade had been missing for two days,” said Cate. “Kori was hysterical one moment and then would fall into deep despair the next. She kept begging us to find Jade but was convinced we never would. She said Rich knew how to vanish into thin air, and that is exactly what he did.”

Henry gestured at the article. “This was published three weeks after the kidnapping. It said you had no leads.”

“That was pretty much true. We dug into every aspect of Rich Causey’s life. No one knew—or no one would tell us—where he might have gone with Jade. I spent months on this case. I couldn’t find anything.” Cate picked up the box and looked closely inside. “I’ve often wondered if both Rich and Jade were dead. This jawbone is a pretty firm sign that Jade didn’t survive . . . along with that notation on the article.”

“What notation?” asked Tessa, sliding the newspaper closer.

Henry flipped it over. Someone had printed in pencil along the top. Tessa read out loud, ““Jade didn’t make it, and now I’m worried he’ll do the same to my baby. Please help me.””

The room was quiet for a long second.

“What the hell?” asked Bruce. The young deputy crossed his arms and glowered. “It sounds like Rich Causey is still causing problems with women and their children.”

“What if the penciled message is old?” asked Tessa. “The newspaper is seven years old—we don’t know that the message is new.”

“Maybe it’s not,” said Cate. “But the FBI needs to know about this immediately.”

“I agree,” said Tessa. “I’ll see that my office provides whatever support they need.” She tilted her head as she studied Cate. “You okay?”

Cate met her gaze, and Henry saw the pain in her eyes. “This was a tough case for me. Kori and I connected on a personal level. I lived in her house for two weeks, never letting her out of my sight while a team worked the case. She treated me like a sister. Now I feel horrible that I haven’t been in touch with her in over two years. I used to call or email her every few months and let her know that we hadn’t forgotten her daughter and were still looking for new leads.” She grimaced. “I haven’t done it since . . .”

Since I was shot.

“I hope the case hasn’t been overlooked by the bureau since then,” Henry said.

“I assume someone else is handling it and keeping in touch with her. It will never close until her daughter turns up. She told me several times how thankful she was that we were trying to find her daughter. She knew we were investigating every single lead.”

“Cate, is there any chance that Kori was involved in her daughter’s disappearance?” Tessa asked slowly. “And her husband’s?”

Henry swallowed. The thought hadn’t even occurred to him.

“Of course there’s a chance,” Cate answered with a shrug. “The team discussed it several times, but other than Rich’s friends telling us that Kori and Rich argued a lot, we never found any evidence to support that.”

“My question is, Who wrote this?” said Henry, tapping a finger on the table next to the handwritten sentence on the newspaper. “And how current is it?” He’d felt disgust for Rich Causey while reading the article. The written plea for help had cemented it.

“The FBI will look into it,” said Cate. “But no trace of Rich has ever shown up since he disappeared seven years ago. He’ll be hard to find.” She reached for the newspaper but pulled her hand back at the last moment. “I wish I hadn’t handled the paper. Hopefully I didn’t ruin any evidence.”

Henry looked from the newspaper to the tiny bone on the box. “No one expects to be handed murder evidence on the street.”

“It’s not murder yet,” said Bruce. “Right now, it’s still a kidnapping.”

Henry exchanged a look with Cate.

She thinks it’s murder too.

2

Cate's mind had been a whirlwind ever since she had seen the small mandible, details of the old case flooding her thoughts. She'd gone to work at the bakery, only to have her grandmother, Jane, kick her out after she messed up an order of brownies.

"Your mind is somewhere else. Shoo," Jane had said, flicking her hands at Cate. "I don't need you here making more work for me."

Everyone did what Jane ordered.

Her grandmother had that way about her. A natural manager. She knew how to get shit done and make the workers happy while doing it. She'd been a force on the island for decades.

So Cate had retreated to the bookstore and unpacked new inventory, offering the boxes with crinkly packing paper to Ghost, the bookstore cat. The cat alternated between leaping into boxes and thrashing around as noisily as possible to abruptly going motionless under the brown paper, hiding and waiting for prey—which was Cate's wiggling hand. She received a few scratches, but Ghost's enjoyment and the sight of his huge hunter-mode pupils made them worth it.

Cate's phone rang, and the cat lived up to his name, vanishing like a ghost under a shelf. The name of Cate's ex-boss, Phillip, appeared on her screen.

Finally.

"Phillip?"

"Good to hear your voice, Cate. I knew you wouldn't stay away from the FBI for long. I'm starting to think you have something internal that attracts our cases. They can't resist the pull. And you can't either."

"I admit this case has stirred up some old feelings. It was always personal to me," Cate said.

“That’s what made you a good agent,” Phillip said. “You had the right amount of heart. And this case definitely made a lasting impression on everyone who worked it.”

Images of Jade had been running through Cate’s mind. The three-year-old had wispy pale-red hair and startling blue eyes. Most of the case photos had shown her in perky high pigtails, flashing the widest grin that showed the tiny silver crowns. Cate had wanted more than anything to bring the child home to her mother.

Would Jade’s father have simply let her die?

“What’s the latest activity on her case?” Cate asked.

“There’s been one review since you left,” said Phillip. “During the review, several database searches were updated, looking for any sign of Rich Causey. A half dozen phone calls were made to people involved in the case to see if any new evidence had turned up or if there had been sightings of Rich or Jade Causey. A phone call was also made to Kori Causey, who refused to speak to the agent. There’s a notation here that she was upset that you weren’t the one calling.”

“Did a male agent call her?”

“Yes.”

“Kori doesn’t trust men and especially those in law enforcement. Please make a note that she needs to be contacted by a woman in the future. She was very angry that the county deputies didn’t take her seriously about Jade’s disappearance. And remember how controlling Rich Causey was? Even years after he vanished, she struggled to believe that not all men were like that.”

“I remember now,” said Phillip. “Didn’t he keep Kori from getting a driver’s license?”

“Yes, and wouldn’t let her have anything else in her name. He made her completely reliant on him. At the time, she didn’t understand that it wasn’t right. It took a few months after Jade’s disappearance before it sank in that she could go anywhere and do what she wanted.”

“I remember being stunned that it was that bad,” said Phillip. “I didn’t understand how someone could be so out of touch with how the world works. TV and the internet bring the world into the home—most people have that window, but I guess Rich controlled those too. He essentially kept Kori and Jade in a bubble.”

“Exactly.”

Phillip paused for a long moment. “I had an agent contact Kori an hour ago, and she told him she’d only speak to you. I don’t think it mattered who called this time. She’s stubbornly set on only talking to you.”

Cate didn’t know what to say.

“I personally called her parents after that, and her mother also insisted that Kori and the two of them would only talk to you.”

“I can try to convince them otherwise,” Cate told him. “I had a good rapport with her parents, even though I only met them in person once. I assume you didn’t tell them specifically about the mandible?”

“No. Only that we might have a new lead. Neither Kori or her parents expressed optimism.”

“They’ve had too many calls over the years about possible leads and sightings that went nowhere. They know not to get excited until something pans out.”

“I learned one odd thing on the call with her mother,” said Phillip.

Cate struggled to picture Kori’s parents. Ellen and George Aston. They had been a reclusive older couple, but she remembered the mother’s lovely smile and that the father had deep sad eyes. “What’s that?”

“They moved to Widow’s Island about a year ago.”

Cate sat up straight. “How come I didn’t know that? I was still with the bureau and would have updated Jade’s file.” She thought hard. “I haven’t come across them since I’ve been here . . . I would have recognized their names.” *Or at the very*

least heard Jane's opinion. Her grandmother met everyone new on the island.

“Dunno,” said Phillip. “They don’t strike me as social people, but Ellen knew that you owned the bakery. She told me she’s seen you there.”

“She hasn’t said a word to me.” Cate focused, trying to picture the couple in her store. “Phillip . . . I hate to use the word ‘coincidence’—”

“But Kori’s parents living on Widow’s and someone hand delivering possible evidence from their granddaughter’s kidnapping to you is too big to ignore.”

“Exactly.” Cate’s brain shot into overdrive, weighing possibilities of how Ellen and George Aston could be involved in this new lead on Jade’s disappearance.

Have they always known what happened to Jade?

Or do they have absolutely nothing to do with that bone?

“I don’t like it,” Cate told him. “I know they used to live on Orcas Island. Did they say why they moved?”

“I didn’t ask. But Kori still lives on the mainland. Just outside of Bellingham. I’ll send an agent—a female—to talk to her in person, but I’d like you to meet and talk to the Astons. I can’t get anyone to your island for a day or two, and even then, there’s no guarantee they’d talk with someone they don’t know. Ellen Aston was very adamant about dealing with you, even though I told her you’d left the FBI. I talked to the county sheriff, who offered to have a deputy accompany you, and I’ve arranged for you to be classified as a consultant—”

“Phillip! I can’t do this.” Cate squeezed her eyes shut and pressed a palm against her forehead. “I don’t work for the FBI anymore.” She was torn. The case was deeply personal to her. Kori Causey had been a naive woman who’d needed Cate’s protection and guidance seven years ago. The sweet young mom and her missing daughter had wiggled into a little place in Cate’s heart. Cate had searched for Jade as if she were her own daughter.

I want to help.

But I'm done with that life.

Cutting ties with her job at the FBI had been hard. A painful breakup. And now the ex was knocking on her door, asking for help. Again.

"I know how you feel," Phillip told her. "I didn't want to ask you, but I don't see any other way, and I'm sure it will just be for a day or two. All I need is for you to interview the Astons. It'll take a couple hours of your time."

It's never that easy.

"I'll do it."

Did I just say that?

Her mouth hadn't listened to her brain.

"Great! I appreciate it. I'm texting you their phone number and address now." He spoke quickly, as if he expected Cate to change her mind.

A ping sounded in her ear, and she looked at his text. She was familiar with the name of the Astons' street, which would take her to a small cluster of little old houses outside Bishopton.

"Do you want a county officer to go along?" he asked.

Cate thought about it. She could have Tessa request the assignment, but she had a strong feeling Ellen and George would open up more if only Cate was present.

"No. I'll be fine."

Ice touched her spine as the words hung in the air, and she remembered knocking on a door in the past. She hadn't been fine after that; she still wasn't. Cate shoved the violent memory away.

I know these people. I have nothing to fear.

She ended the call with Phillip and dialed the Astons' phone number before she could think about it.

Kori's father answered and didn't sound surprised when Cate identified herself.

Phillip told the Astons they'd hear from me before he even asked me.

Her ex-boss knew her too well.

George Aston was quite gruff but told Cate she could come tomorrow morning at ten. Cate agreed, and he said goodbye.

Not one for small talk.

She remembered Ellen as being the talker of the two and then wondered if her grandmother had met Ellen.

Of course she has.

She glanced at the time, and her stomach growled. She and Henry had plans in ten minutes for dinner on the Harbor View Inn's deck.

She rattled the paper one last time for Ghost, enjoying the sight of the black cat's happy thrashing, and then left, ready to tell Henry of the latest development.

This case will haunt me until I find out what happened to Jade.

3

Cate was late.

Henry sipped his wine and enjoyed the sights from the Harbor View Inn's large deck. He was surrounded by tables of tourists and the occasional group of locals. He nodded across the room at Rex Conan, the famous mystery novelist who lived in the mansion on the tiny island in the center of Widow's Bay. The older author lifted his cocktail in acknowledgment of Henry and continued his conversation with a woman Henry didn't recognize. The way the two of them leaned toward each other made Henry smile. It was good to see the reclusive writer with a love interest.

The air was warm, and the sun was still high. Sunlight lasted late into the evenings in July on the island. As Henry relaxed and watched the boats sail around the blue bay, he recognized for the umpteenth time that he'd moved to paradise.

A movement caught his eye, and he turned to see Cate crossing the deck.

God, she's beautiful.

Tall with dark hair and blue eyes, she moved with a confidence that turned several heads. She stopped a few times to greet people she knew, and he enjoyed watching her interact. She gave genuine wide smiles and would casually touch a neighbor's arm. Faces lit up as she spoke with people.

Henry had moved over a thousand miles, something pulling him to this remote corner of the Pacific Northwest. Cate's grandmother, Jane, had told him it was the island. It drew people from around the world.

Henry suspected it had been Cate.

Cate is connected to the island.

Her ancestors were an integral part of the island's notorious history. A history of betrayal, lust, and possibly

murder. Widow's Island capitalized on its colorful past, using it to attract and tempt the tourists, who were its lifeblood.

But the gorgeous setting is the primary attraction.

Rural farming areas. Forests. And the ocean. All with a small-town atmosphere. A bit of everything packed into a small space.

He stood as Cate reached their table, and they kissed. She smelled of brownies, books, and fresh air. Her skin was warm to his touch on the small of her back. She slid into the chair next to him and picked up the glass of wine he'd ordered for her. Her eyes glowed as she clinked his glass. "To blue skies and blue water."

"Blue water," he echoed. It wasn't just Cate's eyes that glowed; he sensed anticipation simmering inside her.

Something about the missing-child case has created a fresh energy.

"Oh, crap." Cate froze, her wineglass at her lips, her gaze locked on a man across the deck who was talking to a waiter. "What day is it today?"

Henry choked back a laugh. "It's not Thursday. Don't worry. He's not scheduled to play tonight." Cate had spotted Herb, who always provided live music on Thursdays at the Harbor View Inn. Herb and his oboe weren't to everyone's taste—especially Henry's and Cate's. Herb liked to play his instrument in close proximity to his audience members, his hips and shoulders in constant movement.

Henry's first attendance at one of Herb's performances rated high on his list of awkward and uncomfortable moments.

The relief on Cate's face was almost comical. "Thank you, sweet baby Jesus. I want to enjoy our evening in peace." She took a large swallow of wine and relaxed into her chair. "How was your afternoon?"

"I set up an interview with a nurse practitioner who's considering a move to the island. She's visited several times and loves it."

“Good! You need help. It’s not fair that you’re the sole provider on the island. I’m tired of people calling late on Friday night because they have a sore throat. I don’t care what she’s like; hire her.”

He knew Cate wasn’t serious, but she had a good point about him being on call twenty-four seven. “What do you think about me asking Jane to interview her too?”

Cate raised a brow. “She’s a good judge of character.”

“Do you think she’d be able to tell if someone would stick around or leave the island in three months? I hate to invest time and money in someone, only to have them realize island life isn’t for them.” He’d admired Jane’s deep insight about people ever since he’d met her.

“Oh, I see what you’re asking.” Cate appeared to ponder his question as she looked out at the blue water. “It’s not a magic trick. I don’t think Jane reads a message about the future on anyone’s forehead.”

“When I first met Jane, she knew I’d stay.”

Cate shrugged. “Then ask her. I’m sure she’d love to help you.”

Henry took one of Cate’s hands. “Now. Tell me what happened this afternoon. You look like you can hardly sit still. Good news from the agency about your old case, I hope?”

“Phillip asked me to interview Kori Causey’s parents. They live here on Widow’s.”

She’s excited to be involved.

Cate had assured him many times that she didn’t miss her job at the FBI, but this mystery had made her come alive the same way she had last spring, when she’d been pulled into another old case. He knew she needed the intellectual stimulation. Baking and organizing the bookstore didn’t challenge her the way her job used to.

But she had been right to leave the job behind. The on-the-job anxiety had been crippling.

“It’s an interview. I’m just giving them a hand,” she told him earnestly. “The Astons won’t talk to anyone else.”

“Wait . . . you said they live *here*?”

The mandible.

She nodded, understanding in her gaze. “I know—could they be the ones who delivered the package? I talked with Phillip about that too.”

The waiter appeared at their table. Cate ordered salmon, Henry ordered the thai pizza, and they agreed on onion rings for an appetizer.

After the waiter left, Henry turned back to Cate. “Could the grandparents be involved?”

“Who knows? It will certainly make for an interesting interview tomorrow morning.”

“I assume they were investigated seven years ago.”

“Yes. At that time, they lived on Orcas Island and were hours away when the abduction took place.”

“When Kori *said* the abduction took place,” Henry corrected.

Cate grimaced.

“Sorry,” Henry said, knowing he’d overstepped. “You spent years on this case, and I’m jumping in with questions and scenarios you’ve already examined multiple times.”

“Exactly. I believe Kori’s story, and the evidence backed her up. Her parents were definitely on the island when Jade and Rich vanished.”

“Did her parents know what kind of man Rich Causey was when their daughter married him?”

Cate looked thoughtful. “From what I remember, they originally liked that he was so much older than her. They thought he would take care of her.”

“I don’t think marrying a caretaker should be a life goal.”

Cate grinned. “It’s some women’s—and men’s—goal.” Her expression grew serious. “Rich Causey was a piece of work. He lived off the grid to stay under the government’s radar.”

“To avoid paying taxes?”

“Of course, and other things. I can’t describe what a mess his tax and income background was, but anyway, he treated Kori like she was a possession, not a person. When deputies finally decided to search the property for Jade, Kori had to warn them about Rich’s workshop. The little building a hundred yards from their home was booby-trapped, and Kori didn’t know how to dismantle it. She said Rich had done it to keep both her and strangers out of his things. They had to call in a bomb squad before anyone could enter.”

“I assume there was nothing helpful in there?”

“Unless you count twenty-two guns as helpful. There was also a huge stack of *National Geographic* magazines from the nineties and enough rusted motor parts to partially build a dozen engines.”

“Sounds useful. How did he get Jade away from Kori that day?”

“Guess.”

“Locked her in a closet?” Henry suggested the classic movie situation.

“Yes.” Cate leaned closer, her gaze holding his. “He’d done it several times before, but that day he’d told her she was a horrible mother and that he’d take Jade away before he ever let Kori take her to the doctor.”

“How would she get to the doctor if she couldn’t drive?”

“She was going to carry Jade to a neighbor’s home a mile away and beg for a ride.”

Henry couldn’t speak.

That poor woman.

Cate continued. “Rich put Kori in the closet and wedged a chair under the handle. She heard him go outside, but she didn’t know if he’d actually left the property or whether or not he’d taken Jade with him. So Kori sat and waited in the closet for a while, worried Rich would physically hurt her if she came out—”

“Kori could get out?”

“She could. I’ll explain in a second. Part of her didn’t believe that Rich would actually take the girl away; she hoped Jade was still sleeping. She was torn between checking on her daughter and avoiding Rich’s wrath.”

“How’d she get out?”

“The closet didn’t have an actual lock. Just the chair was keeping it closed. After Rich had locked her in there a few times, she’d hidden one of his gun-cleaning rods inside in case she truly needed to get out.”

Henry pictured one of the long thin rods. “She pried the door open with it?”

“No, she slid it under the door and shoved the legs of the chair away.”

“I thought this girl was naive. That’s pretty smart, thinking ahead to store something like that in the closet.”

“She was used to a cycle of abuse. At times she had to think ahead to survive. Rich was such a horrible person. He would take the phone from their landline with him when he left the home.”

“What an asshole.”

“That’s describing him mildly. Once she got out and saw her daughter was gone, she ran that mile to her neighbor’s house to report that Jade was missing.”

“And the sheriff’s office blew her off because Jade was with their buddy, her dad.”

Cate lifted her wineglass in a small toast to him.

“This sounds like something that would happen fifty years ago . . . not seven years ago,” he said.

“Rich made Kori write monthly letters to her parents saying how happy she was. He read them all before mailing them, of course. No TV. No computer. They lived off the land as much as possible. Any shopping was done only by Rich or when he was with her. She never went to a store alone.”

“Her whole life must have revolved around that little girl,” said Henry.

“It did. Kori was a complete mess when I first met her, but I watched her grow a lot over the years. It’s amazing how someone can blossom when they’re not being kept in a box. I’m very interested to hear how she’s doing now. I haven’t talked to her in almost two years.”

“I hope Kori finally gets some answers,” Henry said. “Maybe this mandible will be the lead the FBI needed all along.”

Their onion rings arrived, and they munched in silence for a long moment, trying to think of more pleasant thoughts.

Cate covered her mouth as she chewed and then whispered to Henry, “Who’s the woman with Rex Conan?”

“Don’t know,” said Henry. “They look happy, though.”

“At least a longtime resident like him will know to stick to dating and not get married,” Cate said, choking back a laugh.

Henry didn’t laugh. “Are you implying that it’s dangerous for me to get married?” The high number of widowed women on the island had always bothered him. For some reason, married men passed away much earlier than their spouses. As if the island were trying to live up to its name.

Cate’s eyes sparkled. “It’s a myth.”

“I’ve done my own research. Men die younger here. What do you women do to us?”

“Maybe we cook with too much lard and bacon fat. Maybe it’s heart disease.” She moved her mouth closer to his ear. “Or maybe they die with smiles on their faces.”

Her breath on his ear and neck triggered goose bumps all the way down his legs. He turned, meeting her heated gaze as a different hunger flared in his chest.

We haven't even finished our appetizer.

It was going to be a long dinner.

George Aston was sitting on the porch when Cate arrived the next morning. She parked her car on the street, wondering if Kori's father frequently sat in the adirondack chair or was waiting for her. The small neighborhood was cute. It was a beachy-looking cluster of tiny cottages painted in varying pale shades of coral, teal, pink, and white. Cate knew this wasn't a neighborhood of tourist rentals. The people who lived in these little homes were islanders. They had jobs in the towns or worked on the water.

Or were retired, like George and Ellen.

Cate stepped out of the car and waved at George. He slowly lifted a hand.

The email from Phillip that morning was on repeat in Cate's head. The female agent he'd sent to interview Kori Causey yesterday had been unable to locate her. Kori's roommate had said she hadn't seen her that day, and Kori hadn't responded to texts or phone calls from the FBI agent or her roommate. Phillip wasn't happy.

Will Ellen and George know how to contact Kori?

If so, will they tell me?

Cate wasn't so sure.

She approached and noticed George's eyes were as sad as she remembered and wondered if his eyes had been that way before Jade had vanished. He was a gray-haired man in his late sixties with a gentle stoop to his shoulders and long thin legs. He unfolded himself from the chair and stood.

"Good morning, Mr. Aston."

"George, please," he answered, with a somber expression. "Ellen is inside." He opened the screen door and gestured for Cate to go ahead of him. The morning was already warm, the humidity quite high for the island. Usually the constant breeze kept the humidity manageable, but today there was no wind, and the air was heavy. Cate's skin was damp.

Inside the door, Cate stepped into a magazine layout of a traditional beach home from the eighties. Heavy wood furniture with a high-gloss lacquer. Glass sea floats in rough netting. Seagull figurines and water bird paintings everywhere. A huge canvas photo of Kori and Jade hung above the redbrick fireplace. Kori's arms were wrapped around her daughter, joy in her expression, and Jade's eyes were as light blue as Widow's Bay on a sunny day.

Cate's throat tightened, and the evidence envelope suddenly seemed to weigh down her shoulder bag. Phillip had asked her to get the mandible from the county sheriff's office, which was holding the bone for the FBI lab. He thought the sight of the small ivory jaw would push the Astons to be more forthcoming.

Cate didn't want to show them. It felt manipulative. A photo of the bone would suffice. But after Kori's vanishing act yesterday, Phillip wanted answers from the grandparents.

If George or Ellen delivered it to me, they've already seen it.

Cate didn't know what to expect.

What if one grandparent did it without the other's knowledge?

She glanced back at George, who was straightening a throw on an easy chair. The man was very quiet, but from what she remembered, that was his nature. It wasn't an indicator of deception to keep to oneself when that was one's normal behavior.

Ellen appeared, drying her hands on a kitchen towel. The wide kind smile that Cate remembered was unchanged. Her hair was a pale silvery blonde, worn short and curly. She wore walking shorts and a T-shirt that read *Salt Hair, Don't Care*.

Living on Widow's Island wasn't like living on a Hawaiian island or in the Florida Keys, but issues with the salt air were the same on islands worldwide: it affected everything.

"Special Agent Wilde. So good to see you." Ellen held out her hand.

“Just Cate, please. I’m not with the FBI anymore,” Cate said, shaking the woman’s hand.

“I know. But you earned that title, so I’m going to use it. You were a great comfort to us and Kori when Jade disappeared. I know how hard you worked to bring that baby home.”

“I did,” Cate said softly, the sting of the unfinished case suddenly raw and fresh. Her shoulder bag grew even heavier. She looked at George, whose gaze was on his wife. He glanced at Cate and quickly looked away. He had yet to hold eye contact with her for more than a split second.

Cate didn’t like it.

Please don’t be involved in this.

“Come sit,” Ellen said, leading Cate to a charming nook with large windows. “I’ve got fresh cinnamon rolls from—oh! From your place!” Ellen’s laugh was a lovely soft sound. “I saw you in the bakery for the first time just last week, but I didn’t want to interrupt. I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about seeing someone from a case during a nonwork encounter, and I didn’t want to ask why you were here instead of with the FBI. I assumed that was personal.”

“You should have said hello,” said Cate. “I would have loved to catch up.” Ellen’s genuine warmth was impossible to ignore. It was a steady welcoming light.

“Well, we can do that now.” Ellen indicated a chair and grabbed a plate of rolls as Cate sat. George brought the coffeepot and poured.

Cate noticed the elegant dishes and how perfectly clean the kitchen was.

They prepared for my visit.

She was flattered and wished she’d known earlier that the couple lived on the island. The three of them made small talk as Ellen dished up the cinnamon rolls. They’d moved to Widow’s because George’s cousin had died and left him the house. It’d been a hard decision to leave Orcas Island, but Ellen had been ready for a change.

“Tell me how Kori is doing these days,” Cate finally said. “She had decided to train as a dental assistant last time I talked to her.”

“She’s been working in a dental office outside of Bellingham for over a year now,” said Ellen. “She loves it and lives with another assistant who works in the same office. She dated a nice young man for a few months, but it didn’t work out. It was a learning experience for her, though.”

“I bet,” said Cate. “I remember that Rich was the only man she’d dated before she got married.”

Ellen sighed. “Now I can see all the red flags about that man. But at the time, George and I had thought Rich was good for her. She was so naive and struggled with independence. We thought having someone to support her was perfect.”

I don’t consider what Rich did to be support.

“Asshole,” muttered George as he took a bite of roll.

That’s putting it mildly.

“He wasn’t protecting and supporting her; he was isolating her,” Ellen said. She laid down her fork, her roll half-eaten, and dabbed at her eyes with her napkin. “Both her and Jade.”

“You’ve never heard from him or had anyone tell you they’ve seen him since then?”

Both Ellen and George emphatically shook their heads.

“Every now and then I search online,” said Ellen. “I don’t sleep very well, and some nights my brain simply won’t stop. I get up and poke around various websites. I’ve done age progression on Jade’s photos and used them in reverse image searches, hoping to stumble across her somehow. I’ve searched with every possible name variation that I think Rich might use.” She looked down at her hands, which were clasped tightly in her lap. “There’s a lot of rabbit holes to get lost in when you’re searching for someone.”

Cate agreed.

“I have a cousin in Puyallup that’s convinced she’s seen Rich a few times. She sends me useless photos that add to my sleeplessness at night.” Ellen shrugged.

George cleared his throat. “Her elevator doesn’t go to the top floor.”

“She means well,” Ellen added, with a reproving look at her husband.

“She’s a nosy busybody who can’t keep to herself. All she does is get you upset.” He made a dismissive noise.

Cate eyed the man. It was the most he’d said since she’d arrived. And it sounded very heartfelt. His gaze went to the photo of his daughter and granddaughter, and pain flashed in his eyes.

“When did you last hear from Kori?” asked Cate.

“Yesterday,” Ellen answered. “She called just before the FBI called us. She was upset that someone she didn’t know from the FBI was asking questions. She told us not to talk to them unless it was you.”

“Did she say if she was going out of town or anything?”

Ellen frowned. “No. Why do you ask?”

“They’ve been unable to contact her since that initial phone call. They stopped at her home yesterday, and she’s not returning texts or calls.”

“Of course not. You know she’ll only talk to you.”

Cate fought to keep exasperation out of her voice. “But I don’t work for the FBI anymore. She needs to cooperate with whoever contacts her. I can’t help anymore.”

“Yet here you are,” Ellen said with a wide smile.

“Only because you live in close proximity. This visit is a single exception.” She glanced at George. “It doesn’t seem odd to you that she ignored their attempts to reach her? Would she answer a call or text from you now?”

“She should be at work,” said Ellen. “But I’ll text her.”

Ellen stretched to grab a pair of reading glasses from the kitchen counter and pulled a cell phone out of her pocket.

Cate turned her attention back to George. "I've been here ten minutes, and no one has asked what prompted the FBI's new interest in Kori's case."

"I figured you'd tell us when you're ready," said the quiet man. "Not one to pry."

"You don't pry when it comes to your granddaughter's kidnapping?"

"You've always kept us informed of what we need to know."

He won't let me push his buttons. Or at least he won't show it if I do.

"I assume you got a report of a sighting of Rich," said Ellen, setting her cell phone on the table. "That's what it usually is." She seemed as content as George to wait for Cate to bring up the new evidence.

My interviewing skills are rusty. I can't prod anything out of them.

Maybe there's nothing to come out.

The mandible in her bag was impossible for Cate to ignore. As if it had a flashing light that only she could see.

"Yesterday someone dropped off a package for me at Shiny Objects. It had my name and the bakery address on it but somehow ended up at the wrong place."

Polite interest showed on their faces. Nothing else.

"We also have problems with the mail sometimes," Ellen added.

Cate leaned forward, her forearms on the table. "Inside the box was one of the old newspaper articles about Jade's disappearance. Handwritten on the margin was a message that implied that Jade didn't survive, and this person was scared that Rich would do the same to her baby. Then it asked for help."

Both the Astons were silent, mild confusion in their eyes.

“I don’t know what to think of that,” said Ellen. “You used the word ‘implied’ . . . it didn’t say this person knew for certain that Jade didn’t . . . survive?” Her voice cracked on the last word. “Maybe they’re making an assumption. A lot of people believe she’s . . . gone.”

Cate was at a loss about how to bring up the mandible. She’d mentally rehearsed a dozen different ways, exploring various outcomes, and now she had no recollection of what she’d decided was best.

There was no good way to show a child’s bone to grieving grandparents.

There’s a chance it’s not Jade’s.

The FBI still needed to compare the mandible to the records they had from Jade’s past dental work. But in her heart, Cate knew it was Jade’s.

That’s not a good enough reason to show it to these grieving grandparents.

She’d brought it to see if they’d reveal they were the ones who had dropped it off. Or admit anything else. But Cate’s gut was telling her they weren’t involved.

“Where’s this other baby?” asked George, fidgeting in his chair. “Why’d they send a note to you? If someone needs help, they should go to the police.” Anger flashed. “Although that didn’t help Kori.”

“Wait . . .” Ellen touched Cate’s arm. “You said ‘package.’ Was there more than a newspaper article?”

Cate’s stomach churned.

Why did I agree to this?

“There was a bone in the package,” Cate said, deciding to get it out. “It was the mandible of a child. It was implied that it belonged to Jade, but we don’t have absolute proof yet.”

Ellen covered her mouth with both hands, her chest heaving. George went very still, his gaze on Cate.

“I’m sorry to be so blunt,” Cate said. “But obviously the note and bone have the FBI’s attention, and they want to investigate both.”

The Astons were silent. Ellen rapidly blinked as her eyes grew wet.

Her mouth dry, Cate pulled her bag onto her lap but made no move to open it.

“Jade had little silver caps on some of her teeth,” Ellen whispered from behind her hands.

“Yes,” said Cate. “The bone does too.” Using the word “bone” instead of “mandible” was easier for her to say—more generic, softer.

Ellen gasped and covered her eyes. George got out of his chair and moved to stand behind his wife, placing his hands on her shoulders. “Show us,” he ordered.

He knows I have it.

Cate wanted to vomit. “I have a photo that—”

“You have it in your bag,” George stated. “Don’t you?”

Horror filled Ellen’s gaze. “No, I don’t want—”

“I’ll look,” said George. He glanced at the photo above the fireplace, his fingers digging into Ellen’s shirt. “I have every square inch of that little girl memorized. I’ll know.”

Cate took a breath. “There needs to be a forensic dental ___”

“I’ll know,” he repeated.

Cate exchanged a long look with Ellen, who gave a small nod, resignation in her eyes.

After slowly opening the bag, Cate lifted out a large evidence envelope. She fumbled as she pulled on a pair of gloves and then opened the envelope and slid out a small plastic bag onto the table. The tiny silver crowns glittered in the light.

Ellen bit back a cry.

George was silent, his stare focused on the bone.

Cate's heart broke for them. "I'm sorry," she said. "But remember, it may not be Jade's."

There was a loud knock at the front door, and it immediately swung open. "Mom?"

The three of them turned at the voice.

Kori.

She looked the same. Pale-red hair, thin . . . but Cate immediately picked up on a confidence she hadn't seen before. Something about the position of her shoulders and how she lifted her chin.

This wasn't the girl who'd clung to Cate seven years ago.

Kori set aside a small carry-on and dropped her backpack on top of it. Surprise flashed in her eyes as they met Cate's. "Cate! I wondered if I'd be seeing you before long."

Kori's gaze moved to the clear plastic bag on the table, and confusion filled her face. She took two halting steps closer, unable to look away from the mandible.

Oh, no.

Cate covered the baggie with her hand. Too late.

Kori stared at her. "Is that Jade's?"

“He killed my baby!”

Kori screamed the words, and George lunged around the table as she lurched toward the three of them, her eyes locked on the bone. Cate leaped from her chair and caught the young woman as her knees buckled. Together, she and George guided Kori to a chair at the far end of the table, away from the mandible. The distraught woman’s body trembled with a massive force, making Cate and George support her as she sat. Ellen sank to her knees at Kori’s side and wrapped her arms around her daughter, as if trying to absorb the grief.

Ten minutes later, the room was quiet, but the sorrow and pain permeated every corner.

Cate had forgotten how emotionally draining the Jade Causey case had been. During the time she’d spent with Kori seven years ago, she’d grown used to supporting the woman through her grief and pain, but she’d been completely unprepared for the onslaught of the last few minutes.

“It’s Jade,” Kori continued to whisper as she sat at the table. Cate had insisted on putting away the mandible once they all had taken a good look. Kori was convinced the little silver crowns were on the same teeth as Jade’s.

“We’re not positive—” Cate had started to say.

“Don’t you think I know my baby’s smile?” Kori had shrieked at her.

Cate had given up trying to cushion the blow. There was no point.

“I have dreams she’s alive,” Kori said quietly. “Many times a week they invade my sleep. I’ve taken a lot of comfort in them. It was all I had left.” She paused. “Today has destroyed those dreams.”

“I’m so sorry,” Cate said. She would never be able to say it enough.

Empty words.

Ellen sat by her daughter, their hands clasped tight. George had retreated to his chair, arms crossed on his chest, his watchful gaze on Kori.

“Where did you get it, Cate?” Kori asked, all emotion gone from her voice. She sounded as if she’d run a marathon, her energy drained.

Cate told the story of the box being left at Shiny Objects. Kori appeared to listen, but Cate wasn’t certain she’d heard all the words. There was a disconnect in Kori’s eyes.

Something had broken.

“Why did you come here?” Cate asked Kori. “The FBI said you wouldn’t talk to them and then disappeared. They wanted to inform you about the mandible.”

“There was something in the voice of the man who called me . . . I couldn’t talk to him . . . I didn’t want to know what he had to say.” She circled a fist near her stomach. “Somehow in my gut I knew he had bad news.” She looked from her mom to her dad. “I felt a need to be with my parents. Turns out I was right,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Cate said again.

“They told me you left the FBI and that Jade’s case was assigned to someone else now. But here you are. Once again, someone in law enforcement lied to me,” Kori said dully.

“No, I’m not supposed to be here . . . well, I am here, but they didn’t lie that I no longer work for the FBI. I’m helping out simply because your parents live so close, and the bone was delivered to me.”

“Why did it come to you?”

“I assume someone knew I handled the case.” Cate grimaced. “I was mentioned in Jade’s articles frequently back then, so it wasn’t hard to discover. They figured out I live here now. I’ve been involved with a few other cases on the island in the last year, so a simple internet search would reveal that.” She considered the young woman and decided Kori had

recovered enough from the initial shock for a few questions. “Has anyone approached you about Jade recently?”

Cate hadn’t mentioned the newspaper article or the handwritten message to her yet.

Too soon.

“No,” replied Kori.

“Any news of Rich?”

“No.” Kori looked at her hands. “I think he’s dead too.”

“Why do you say that?” Cate asked sharply.

The woman shrugged. “Dunno. Just a feeling.” Her gaze rested on Cate’s bag. “He let go of Jade. He wouldn’t have done that if he was still alive. He has to be dead to give up his hold on her.”

“You mean you think he’d . . . keep her remains with him?” Cate asked delicately. She didn’t know how else to phrase it.

“He told me he’d never let me go, even if I was dead.”

Jesus Christ.

“But he essentially let you go when he left,” Cate pointed out.

“Only because he had Jade to control instead. He had to have something under his thumb, you know?”

Cate thought of the plea for help on the newspaper. “What if he found someone else to manipulate?”

Kori considered. “I used to wish that someone would catch his attention and he’d cast me aside.”

Ellen closed her eyes, regret rolling off her. Cate wondered if she’d ever forgive herself for supporting Kori’s wish to marry Rich.

“I could see that happening,” Kori added. “He has an obsessive streak.”

No shit.

“Maybe he’s not dead, then,” said Cate.

Kori’s gaze locked with Cate’s. “What are you saying? You know something about him? Has there been another sighting?”

Cate told her about the handwritten message. “Keep in mind that we don’t know how long ago it was written.”

Kori pushed to her feet and started to pace around the table, her fingers twisting her long hair into a braid near her face.

The gesture punched Cate in the gut. *I forgot she does that.* Kori braided when she was stressed. During the initial investigation, her hair had thinned in the spots where she habitually braided. She’d even created bald spots.

There was no evidence of balding now. Cate took that as a sign that the woman led a mostly stable life.

“He’s got someone else,” Kori muttered. “I should have killed him when I could. It’s my fault he’s able to do this to another woman. Oh, my god, what if he kills *another* baby?” Her voice rose; her eyes were distraught. “I should have stopped him.”

Cate stood and halted Kori’s pacing, gently taking her upper arms and making the young woman look her in the eye. “You were practically a child when you were with him. You are not responsible for what he did to you or responsible for stopping him from doing it to anyone else,” she told her emphatically. “The only person responsible for his actions is Rich himself.”

“I could have put an end to it,” Kori said. “There were many times I thought about shooting him. I could have done it.”

“And gone to prison for the rest of your life?” Cate gave her a little shake.

Déjà vu.

The conversation was very similar to their dealings seven years ago. Kori getting emotionally worked up and Cate

bringing her back down. She'd done it multiple times a day back then.

"Someone else wouldn't be suffering if I had followed through," Kori whispered.

"Listen to me," Cate said firmly. "You know Rich better than anyone. If anyone can help this other woman and her child, it is you. Stop focusing on what didn't happen in the past and help me focus on the now. I need to find this woman and get her away from Rich."

Not my investigation.

Cate ignored the little voice of logic in her head. She was suddenly determined to see this new development in Jade's case through to the end. After meeting with Kori and her parents, she had now been sucked back in. She couldn't walk away and go back to baking muffins after interacting with the family.

Exactly what Phillip had wanted in the first place.

Did he know I'd come around after talking to the Astons?

It was a moot point. Cate was emotionally up to her neck in the case. Again.

Nothing was going to tear her away from searching for Kori's ex-husband and stopping him from ruining another woman's life.

And her child's.

"Where is the rest of my baby?" Kori whispered, her eyes searching Cate's. "What did he do with her? I need to find her . . . I need her with me."

Cate understood. Kori needed closure.

"I can't help her anymore," Kori said softly. "But I can protect her. Help her rest. I need to know where she is."

"I'll find her for you," Cate promised. She'd made several similar promises to Kori over the years, knowing it was a long shot that the FBI would find Jade. But something told her that this time, she could actually do it.

Finding Jade's remains wouldn't be the result anyone wanted. But it would allow their long-open wounds to finally start to heal.

6

Cate handed the tourist a cardboard tray with four coffees and a paper bag full of cranberry scones. Her morning had been exceptionally busy, keeping her from dwelling on yesterday's encounter with Kori and her parents. The hotels were packed with people who had come to the island for the warm summer days.

"Let's see if a few of Patience's friends can help out with some shifts," Cate suggested to Jane as she gathered doughnuts for another order. Tessa's sister was a good source for extra bakery help.

"I already asked," Jane said as she handed a peach fritter sample to a young couple. "Two of them jumped at the offer to make some money. They'll be here in an hour."

"Good." Cate eyed the young couple tasting the fritter. They'd already tried two other pastries. Cate suspected they were filling up on samples and weren't going to order any food. A moment later they ordered two small black coffees.

Yep.

At least the samples were a day old.

She gave them a big smile as she took their card for the small purchase. The man's eyes had lit up as he tried the fritter, and Cate suspected he'd be back at some point.

Jane's baking was addictive.

The line out the door had finally died down and Cate was cleaning fingerprints off the glass case when Tessa arrived. The deputy had the same bags under her eyes that Cate did. They'd been up late the night before with a bottle of rosé as Cate had updated her and Samantha about her interview with Kori Causey and the Astons.

The three friends got together once a week with a bottle of wine or a quart of ice cream. They'd been friends since they were young teens. Practically sisters. And Cate looked forward

to the quiet but intimately social evenings all week. They had years of being apart to make up for.

“What’s up?” she asked Tessa, who was in uniform.

“Two tourist fender benders, one trespass, and one abandoned baby seal,” said Tessa.

“Busy morning. Did a tourist report that the seal had been left behind?”

“Yes. She got into an argument with some locals who told her not to worry about it. I had to convince her it was best left alone.”

“Nothing has changed in twenty years here, has it?”

“Not at all.” Tessa raised a hand in greeting at Jane and nodded as Jane pointed at the big jug of iced coffee behind the counter.

Cate’s phone vibrated in her back pocket. She pulled it out and was surprised to see the Shiny Objects store listed on the screen.

“This is Cate,” she answered.

“Cate, it’s Marsha. Are you busy?”

“We have a lull at the moment. Do you need something?”

“I want to talk to you about that messed-up delivery.” She paused. “Samantha told me what was in that box and how it was tied to an old case of yours. Can you stop by for a few minutes?”

“Absolutely.”

Yesterday the mandible had been picked up by a special courier for delivery to the FBI’s lab on the mainland, and Cate had spent the afternoon typing up interview notes and pondering her next steps to assist in the investigation. The discussion with Kori and the Astons hadn’t revealed any new information to pass along to the FBI, so after the emotional afternoon, she’d decided to step back for a day or two and let the family mourn before talking to them again. Even though Jade had been gone for years, the mandible had ripped open

old wounds. Both Cate and the family had no doubt the lab would confirm it was Jade's. There had been an air of finality in the Aston home yesterday. An era of waiting and wondering had finally come to an end.

"Want to go to Shiny Objects for a few minutes?" she asked Tessa. "Marsha has something to tell me about that box that accidentally went to her store."

"She remembered something?" asked Tessa as she took a sip of her iced coffee.

"I don't know. But something prodded her to call me. You and I both know that people often think of things later."

The two women stepped out into the midmorning sun and walked down the street to the little shop. They nodded at locals and stepped out of the way as children darted by.

It's a good life.

"Sleep okay?" Tessa asked.

"You know I sleep like crap on the nights we drink wine late at night."

"We can skip it next time."

"Not on your life." Cate grinned at Tessa. "I know we're horrible stereotypes, but there's something about girl talk combined with a little ice cream or alcohol that makes me really happy."

"A bottle is barely more than one glass for each of us."

"I think it's the ritual of it more than anything."

"Agreed," said Tessa. "And the fact that we missed out on over a decade of girl talk."

"Exactly. We're making up for lost time."

"You know the three of us will be part of the next crop of older women running the island. We'll have to learn to knit." Tessa referred to the Widow's Island Knitting and Activist group. Jane was currently its leader, and the women in the circle were more instrumental in the government of the island than the mayor and council.

“I don’t think many of them actually knit.” Cate stopped to touch a beautiful wind chime hanging outside Shiny Objects. The metal structure spun and glittered and made soft sounds that were agreeable to Cate’s ears. “Nice,” she said, seriously considering a purchase. “And I don’t think it will offend any neighbors.” She glanced at the tag and choked at the \$200 price.

Some tourist would buy it.

Shiny Objects featured local jewelry, paintings, sculptures, blankets, scarves, and other works of art. Each display had a small card that introduced the artist and described how they worked. Marsha had a good eye. Many of the pieces she took on struck strong chords in Cate like the wind chime just had. But not a \$200 chord.

She followed Tessa inside and spotted Marsha, who was speaking with two tourists near an arrangement of earrings. Again Cate’s attention was hooked. This time by a new display of delicate silver-and-glass necklace pendants in every shade of blue. Marsha excused herself from the shoppers and gestured for Cate and Tessa to follow her out the front door. She led them a couple of steps to a small alcove where they wouldn’t block tourist traffic. Cate deliberately didn’t look at the beautiful wind chime.

“Did you find out who left that box at my store?” Marsha folded her arms and looked from Cate to Tessa. Marsha Bishop’s red hair was coiffed into what Cate thought of as a helmet. A stylish helmet. Her eyeliner was a bit heavy but precisely applied, and she tastefully wore jewelry and finely knitted items from her store. For a long time, the woman had been dealt one bad hand after another, so seeing Marsha run a business with panache made Cate’s heart happy.

“No,” Cate and Tessa replied in unison.

Marsha toyed with a lovely earring as she watched the tourists pass by. “Maybe it’s nothing, but last night I looked online for articles about your case. That poor woman . . . Kori Causey . . . losing a daughter like that.”

A pang hit Cate's heart as she realized Marsha felt an affinity for Kori. She'd lost her daughter for twenty years. The fact that Samantha had returned after all that time was nothing short of a miracle.

"But while I was reading and looking at the pictures of that precious little girl, I realized that Kori looked familiar."

Cate and Tessa exchanged a glance. "Her parents moved to the island about a year and a half ago," said Cate. "I'm sure she's visited a few times."

"She's not missing, right?" asked Marsha.

"Kori? No. I saw her yesterday." Cate frowned at the confusion in Marsha's eyes. "What is it?"

"The day before I received that box addressed to you, I had a customer show me some photos of a missing woman, wanting to know if I'd seen her." She raised her palms. "As if I can remember what all my customers look like. I looked at the pictures and said I hadn't seen her. But she stuck in my mind because she had red hair. Not a deep red like mine or Sam's, but I'd call it a strawberry blonde. I swear the photo he showed me was the same woman I saw online—Jade's mother."

"Kori does have pale-red hair," Cate said. "Jade too. But Kori's not missing, so I don't know why . . ."

A chill touched her spine.

Rich Causey?

Could Rich be searching for Kori?

Tessa sucked in her breath, and Cate knew the same thought had occurred to her. "Did he leave contact information?" asked Tessa.

"He didn't leave anything. He showed me several photos on his phone. I don't remember what he said her name was or her age, but she appeared young—probably barely into her twenties."

"Do you remember what he looked like?" Cate pulled out her phone and started googling for photos of Rich Causey.

“Tall. Glasses. Rather thin, with a crooked nose. Short light-brown hair. He wore a red Hawaiian shirt that was one of the most obnoxious ones I’ve ever seen. And cargo shorts.”

“Age?” Cate opened a photo of Rich that had been in every article back when he had vanished. It was slightly blurry and had been cropped from one with him and a few friends at a bar. The photo was nearly five years old back then, so it was very out of date now. But it was all they had. Rich’s penchant for staying off the grid had included staying out of photos. She showed the photo to Marsha, who took Cate’s phone and squinted. She put on her readers and squinted again.

Rich Causey had been tall, but his nose hadn’t seemed crooked.

Noses can be broken.

Marsha looked doubtful. “This guy was much older. Probably in his fifties.”

“The photo is at least twelve years old.”

Marsha slowly shook her head. “I don’t know. His hairline was receding . . . the shape of his mouth doesn’t seem right, and the nose definitely isn’t crooked.”

“He was a stranger to you?”

“Definitely not a local,” Marsha said emphatically. “He asked lots of questions about who I buy the jewelry and art from. He wanted to know if I’d just buy it off anyone who brought in a collection. I told him I’d have to see it first, but I had bought on sight when someone showed me pieces I knew I could sell.” She looked around and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “I felt like he primarily wanted to sell me something.”

“Not to find the woman in the photos?”

“Well, that too.”

“If he’s not a local, he might be staying at one of the hotels,” said Tessa. She stepped aside and spoke into the mic at her shoulder. Cate heard her pass along the man’s

description and direct one of the other deputies to start checking hotels.

Could Rich Causey be on the island?

The island had only a dozen hotels, but many other options were available because of private rentals. It would be a needle-in-a-haystack search. And just because Marsha had seen him alone didn't mean he was traveling alone, so they couldn't limit their search to a single man. From what Cate knew of Rich Causey, he'd leave no trace behind. She couldn't see him staying in a hotel that required a credit card that could be tracked.

He wouldn't use his own name anymore.

"You're sure the young mother is okay?" Marsha asked Cate. Her eyes were haunted, and Cate's stomach twisted in sympathy for her.

"I'm positive. I saw her yesterday."

"So odd," Marsha said, almost to herself. "He didn't seem like the type of man that would kidnap a child."

As far as Cate knew, that wasn't a recognizable type.

"Let us know if you see him again," Cate told her as Tessa wrapped up her mic conversation.

"I will."

Cate and Tessa had walked away from Shiny Objects for one minute when Tessa got a phone call.

“Bruce says the bartender at Widowmaker Brewery told him that a guy just showed him some photos of a woman, asking if he’d seen her,” Tessa told Cate.

“Is he still there?” The women changed direction, moving together at a fast walk. The brewery was a few blocks down the street. Optimism swept through Cate.

Did we get a break?

“Yes. He ordered lunch. Bruce told the bartender to hold his food back until we get there.”

“Perfect,” said Cate. The women broke into a slow jog. “It has to be the same guy.”

“We’ll know in a minute.”

The two reached the brewpub and jogged up the weathered stairs. The brewery had been started by a couple of retired navy officers two decades ago. It had a partial view of the bay, and tourists loved the old boat-and-fishing décor, with wide tables and benches in the dining portion of the brewery for family-style seating.

Cate immediately spotted the thin man at a high-top table in the bar section, his gaze on a news program on one of the dozen big-screen TVs. His profile was to her, showing an angular-shaped head, a clearly hooked nose, and a well-receded hairline. His posture was extremely straight, his bony shoulders creating sharp corners in his shirt.

That’s not Rich Causey.

Even though she’d never met Rich in person, she’d studied the FBI’s few photos of him countless times. This didn’t feel right at all.

The man wore cargo shorts and a hot-pink golf shirt dotted with flamingos. In front of him was a large pitcher of

beer and a half-empty pint glass.

“I hope he’s staying within walking distance,” Tessa muttered, eyeing the beer. She nodded at the bartender, who’d watched them come in. He vanished and appeared moments later with a burger and fries. He set the plate in front of the man as Cate and Tessa approached.

The man popped a fry in his mouth and did a double take when he realized the two women had him in their sights and were headed to his table. His gaze went to Tessa’s uniform, and he visibly relaxed, wiping his fingers on his napkin.

Comfortable around law enforcement.

Usually Cate saw the opposite.

He held out a clean hand to Tessa. “Morning, Deputy. Alan Weekes. I wondered if I’d poked enough people to get law enforcement’s attention.” He was well spoken and polite.

Definitely not Rich Causey.

She knew Rich avoided conversations and people he didn’t know. He would never greet an officer over his lunch.

I doubt Rich has changed in seven years.

If anything, she suspected he was more reclusive. If he was still alive.

Tessa shook the man’s hand and introduced herself and Cate—leaving off any explanation of who Cate was.

What is there to say? Bakery owner? Temporary FBI helper?

“I suppose you’ve gotten a few complaints about me talking to the businesses in town,” Alan said. He pulled a wallet out of his shirt pocket and slipped out a card. “I’m a private investigator out of Oregon. I’m looking for a woman. Her parents hired me to find her.”

Tessa barely glanced at his identification. “Why didn’t you come to the county sheriff first? We would have helped you.”

Cate recognized the half smile Tessa gave him. It meant she was listening, but he had yet to impress her.

“I would’ve eventually gotten around to that,” Alan said. He gestured at the other barstools surrounding his table. “Would you like to sit down?”

“Will this take a while?” asked Cate.

“Depends if you want to order some food.” He eyed his burger, the hunger in his gaze making him look even thinner.

“Eat, please,” said Tessa. “Who are you looking for?”

He ate another fry and turned over his phone next to his plate. He tapped on the screen a few times. “Her name’s Ashlee Garnet. She’s eighteen. She left home six months ago after a big fight with her parents. They haven’t heard from her since late January. She stopped posting to social media and turned off her phone. Hasn’t contacted her friends. The Garnets contacted the local police in Portland, but they haven’t found anything. The parents hired me a few weeks ago.”

He turned the phone so Cate and Tessa could see a photo.

She resembles Kori.

Ashlee had the same shade of hair and slender build as Kori, but their faces were definitely different—they’d never be mistaken for each other by anyone who knew them, but Cate understood why Ashlee’s photos had prompted Marsha to think of Kori. She exchanged a disappointed glance with Tessa.

“Clearly something brought you to Widow’s Island to look for her,” said Tessa. “What did you find that the police did not?”

“I let them know of every lead I find,” said Alan firmly. “How they choose to handle that information is up to them, but I have more flexibility in how I get things done.” He took a bite of his burger. It had only pickles as a topping, and the meat patty had been cooked so long it was almost black. But Alan took another enthusiastic bite, so Cate assumed he’d ordered it well done and the kitchen hadn’t overcooked it while stalling for them to arrive.

“Anyway,” he continued. “She left to be with a guy, of course.” He wiped his mouth carefully with his napkin. “Ashlee told her parents she was going to move in with him, and naturally the parents freaked out. They *forbade* her to live with him—you can guess how well that went over.” He rolled his eyes and took another bite of his dry pickle burger. “So here I am.”

“Let me guess,” Cate said. “One of Ashlee’s girlfriends talked.”

“Nope.” Two fries vanished into his mouth. “I learned from the mother that Ashlee makes jewelry, and she hadn’t left any of her supplies behind. According to the mother, Ashlee only made stuff for friends, but I figured if Ashlee needs to support herself, the jewelry would be a logical place to start. I ran some reverse image searches on photos that her mother sent me, and nearly identical jewelry popped up on the website of your island store Sharp Objects.”

“Shiny Objects,” corrected Tessa. “But when you were in there, you didn’t tell the owner that she carried Ashlee’s jewelry. You only showed her photos of the girl.”

“I know better than to show my entire hand at once—I space things out over time and people. I was in there the day before and asked a different salesperson specifically about that jewelry. Most of the other displays had informational descriptions about the artists. The artist’s card on the pieces I think are Ashlee’s don’t say anything specific about the maker except that she believes she’s part wood nymph and finds her motivation in the sea and sky. The first salesperson told me it’s actually a man who sells and makes the jewelry.”

“Bummer,” said Tessa.

“I waited a day and showed Ashlee’s photo to a different salesperson. Struck out. No one in town I’ve shown the photo to recognizes her. I’d hoped when I saw you two come marching in that you knew her.”

Both women shook their heads.

Alan raised a brow, disbelief on his face. “So me simply asking questions around town was enough to earn a visit from the county sheriff’s department?”

Cate looked to Tessa, who answered. “No. We’re working on another case, and the timing of you asking questions was just too coincidental.”

Alan’s eyes narrowed. “In my twenty-five years of PI work, I’ve found that true coincidences rarely exist.” He nodded emphatically and downed the rest of the beer in his glass. “Now who are you ladies looking for?” His gaze was sharp as he glanced from Cate to Tessa.

The women exchanged a long look.

Cate was getting an honest vibe from the PI. He seemed professional and competent at his job. Her read of Tessa’s expression was that she felt the same. Alan appeared forthcoming and intelligent, and Cate liked his attitude.

“Would you believe it was *your* physical description that caught our attention?” asked Tessa. Subtle amusement danced in her eyes.

His brows shot up. “Me? What did my doppelgänger do?”

“Nothing in a long time,” said Cate. “He’s been missing for seven years.”

“Fascinating.” Interest filled his face. “And you’ve kept an eye out this long? Tell me more.”

“Maybe another time. We’ll let you enjoy your lunch,” said Cate.

“But now you’ve got my curiosity piqued. Especially with the federal involvement.” He winked at Cate.

She stilled.

Alan grinned at her. “You’ve got ‘federal agent’ written all over you,” he said.

“No, I don’t.”

He leaned back in his seat, studying her from head to toe. “FBI? Marshals?”

“I’m a baker,” she blurted out. “I own a bookstore too.”

He said nothing, a gentle smirk on his lips.

He doesn't believe me.

Tessa’s shoulders quaked.

She's laughing.

“Sometimes what you don’t say tells me more than anything you do say,” Alan told them. “Deputy Black here purposefully didn’t say who you worked for. I doubt she searches for people missing for seven years with the help of a baker.”

Tessa pulled out one of the barstools and took a seat. She signaled to the bartender, who headed their way. “It’s time for lunch,” she told Cate, patting the stool next to her.

Cate looked from Alan to Tessa.

He is amusing.

She reluctantly dragged out the other barstool as Tessa ordered fish and chips along with iced tea. Cate did the same.

Alan’s face lit up. “This is great. A working lunch. Maybe we can brainstorm some ways to find Ashlee. She’s in the area; I just know it. Her jewelry is quite distinctive.” He frowned. “Unless someone has decided to copy her designs.”

“We can get more information from the owner of Shiny Objects,” said Cate. “I’m sure she met the person who sold her the jewelry. If he asked to remain anonymous for the sales, she would respect that. But once she knows why we’re asking about him, she’ll tell us anything we want to know.” The bartender delivered two huge iced teas, and Cate took a sip. “So do you think the boyfriend might be—”

Keeping Ashlee out of sight?

She froze as the parallels of Kori’s and Ashlee’s lives slapped her in the face.

The women have similar physical characteristics. Coincidence?

“Cate?” Tessa asked. “You okay?”

“Just a second,” Cate murmured as she tried to put her thoughts in order. “Who else do we know that kept his woman away from everyone? Made her essentially disappear?” she asked Tessa. “Alan just said there are no coincidences . . . is it possible Ashlee’s boyfriend is Rich Causey? Am I grasping at straws here?” She looked at the PI. “Do you have *any* information about the boyfriend at all? Was he older? Surely Ashlee told her girlfriends *something* about him.”

Alan looked sharply at Cate. “One said that Ashlee was confident the boyfriend would give her a stable life . . . that he was older . . . but Ashlee wasn’t specific about the age to the friend. When you’re eighteen, even someone who is twenty-one is ‘older.’”

Tessa pushed away her iced tea and leaned toward Cate, her expression intent. “*If* that message on the newspaper article is current, Ashlee could have written it if she’s with Rich Causey.”

“Rich Causey,” Alan repeated. “That’s the name?” He grabbed his phone and opened a browser.

Cate ignored him, her gaze locked on Tessa. “Rich posing as the artist for Ashlee’s jewelry work? And keeping her hidden somewhere? It fits what we know of him.” She pressed a hand against her forehead. “Is it as simple as *that*?”

“It’s not simple if we don’t know where he’s keeping her,” said Tessa. “It makes total sense that he’s repeating a pattern, though. Like keeping her from accessing the internet and friends or even showing her face.”

“Where could they be?” Cate murmured, mentally scouring the island, wondering where Rich would keep a woman completely isolated. There were too many places. It was a small island, but it had numerous rural and forested areas.

“Holy shit,” said Alan, focusing on his phone. “You thought I might be this asshole who kidnapped his ill daughter?”

“We have some recent evidence that indicates he might be on the island,” said Cate.

“Aha,” said Alan. “I was right about you being FBI, Special Agent Cate Wilde. You’re mentioned several times in this old article.” He gave Cate a side-eye.

“I’m no longer with the FBI,” Cate told him. “I really do own a bakery and bookstore. I’m a ‘consultant’ at the moment.” She made air quotes with her fingers.

“Whatever you say,” said Alan. “But I suspect if you can locate your missing person, Rich Causey, I’ll locate Ashlee.”

Excitement bubbled up in Cate. *After all these years, do we finally have a solid lead on Rich Causey?*

Alan leaned forward. “And what’s this about a message on a newspaper article you think Ashlee could have written?”

Cate mulled over how much to tell the PI. “An article about the kidnapping of Jade Causey was left in Shiny Objects. Someone had written on it that Jade had died, and the writer was scared the same thing would happen to her baby.”

Alan’s mouth opened slightly as he stared at the two women. “She’s pregnant? If it’s Ashlee, she hasn’t been gone long enough to have a baby . . . although I guess she could have been a few months along when she left. Maybe she has had a baby.”

“The article was in a box that was addressed to me,” said Cate.

Alan wrinkled up his forehead and blinked several times as he tried to put the pieces together.

“The article mentioned me.”

“And after seven years, you took this note seriously?”

“Yes.” She decided to not mention the mandible.

He gave her a measured look.

He knows I haven’t told him everything.

“Now the hard part is to locate them,” said Tessa. “The possibility that Rich and Ashlee are together is definitely worth pursuing. I’ll talk to Marsha again and ask what she knows about the jewelry.”

“How long since you’ve talked to Rich’s family or known associates?” Alan asked.

“He doesn’t have any family, but his friends are contacted yearly during the reviews of the case,” said Cate.

“So they get a random phone call from a faceless agent where they can easily lie about their buddy.” Alan shook his head. “I prefer to look people in the eye when I talk to them. I learn a lot more.” He gave Cate a knowing look.

“I do too,” she agreed.

“Who was Rich’s closest buddy?” asked Tessa. “Maybe it’s time for an in-person visit.”

“Greg Ledford,” Cate answered promptly.

“I’ll get an address for him.” Tessa slid off her stool and stepped away from the table to speak into the mic at her shoulder.

Alan lifted his beer to Cate. “To killing two birds with one stone.”

Cate clinked his glass with her iced tea, a new hope filling her.

Am I finally getting somewhere with this case?

Fingers crossed.

Cate had never met Special Agent Isla Ross. The agent was young and had only two years on the job, but after an hour in the car with her, Cate knew she was sharp and intelligent.

Cate had taken the first early ferry to the mainland that morning, and the two of them were now driving to Birch Bay on the coast of Washington to interview Rich's old buddy, Greg Ledford. Isla had been assigned after Kori Causey had rejected the male FBI agent's phone call, so she'd quickly familiarized herself with the case. When Cate had called Phillip about conducting an in-person interview with Greg Ledford, he had connected her with Isla.

"My mother loved the ocean," Isla said when Cate complimented her name. "I was lucky to get the halfway normal name. My sisters are Aqua and Mer."

Isla parked in front of a ranch-style home, and Cate was surprised to see a few cows and other animals in a small fenced pasture adjacent to the house. It felt like a residential neighborhood, even though the lots were large and spread out. "Is that a llama?" asked Isla, shifting in her seat to see past Cate. The animal had stopped grazing and lifted its head to look at them. It had an incredibly long neck.

"I think it's an alpaca. It's got a little puffy head."

They got out of the car, and several of the animals approached them at the fence. The women scratched a few ears and then walked up the driveway to the home, the animals following parallel behind their fence.

Seven years ago, Greg Ledford had told Cate that he'd never tell her where Rich Causey had gone because Rich had every right to do as he pleased with his own daughter. Cate had gotten into a verbal spat with the man over the child's need for medical care. She could still see Greg rolling his eyes and waving off her concerns. Greg had claimed Kori was overreacting. Children got sick. They got over it.

Cate hoped he knew what had happened to Jade and had trouble sleeping at night.

According to Isla's research, Greg Ledford was single and rented the home. He worked in home construction: the same job—but different employer—he'd had when Cate interviewed him seven years ago. Construction was where Greg had originally met Rich. They'd become fast friends. Both enjoyed dirt biking and bowhunting.

The front door of the home opened and Greg stepped out, his arms crossed on his chest. Cate's stomach turned over. She always felt uneasy when she left Widow's, and the tension of seeing Greg Ledford again wasn't helping. He'd been unhappy to hear from the FBI but had agreed to give them a few minutes of his time after a buttering-up call from Isla. Isla had told Cate she sometimes "slipped" into a faint southern accent—her mother had been from Georgia—and had found she got better cooperation on phone calls when she used it.

Clearly it had worked with Greg.

Greg looked exactly the same to Cate. He was short and wiry with black hair and a goatee. He wore a tank top that had armholes cut so far down the sides Cate could see all his ribs.

"Mr. Ledford," Isla started. "I'm Special Agent Ross, and I think you already know Special Agent Wilde."

Cate and her ex-boss had had a long discussion about how Cate was to be introduced. Phillip had won, making Cate agree to use her old title.

"You're still hounding Rich," Greg stated, his gaze hidden behind dark wraparound sunglasses. Stubbornness rolled off him in waves.

"Have you heard from him?" Cate asked politely.

"Nah."

There was a long moment of silence. The morning sun was hot on the back of Cate's blazer. She hadn't worn "work clothes" in a long time. She didn't remember the jacket feeling so constraining and itchy against the back of her neck.

“Can you blame him?” asked Greg. “His wife sicced the cops on him.” He shook his head in disgust. “She was nuts. Who does that to their husband?”

Someone in fear for their daughter’s life.

Cate bit her tongue.

A woman appeared behind him. She wore the same style tank top as Greg but with a tube top underneath. She had out-of-control frizzy blonde curls and looked to be barely in her twenties. She eyed the two agents’ slacks and blazers with suspicion. “You church people?”

Isla whipped out her ID. “No. We’re asking Greg about a friend of his that may have murdered his daughter.”

Shock crossed the woman’s face.

“Get lost, Tammy! This doesn’t concern you.” Greg didn’t even glance behind him.

Cate wanted to punch him.

Tammy vanished.

“Why are you here in person this time?” asked Greg. “Usually I get a phone call.”

Cate smiled sweetly and threw a bomb into the discussion. “We have new evidence indicating that Jade died in Rich’s care.”

Greg didn’t flinch.

He already knew that.

“What evidence?” he blurted out.

“It’s not available to the public,” said Isla. “Rich may be facing murder charges in addition to kidnapping.”

“You can’t kidnap your own kid!” Greg shoved his hands in his pockets and slouched against the doorjamb.

“He withheld medical care that resulted in her death,” added Isla.

Greg moved his glasses to the top of his head and rubbed his chin, his focus beyond the agents.

He's uncomfortable. Good.

"I haven't heard from him since he left," Greg said. "He knows how to live off the land, you know. And he's as stubborn as all hell. If you haven't found him in seven years, you might as well give it up."

"We're stubborn too," answered Cate. "Especially when children are involved. We aren't anywhere near giving up."

"Well, I said my piece. Now get off my property." He stepped back and moved to shut the door.

"It's a rental," Isla snapped just before the door slammed in their faces.

She and Cate moved down the concrete steps. "Think we poked him enough?" asked Isla.

"I think so. The wireless carrier will let the FBI know if he makes any phone calls in the next hour."

"He might use the girlfriend's phone," said Isla, tapping on her cell phone as they walked. "Tammy, right? I'll find her last name and get her wireless information."

Cate stopped to rub the foreheads of two very curious cows who had watched the entire conversation with Greg. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw something move. Turning slightly, she saw Tammy watching them from a window.

Hmm.

Cate dug in the inner pocket of her blazer. She'd discovered old business cards when she'd put on the jacket that morning and stared for a long moment at her name in crisp letters under the FBI logo, a mix of emotions flooding her. The agency had been part of her identity for a long time. It'd been hard to cut away that piece of herself.

She still had an empty hole that hadn't healed over.

But it was much smaller than it had been.

Cate scribbled her cell number on a card and shoved it into a crack in the fence and looked at Tammy again. The woman was still watching.

Isla noticed the woman. “Maybe she’ll call,” Isla said under her breath.

“Worth a shot,” said Cate. “Having a boyfriend who’s a nonstop asshole tends to wear on a person.”

“Agreed.”

“Let’s go,” said Cate. “I want to get back to the island. My stomach feels loopy.”

“Do you need something for it?” asked Isla.

“Nope. I just need to go home.” Cate exhaled, and a small part of her tension started to fade.

Stepping onto the island would take care of the rest.

Cate waited for Tessa outside the Cascade Café and seriously considered getting one of their dutch baby pancakes to go, even though it was almost dinnertime. Or maybe two pancakes. But she knew they wouldn’t taste nearly as good by the time she got them home. They were best fresh out of the café’s ovens, with plenty of butter, powdered sugar, and lemon. The smell of a freshly baked one teased her again, and she moved away a few steps.

I’m not the only one who likes breakfast for dinner.

She’d just returned from the interview with Greg Ledford when Tessa called, asking her to meet at the café. Tessa was now inside taking a report regarding a large group of young men who had dined and dashed. Cate could see the deputy talking with a young waitress. Tessa had told her the waitress was annoyed that the group had constantly made her run back and forth for stupid complaints and then not paid.

Tessa finally came out, bringing a fresh wave smelling of burgers, pancakes, and coffee.

“Was it tourists who dined and dashed?” asked Cate.

“Nope. It was the Wilkins boys and a group of friends.” She shook her head. “Did they really think no one would recognize them?”

“I don’t think ‘boys’ is the right term,” said Cate. “They’ve got to be in their early twenties by now.”

“They acted like boys.”

“True.”

“Their mom isn’t going to let them get away with it,” said Tessa. “Even if they don’t live at home anymore. I don’t envy them facing Debbie’s wrath after I tell her about it.”

“You’re going to report it to their mom?” Cate grinned.

“Yep. I have every faith that Debbie will take care of it.”

“I have no doubt.” The two women started to walk up the small hill in Bishopton. The town was adjacent to the ferry port and was often more crowded with tourists than North Sound. Bishopton was laid out so people could walk off the ferry and immediately find plenty of restaurants and little shops. It’d been a convenient place to meet upon Cate’s return. Both women were ready to update the other on their mornings.

“What did you find about the person who sold Marsha the jewelry?” asked Cate.

“Marsha said she’s bought jewelry from him three times and that it always sells well. Each time she’s bought some, she’s paid him more and also increased the price in her store.”

“It’s not a consignment?”

“No. She buys it outright.”

“That’s a little risky.”

“She says she knows what will sell in her store. She charges more than double what she pays for jewelry and rarely has to mark it down.”

“Sounds like she knows what she’s doing.”

“Anyway, I asked her to describe the seller. She guessed that he was around thirty-five. Said he’s very quiet and has a thick beard. She’s never seen anyone else come in with him, and she’s one hundred percent convinced that he makes the jewelry.”

“Hmm.” Cate didn’t know what to think about that. The age sounded too young for Rich, and he definitely wasn’t quiet, from Kori’s and his friends’ descriptions. Cate had a hard time picturing him as the quiet man talking to Marsha about his jewelry.

“She doesn’t have contact information for him. He claims he doesn’t have a phone. She said he insists on being paid in cash and told her that when he has more pieces to sell, he’ll simply show up. She said she wouldn’t be surprised if he was one of the survivor island types.” Tessa wrinkled her nose. “She said he was rather fragrant.”

“That fits what we know of Rich,” said Cate.

The closest “survivor island,” Elias Island, was not far off the southwest tip of Widow’s Island. Named for the founder of Widow’s Island—who was an ancestor of Cate’s—Elias Island attracted people who wanted to be left alone or small groups of survivalists, which was how it had earned the “survivor island” name. There were a few other islands in the area with the same types of populations. The survivor islands didn’t have power or plumbing and weren’t meant to be inhabited, but people lived on them anyway. The county sheriff looked the other way as long as they behaved. True problems on the islands were rare; the few residents preferred to avoid each other.

“What’s her seller’s name?”

“John Wayne.”

“No, it’s not.”

Tessa laughed. “That’s what I said. He told Marsha his parents had been fans. She had decided his name didn’t matter.”

“Do we need to check out the survivor islands?” Cate asked.

“I think this guy Marsha met is too young,” said Tessa. “But it wouldn’t hurt to find out for certain, I guess.”

“Rich is a survivalist,” said Cate. “It makes sense that he would seek out a place like that.”

“I agree.”

Cate’s phone rang, and she didn’t recognize the number. “This is Cate.”

“Umm . . . you were at my place today,” said a woman very quietly. “You and another woman.”

“You live with Greg Ledford?” asked Cate. She tapped Tessa on the arm and excitedly pointed at the phone, mouthing *Tammy*.

“Yeah.”

A long silence followed.

“You got the card I left,” said Cate. “You must have something you need to share with me.”

“I don’t know.” Uncertainty rang in Tammy’s voice.

“You heard we were looking for Rich Causey. Did you know he’s a friend of Greg’s?”

“I’ve never heard that name before,” said Tammy. “I was more curious about what you said about someone murdering a little girl. Did that really happen?”

“We are almost positive,” said Cate, trying to remember what exactly she’d said about Jade Causey to Greg. “The father refused to take the child for medical care and then disappeared with her. We have new evidence that she didn’t survive, and we want to talk to her father about it.”

Tammy was silent.

“Did you overhear something about a little girl?” Cate softened her tone. “Her name was Jade. She was only three.”

“Maybe . . . I’m not sure.”

“Tell me what you heard. Even the smallest thing might make a difference in finding this man.”

“What if it wasn’t his fault?”

Cate closed her eyes. Tammy knew something. “Then he won’t be in trouble, will he?”

The woman went quiet again.

“Tammy,” Cate began. “I think you have something you need to get off your chest. You’ve made a step in the right direction by calling me.”

“Will he know it was me?”

Cate didn’t know if Tammy meant Greg or Rich, but it didn’t matter. “No. Not at all.”

The woman sighed loudly over the phone. “I heard Greg talking with his friends one time . . . it was probably a year ago. Maybe longer. They were talking about another guy who was hiding out from the police. They didn’t say exactly why, but I could tell these guys all thought it was pretty funny that the police couldn’t find him.”

Now that Tammy had decided to tell Cate her story, she wasn’t holding back. The words came fast.

“I was cleaning up in the kitchen. Greg had two other guys over for a barbecue and beers. I wasn’t paying much attention because they talk so much shit all the time, but I heard one of them say, ‘Too bad about the little girl. She was a cutie.’ And they all went quiet. *That* got my attention. Usually they never shut up.”

They knew. And no one said anything.

“After that they went on to talk about how this friend had been traveling around from state to state for a while. How he almost got caught a few times.”

Cate waited for more, but Tammy went quiet. “Anything else about where this guy could be?”

“I’m thinking.”

“Did Greg know you overheard their conversation?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Did he question you today after we left?”

“No. He just went out in the garage and fooled around with his motorcycle for an hour.”

“Did he call anyone?” Cate hadn’t heard back from Isla about any phone calls. “Did he ask to borrow your phone?”

“He didn’t. And I don’t know if he called anyone or not.”

“Where is he now?”

“Not sure. I heard him take off on his bike. He usually doesn’t tell me when he’s leaving. But that’s when I got your card and made up my mind to call.”

“You’ve been a big help, Tammy.”

“I don’t think I told you anything helpful.”

“How long have you been together?” Cate asked as she tried to think of other questions to keep the woman talking.

“Two years.”

“Has Greg ever brought home new-to-you friends? Maybe someone from out of town who stayed overnight a few days? The man we’re looking for is in his midfifties.”

“A single guy?”

“He might have a girlfriend or wife.”

“We had a guy and his girlfriend stay one night last winter. Not sure exactly when, but I know it was after Christmas. I’d say he was around fifty. Greg said they used to work together.”

Bingo.

“Do you remember his name? Or his girlfriend’s name?”

“I don’t remember his, but her name was Leigh.”

Ashlee?

“Was she a lot younger than him?”

“Oh, totally. I wanted to ask her why she was with a guy so much older than her, but I thought that’d be rude. I swear she was barely out of high school.”

“Tammy.” Cate tried to keep the excitement out of her voice. “That sounds like the man we’re looking for. Can you remember anything about where they were going?”

“I’m not sure, but I know Leigh was really excited because they were in the process of moving. She said they

were going to have natural lives. I asked what she meant by that, and she said grow their own food, build their own home, and not pollute the planet. Sorta sounded like a bunch of hippie bullshit to me. I don't think I could live without my TV or internet."

"Where were they going to find a life like this?" Cate asked.

"Not sure. But Leigh must have said a dozen times how excited she was that they were taking a long ferry ride to get there."

Cate tried a few more questions but couldn't pry any more relevant information out of Tammy. Cate thanked her and asked her to call if she thought of anything else.

After ending the connection, she turned to Tessa, who'd been listening with interest to Cate's side of the conversation.

"I think Tammy just confirmed that Ashlee is with Rich Causey," said Cate. She gave Tessa a brief rundown of the conversation. "A long ferry ride would definitely put Ashlee and Rich in our area."

"They could be right here on Widow's," said Tessa.

"I don't think so," said Cate. "I think Marsha would have known if her seller lived on the island. I think the survivor islands are the right places to start looking, especially knowing what I know about Rich. They're small. Not many people live on them. We should be able to rapidly cross them off our list."

"They're also populated by people who shoot first and ask questions later."

"Then we'll be careful. Logan would be ideal to take with us to the islands. He understands these people." Cate's brother had encountered the type several times in his job as a park ranger.

"He does."

"Can you think of anyone else who would be helpful? We can cover multiple islands if we split up."

"I know one other person."

Cate looked at her expectantly. Tessa looked away, avoiding her gaze.

“Well? Who?” asked Cate.

“Adam Jacobs.”

Cate rolled her eyes. The young man could handle a boat or seaplane as if he'd been born to it, but his social graces were greatly lacking. Cate had experienced several awkward encounters with Adam since her return to the island last year. “What makes you say that?”

“I know he's spent some time on a few of the islands. His dad told me Adam had believed he was meant for the lifestyle, but instead he found he appreciates standard plumbing too much. I guess he's tried a few times. For some reason he thought it would be an adventure every day.”

Cate snorted. “At least he'd know where to find the people on the islands.”

“I think so.”

“I'll contact him. You check with Logan and see if he can take you to Elias Island tomorrow morning.” She paused. “I'll even partner with Adam. We can fly to one of the ones that's farther away,” she said reluctantly.

“Good idea,” agreed Tessa. “I can send Kurt or Bruce along with you. That should help keep Adam from hitting on you and sticking his foot in his mouth.”

“I'm engaged.”

Tessa shot her a side-eye. “You could hold your engagement ring in front of his face and have Henry stand between you, and Adam would still give it a shot.”

“True. I'll let you know later what I hear from Adam. But let's plan to leave by six a.m. tomorrow.”

“Done.”

The women parted ways, and Cate headed to her vehicle in the ferry parking lot. She was excited to start searching tomorrow.

Will I finally get Kori some closure?

9

“Is it safe?”

Henry immediately realized his question irked Cate. She stalled, pouring herself some more iced tea before she answered. They were eating a late dinner on their deck, the summer evening warm and the sky a darkening blue. Henry had grilled salmon and prepared Cate’s favorite watermelon, mango, and jalapeño salsa to eat with the fish.

“I’m not questioning your ability to handle yourself,” he continued.

Cate glanced at him. “It sort of feels like it.”

“What I meant was . . .” He raised his hands. “Okay. I don’t know what I was trying to say. I know it’s unknown territory for you. Even if that pothead Adam claims he knows his way around an island of survivalists, there’s a lot we don’t know.”

“Correct. I’m fully aware I could be walking into a dangerous mess.”

“I’ve had a few survivor island people come here for medical treatment,” said Henry. “One had one of the worst infections I ever saw. A big wood splinter that had broken off deep under the skin. The amount of pus that I squee—”

“Stop.” Cate waved her fork at him. “I’m eating.”

“Oops. Sorry.” Henry dug into his salmon. “Anyway, I’ve been told I should do an occasional clinic on the islands. Assess their needs. See what can help.”

“You don’t have time for that.”

“Not yet. Hiring more help should open up my schedule.” He reached over and took her hand. “That would make a good cover for you tomorrow. Pose as health-care workers.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Excitement rose in him. “I’ll go with you. I’ve got excess bulk bandages, acetaminophen, topical antibiotic gel. We can pass it out. That should help break the ice. Maybe loosen some tongues to help find who you’re looking for.”

Cate stared at him for a long moment. “That’s a good plan.”

“If Ashlee is pregnant or already has a little one, she’d probably show up if she heard there was a doctor on the island.”

“Rich wouldn’t let her,” Cate pointed out. “He’d probably keep Ashlee away from anyone bringing medical assistance.”

“True.” Henry thought for a long moment. “But you’d probably hear from other people if there was a pregnant woman on the island. Or a young child.”

“Good point. At least we could get confirmation if she is there . . . and through her, find Rich.”

“What’s the plan if you find him?” Henry asked.

“Return with armed support. The county’s tactical response team has been put on notice.”

“I didn’t know they had one.”

“I don’t think they get a lot of activity, but they train regularly.”

“I’d hate to see Ashlee get caught up in a situation like that,” said Henry. “Rich won’t turn himself over easily.”

“Agreed. If I find her, I’ve got to convince her to leave with me,” Cate said. “I’ve been mentally running through dozens of scenarios to get her off the island. But a lot depends on Rich.”

“Let me come tomorrow. I’ll add credibility to your presence on the island more than Adam would.”

“Done. I agree with you, but what about your clinic tomorrow?”

“Julie can handle the morning. It’ll be strictly walk-ins.”

“You’ll do as I say on the island,” Cate told him. “I know you used to give orders in that busy LA emergency room and are accustomed to being your own boss. But going to the island is my mission.”

Henry had been along on a few law enforcement outings with Cate that had turned violent.

Tomorrow could become one.

“I’ll absolutely listen to you. I’ve seen you in action. I’m well aware you know what to do.” He squeezed her hand and pulled it closer, moving his face toward hers. “You want to tell me what to do later tonight?”

Cate grinned. “Damn, you’re handsome. I’ve always had a weakness for brown eyes.”

The room was suddenly very warm.

“I love you,” she whispered, setting down her fork.

“As you were meant to.”

10

Cate eyed the two men with rifles slung over their shoulders who stood at the end of the survivor island's decrepit dock the next morning.

"Not good," Henry muttered under his breath.

Cate's outlook was more positive. "That's a friendly carry. The guns are on their backs, not pointed our way." But she kept a sharp eye on the men after sending them a casual wave.

Adam Jacobs had piloted her and Henry to the little unnamed island while Tessa and Logan had taken a boat to check on the residents of Elias Island. An unofficial boat and seaplane "taxi driver," Adam had greeted her and Henry as they had joined him at the plane in Harlot Harbor at the crack of dawn, and Cate was pleased that the young man had been on good behavior and not leered at her once.

Now he helped unload the boxes of surplus medical supplies that she and Henry had scrounged together. Cate had made a trip to the grocery store late last night and bought most of their supply of prenatal vitamins, antacids, and a few other things. If Ashlee was pregnant, Cate hoped that one of the products would draw the woman out.

Cate didn't see any people other than the two men, but she knew far off to their left and now out of sight was a "marina."

She had seen the marina in a small protected cove as they had flown over the island and didn't know what else to call the three little rickety boats tied to a slightly more stable-looking dock. She'd also seen two bleached and battered rowboats pulled high up the rocky beach. Cate had wondered how seaworthy any of them were. She and Adam had agreed to tie up at their current dock instead. It was easier for him to approach and felt more open to Cate.

"Morning," Henry said to the men with rifles as he walked to the end of the dock, two cardboard boxes in his arms. "I'm

Dr. Powers. We've got some medical supplies we thought some of your residents could use."

"We don't need nothin'," said the man wearing a Seahawks baseball cap. "You can load those boxes right back up in your plane."

Cate grimaced. *Dammit.*

The younger man stepped forward, curiosity in his eyes. "What's in the boxes?"

Good.

"Sterile bandages. Medical tape. Acetaminophen. Benadryl. Topical antibiotic cream. Rubbing alcohol."

"Got anything stronger than acetaminophen?" the second man asked hopefully. He was missing several lower front teeth.

"No, sorry," said Henry. He'd told Cate to expect one of the first questions to be about painkillers. Everyone wanted free narcotics.

"We'll take the boxes for you," said the man with the toothy smile. "You can be on your way." The Seahawks fan glowered at his partner.

"I'd prefer to hand them out," said Henry. "Anyone on the island need looking at? Any infections or sicknesses going on? Kids healthy?"

"We don't need any doctors," said the first man. His partner, who had agreed to take the boxes, gave him a side-eye.

"Everyone feel that way?" Henry asked. "Seems like people should decide for themselves if they want me to take a look at something for them. Or do you make the decisions on everyone's health?"

"He's *not* in charge," said the man with missing teeth. "We're all free men here. If you follow me, I'll take you in and put the word out that a doc is visiting." He gestured for one of the boxes, and Henry handed him a large carton of bandages.

Henry turned around and met Cate's gaze. She nodded at him, pleased he'd gotten them onto the island. They'd agreed that the type of men on the island might respond better if Henry appeared in charge.

Twenty minutes later, they'd hiked to a small clearing with their load of supplies. Adam stayed with the plane, at Cate's request. She didn't want anything hampering their plan to leave—like a resident deciding they wanted a seaplane for themselves.

“No cell service,” Henry muttered.

“Nope,” said Cate, unsurprised. “That's why Tessa gave me a sat phone.”

The Seahawks fan spoke into a beat-up walkie-talkie as they were leaving the plane. She heard him explain that a doctor was on the plane everyone had seen fly over the island. The doctor was bringing in a few supplies and was willing to take a look at any problems.

Now in the clearing, nearly a dozen people waited. Cate studied the men; none of them had any resemblance to Rich Causey. She tamped down her disappointment.

Rich wouldn't come to see a doctor.

On the hike in, Cate had glimpsed some large tents linked together deep in the woods and an assortment of chairs and rusted barbecues set up near the tents. Tarps stretched between the trees, offering more cover. Cate wondered if all the residents lived in tents or if some had fashioned any homes out of wood. The docks were proof that some sort of construction had happened on the island at one point. Here in the clearing were a few chairs and large logs that had been dragged to surround a firepit. It was clearly a central meeting place of some sort.

Cate counted three guns tucked into holsters on the other residents and wondered how many weapons she couldn't see. *Where there's a gun, always assume there's another.* No one looked upset to see Henry and Cate. In fact, several looked quite eager.

“Shit,” Henry said. “Look at his leg.”

The calf of one of the waiting men was swollen to nearly twice the size of his other. Somehow he had acquired an actual medical crutch and leaned heavily on it as he watched them approach. Cate made eye contact with the two women who were present and nodded. Neither was Ashlee Garnet.

Is this a wild-goose chase?

She hoped Tessa and Logan were having better luck.

Henry headed straight for the man with the bad leg, and Cate carried her box over to the women. She'd thought carefully about what to pack to break the ice, knowing she would probably need to gain a bit of trust before anyone would answer her questions. Both women appeared to be in their thirties. One was thin and wore stained jeans. The other wore navy yoga pants with a hole in the knee. They both had expressions of curiosity, their gazes locked on the large box Cate carried.

“Good morning,” Cate said. “I’m with Dr. Powers, and we’re just checking in to see if anyone has any health needs on the island.”

“What’s in the box?” asked the woman in yoga pants.

“Women’s sanitary products and—”

“I’ll take some of those,” the woman said immediately, and the thin one nodded, her face lighting up. “The men will never buy those on supply runs.”

“They’re chicken,” said the thin woman, rolling her eyes. “Also claim it’s a waste of money.”

Cate had suspected basic women’s care would be much-needed products.

She squatted as she set down the box and unslung a large bag from her shoulder. She dug out a few packages of pads and tampons, which the women eagerly took. “Any medical issues you’d like to talk to Dr. Powers about?” Cate asked as she also gave each one a bottle of generic acetaminophen and a box of Band-Aids.

“Nah. Healthy as a horse,” said the thin woman. The other nodded in agreement.

Cate thought they both looked run down and exhausted but didn't argue. “What about the other women who didn't come. What do they need?”

The thin woman shrugged and didn't meet Cate's eyes. “What else do you got?” she asked.

Cate gave her some of the topical antibiotic cream. “I've got prenatal vitamins,” Cate said. “Children's vitamins too.”

“No kids on the island,” said yoga pants.

“That's good,” said Cate. “Anyone pregnant?”

The women exchanged a glance and didn't answer.

I'll take that as a yes.

“She doing okay with the pregnancy?” Cate asked, even though the women hadn't confirmed. “I'm sure she'd benefit from some vitamins at the very least. I brought antacids too. According to my friends who've been pregnant, these are like gold.”

More furtive looks passed between the women.

“Is she all right?” Cate asked, inserting concern into her voice.

“She's fine, but her husband's an ass. He's not going to let her have any of that stuff,” the first woman finally said, gesturing at the bottles of vitamins.

Cate deliberately looked at all the men in the clearing. “He here?” she asked softly, hoping she sounded like someone the women could confide in.

“Nah. He's fishing today.”

“Then now is a good time to see if she can use some of these things.” Cate dug into her bag and pulled out a handful of Snickers bars. “Shhh,” she said with a wink as the women's eyes bulged at the sight of the chocolate. “Don't let the guys see.”

The bars vanished into their pockets.

Chocolate to grease the wheel.

“Can you show me where to find her?”

The women looked at each other and nodded. They headed toward a well-worn path that led into the woods. Cate caught Henry’s eye and held up the prenatal vitamins, tipping her head in the direction the women had left. He nodded, but concern flashed in his eyes. She gave him a thumbs-up, noting that two other men had joined the group and were also accepting supplies from Henry. She turned and caught up to the other women.

The walk took ten minutes. Cate had glimpses of a few other tents but didn’t see more people. She learned the thin woman was Michelle and the other was Selina. Michelle had been on the island for almost six months and Selina a month. Both lived with their husbands. Cate inferred that Selina’s husband had brought them there to avoid law enforcement, but Michelle and her husband simply didn’t want to answer to anyone.

“Too many stupid laws,” Michelle said. “Why do politicians get to tell us what to do? That’s not the American way.”

Cate made noises of agreement as Selina emphatically nodded at every word Michelle said.

The women finally stopped several dozen feet from a large dark-green tent. “Hello! Leigh! You in there?”

Leigh. The same name Tammy said.

Bulging black garbage bags leaned against one side of the tent, and Cate wondered if they contained belongings or actual garbage. She noted a beat-up bicycle under a tree and a large wagon with two broken wheels. The air was still and humid and smelled of damp wood and dirt. The tent had several patches, and Cate spotted two long slashes that still needed to be patched. The slashes looked deliberate, as if someone had been angry and stabbed at the tent.

How does anyone live like this?

A hugely pregnant woman ducked and stepped out of the tent, her hand supporting her belly.

Ashlee.

Her long hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but its pale-red color was discernible. Pregnancy had rounded her face, making her look much younger than in her photos. If Cate hadn't known she was eighteen, she would have guessed she was closer to fifteen.

"Hey, Leigh," Michelle said. "This doctor's got some antacids and vitamins for you. You can have those, right?"

"What the hell?" said a man moving out from behind Leigh.

Michelle and Selina audibly gasped and froze.

It was Rich.

He had aged considerably. He looked as if he should be Ashlee's father—not her baby's.

Cate was thankful she'd put on a ball cap that morning and pulled her hair into a messy bun at her neck. She'd never met Rich in person, but there was a possibility he'd seen her on TV in press conferences or searched out her photo online years ago, looking for the face of the woman who was hunting him.

"Hi!" Cate said brightly, as if the women she was with hadn't frozen in surprise. "I've got something to help your wife with heartburn—"

"We don't need it," Rich announced, stepping in front of Ashlee.

"How about some vitamins that are for pregnant women?" Cate said rapidly. "It's so important that she's getting all the vitamins she needs. That baby is stealing them from her body."

"Vitamins are just a ploy to get your money," said Rich. "They're bullshit. Our bodies make what we need."

Cate wanted to get *something* into Ashlee's hands. "That's true. But babies are greedy. Every little bit helps."

Rich took a step toward Cate. “Get the fuck off my property.”

Cate was tempted to argue the validity of that statement.

“I understand,” she told Rich. “A lot of people feel that way. I’ll just leave some women’s hygiene products. She’ll need them for all the heavy bleeding after—”

“*Fine!* Jeez.” He grabbed Ashlee’s arm, hauled her forward, and then gave her a shove in the back. “Go get your women’s shit.”

Ashlee stumbled forward, her arms out for balance. She was gigantic, making Cate wonder if she was pregnant with twins. Rich stood back and watched, his arms crossed on his chest, disgust in his eyes. Cate had hoped he’d keep his distance when she gave Ashlee the hygiene products.

Cate quickly set down her box and dug out the sanitary pads. She slipped a small piece of paper out of her pocket. Ashlee approached and Cate stood, holding the paper on the plastic-wrapped pads so that Ashlee could read it.

It was a photocopy of what Ashlee—Cate assumed—had written on the newspaper article. Just the handwritten portion. Seeing her huge belly and Rich’s attitude, Cate had little doubt that it was Ashlee who had described her fear for her unborn child. The young woman froze as she saw the photocopy, and then her gaze leaped to Cate’s.

“Here you go,” Cate said conversationally but loud enough for Rich to hear. “I hope these are helpful after your baby is born. Have you had any contractions?”

“Yes,” whispered the girl, raising a hand to her forehead. “And my head and back hurt all the time.”

Alarmed, Cate looked at Rich. “Did you know your wife has been having contractions?”

“She’s been bitching about pain for months. It’s normal.”

Ashlee winced and put both hands on her belly. Cate swore the abdomen seemed to rise and tighten under Ashlee’s snug shirt.

Holy shit.

“She’s having a contraction right this second.”

“It’s those fake labor things,” snapped Rich. “Leigh, get over here. Now.”

“Can I leave her some acetaminophen for her—”

“No. *Nothing* else. Just the female crap.”

Confident that Ashlee had recognized the note, Cate crumpled the paper back into her hand and passed her the pack of pads. “Hopefully *help* for the baby will come *soon*.” She held Ashlee’s gaze, praying the young woman understood that someone would get her out of this horrible situation soon.

“I hope so too,” the young woman said. Her eyes were bloodshot, and exhaustion surrounded her. But there was a hint of trust that hadn’t been there a few moments before.

“You can count on it.”

I’ve got to get her out of here today.

Cate nodded at her and returned to the other two women, who hadn’t said a word during the entire exchange. The three of them headed back toward the clearing.

“He’s a real asshole,” whispered Selina. “We’ve felt so sorry for that girl. He doesn’t let her do anything.”

“I took them some leftovers a few weeks ago, and he blew up at me,” said Michelle. “Told me his wife didn’t need help taking care of him.”

“Sounds like a real winner,” said Cate. “I’m sure he’ll get what’s coming to him.”

“She looks like she could pop any day,” said Michelle. “I don’t know what’s going to happen when she goes into labor. I’m no help. I can’t be around that type of pain.”

“Me either,” agreed Selina. “And the men won’t be any help.”

“Rich claims he knows what to do during a birth,” said Michelle. “But I wouldn’t trust him.”

“Fuck no,” said Selina.

“I think she might be in active labor right now,” Cate said.

“Dammit,” muttered Michelle. The woman stopped and looked back the way they had come, frustration on her face. “I don’t know how to get Leigh away from him. He’s such an overbearing ass. If we could separate them, there’s a boat that could get her to the clinic on Widow’s—oh . . . that’s where you’re from, right?”

“I’d take her right now in the seaplane,” said Cate. “And leave him behind.”

The health of her baby is far more important than bringing Rich to justice.

Cate touched Michelle’s arm. “How do the other men on the island feel about Rich and her pregnancy?”

Michelle grimaced. “They say it’s Rich’s business. I’ve talked to my man about Leigh a few times. He tells me to keep to myself.”

“Same,” said Selina.

“And if that baby dies because Rich won’t let her have help?”

The woman looked away.

“Leigh could die too.”

“What can we do?” Michelle threw up her hands, anger in her tone. “We’re powerless.”

“No, you’re not,” said Cate, making the women look at her in surprise. “And you’re exactly who can help. Trust me.”

I have an idea.

Cate gave Michelle and Selina an encouraging nod as they returned to the clearing, crossing her fingers that the two could talk a little sense into their husbands. They'd agreed to tell their husbands that Leigh was in labor and was showing signs of severe health complications. To convince the women, Cate had emphasized what could happen if Leigh's headache and exhaustion weren't addressed. All the husbands needed to do was to get Rich to go fishing, like he had already planned for that day.

Once Rich was off the island, Cate was getting Ashlee on the plane.

No one will stop me.

She would use her weapon if needed.

The husbands didn't need to know that part of the plan. Michelle and Selina were to tell them that Rich needed to be out of the way so Leigh could receive a simple exam.

Cate joined Henry as he examined the man with the swollen leg.

"He needs IV antibiotics," muttered Henry to Cate. "I've given him an oral loading dose, but he needs a more aggressive treatment."

Cate looked away from the red swollen calf. It looked like it'd burst if touched with something sharp.

"I can go tomorrow," the injured man said. "Jim said he'd loan me his boat."

"We can take you back with us today," said Cate.

"I'm not getting on that itty-bitty plane." The infected man shuddered. "Hell no. Tomorrow is good enough."

Cate glanced over her shoulder and saw Selina and Michelle deep in conversation with two men. Selina's husband was emphatically shaking his head, but Michelle's appeared to

be listening. Cate tugged Henry on the arm and led him a few steps away.

“I found her,” she whispered. “But she’s hugely pregnant and having contractions.”

Henry’s eyes narrowed. “Will she leave?”

“Rich was there,” said Cate. “He swears she’s fine and that he can handle a birth. Henry, she’s complaining of a massive headache and her back hurting. Is that normal?”

“The back pain could be from simply carrying a baby, but it could also be a sign of labor. I don’t like the headache. Did she say how long it’s been going on?”

“No.”

“Swollen hands or feet?”

Cate pictured Ashlee’s hands as she had reached for the package. “I think so. Hard to say.”

Henry touched the stethoscope shoved in his shirt pocket. “I need to take her blood pressure. Could be preeclampsia.”

Cate’s heart skipped a beat. She knew the condition could be deadly to both mom and baby. “Rich isn’t going to let you anywhere near her. Selina and Michelle are trying to convince their husbands to take him fishing, telling them that Ashlee desperately needs an exam. If he leaves, we need to get her off the island today.”

“Definitely.” Henry looked around at the group. The men were trading among themselves with the supplies Henry had given them. “I’ve done what I can here. Let’s head back toward the plane, make them think we’re finished.”

Cate caught Michelle’s gaze. The woman and her husband were leaving, taking the path toward Rich’s tent. Michelle flashed her a subtle thumbs-up.

“Looks like one of the men has agreed to get Rich out of the way,” she told Henry.

Henry reaffirmed that the man with the swollen calf would come for medical care, and then he and Cate headed out

the way they'd come. Their two previous escorts ignored them, still intent on bartering with the new supplies.

"I hope the people who need it get the right stuff," said Henry. "I didn't mean to create a new form of currency."

"Bringing what we did was the right thing," said Cate. "Even if we had an ulterior motive."

"They need better access to care," he said firmly.

Cate put her hand on his shoulder, amused at the furrow between his brows. Henry was a doctor through and through. "They have access. You. It's just a bit of a long boat ride."

"Trent told me he thought I'd turn him away if he'd come to town with that leg infection."

"Well, now he knows you won't. And he'll convince the rest to ask for help when they need it."

"Hope so."

Several minutes later they emerged onto the rocky beach near the old dock and their plane. The strong smell of marijuana swamped them.

"Dammit!" Cate spun around, looking for their pilot, and found him sitting under a tree thirty feet away, a joint in his hand. "Adam! What the *hell*?"

The young man jumped to his feet and put out his joint. "I thought you were going to be a lot longer. I haven't had much."

"He's had enough to stink up the entire beach," said Henry.

"I'm not flying with a stoned pilot," said Cate.

"I'm fine," said Adam as he approached. His eyes were bloodshot.

Cate was furious. "What if we'd had to get off the island fast? You saw the guys with rifles. We didn't know what we were walking into."

Adam shrugged. “You’re armed. You could have handled it.”

“Idiot.” Henry looked livid. “Do you always smoke pot when you’re working?”

“Of course not.”

Cate pressed her lips together and walked away, pulling out the satellite phone Tessa had issued her. She called the deputy, who answered immediately.

“We found Ashlee and Rich,” Cate told Tessa. “But our pilot is now stoned. We’re not going anywhere for a while.” She updated Tessa on their plan to get Rich away from Ashlee and get her off the island.

“We finished on Elias Island a bit ago,” said Tessa. “We’ll head your way instead of to the other survivor island. Give us about a half hour. Don’t let him fly.”

“I won’t.” Cate glanced back at Adam, who had returned to sitting in the shade of the tree and closed his eyes. Henry stood a few feet away, his arms crossed in annoyance.

She ended the call and approached Henry. “Tessa and Logan are coming. If we can get Ashlee away from Rich, we can take her on the sheriff’s department boat.”

The words were barely out of her mouth when she heard voices in the woods. But they weren’t coming in their direction. She met Henry’s gaze. He nodded, and together they silently moved into the woods. She followed the sounds of arguing, keeping herself hidden behind tree trunks and thick bushes. The voices continued to move away, and she and Henry moved faster through the woods. Finally two men came into sight.

Rich.

He had a large plastic case and a bulging garbage bag with him as he argued with the second man. The two of them were on a path that took many minutes to lead out of the woods and into a cove. Cate and Henry reached the edge of the trees and watched the two men approach one of the boats on the “marina” dock that Cate had seen from the air. The second

man carried two fishing poles and another garbage bag in his hands.

Michelle's husband.

“He’s leaving,” Cate whispered to Henry. She couldn’t hear what the men were quarreling about and didn’t care. She just wanted Rich as far away as possible when they went to get Ashlee.

The two men loaded their things into the little boat as Cate and Henry hid behind trees. Rich jumped in and fussed around with the engine while the other man waited on the dock, watching.

Cate wanted to tell them to hurry up and leave, but she and Henry had no way off the island with Ashlee until Tessa arrived. Rich’s lingering with the boat was probably in their favor.

Rich got out of the boat and raised his arms as he continued arguing with Michelle’s husband. The second man kept pointing back at the boat and shaking his head.

Just leave.

Rich stomped by Michelle’s husband and headed back up the beach toward the woods.

Shit.

She and Henry scrambled to hide behind a huge dense rhododendron bush and held their breath as they heard Rich pass. Jogging footsteps sounded, and the second man ran after him.

“Is there something wrong with the boat?” Cate whispered.

“I don’t know,” said Henry. “But he left the fishing poles and tackle, so I assume he’s coming back.”

“Good point.” She shifted into a more comfortable position to wait. “I want to strangle Adam.”

“Get in line.”

“Earlier I was so pleased that he seemed on his best behavior today.”

“I think this is his best behavior.”

“What if we’d needed to leave in a hurry?” she fumed. “I trusted him.”

“He’s a good pilot . . . he’s pretty much the only pilot. Maybe next time search him for pot before riding with him.”

“I’m sure he’d find some other way to disappoint me.”

Henry took her hand and squeezed it. “Forget him. As soon as Tessa gets here, we’ll get Ashlee off the island. You did good today. Probably saved her life.”

“The medical supplies were your idea. I don’t know what I was thinking—that I would just show up looking for a pregnant woman?”

“You would have figured something out.”

“I still want Rich,” Cate stated. “He’s so close. He’s right within my grasp. And he’s going to answer for what he did to Jade.”

“He will. But Ashlee needs to come first.”

“Yes.”

Several minutes passed, and then Cate heard something. “Listen.”

“They’re coming back,” said Henry.

Cate listened harder. “That’s a woman. And she’s upset.”

Moments later Rich crossed Cate’s line of vision, and she caught her breath.

No.

He had Ashlee’s hand in his and was yanking her along the trail. Ashlee stumbled after him, her other hand under her huge belly. She was crying, begging him to slow down. Michelle’s husband followed several feet behind, also telling Rich to slow down.

Rich halted and spun around. He pointed at Michelle's husband. "Do *not* tell me what to do with my wife."

The man stopped and held up his hands. "You're hurting her, man."

"Mind your own business! She's just seeing me off." He gave Ashlee's arm a shake and stepped close, putting his face close to hers. "Just like any good wife should do when her husband is leaving." His cocky grin made Cate want to hit him.

Ashlee looked ready to collapse. Cate caught her breath as a ripple across Ashlee's belly showed through her shirt, and the woman winced in pain.

"Jesus," Henry muttered. "We've got to get her."

Cate weighed her decisions. She was armed. She could order Rich to stop and release Ashlee. What she didn't know was how he'd react. This wasn't a man who listened to law enforcement orders. He did as he pleased. There was a good chance he was also armed, and based on how he'd treated Kori and Jade in the past, Cate worried for Ashlee's safety.

Cate had no doubts he would hurt or even kill Ashlee to save himself.

"He'll hurt her," Cate whispered. "We stay back until he takes off."

Henry nodded.

Rich pulled Ashlee across the beach and onto the dock. Michelle's husband followed them. He was silent, but Ashlee continued to plead with her husband to slow down or let go. "The baby's coming," she begged. "I need to lie down."

"Shut. Up." Rich pulled her along the flimsy dock.

"He's going to put her on the boat!" Henry said.

Shit.

Rich shoved Ashlee into the boat, and she nearly toppled into the water. He jumped in and started the engine.

Cate stepped out from the woods and started to sprint across the beach, Henry close behind her.

Rich threw off the lines as the engine sputtered and gave off a loud whine before continuing. Rich stepped back to the wheel. The boat roared and lurched away from the dock.

Cate leaped up the steps to the dock, but Michelle's husband put out his arms, stopping her.

"He doesn't want his wife to see a doctor," he told her.

"I'm not a fucking doctor," Cate yelled at him, furious that he was defending Rich. She watched Rich's boat speed farther and farther away. He looked back, and even though he was too far away to make eye contact, Cate felt his stare burn through her.

Then he flipped her off.

Does he know who I am?

"I need one of these boats!" Two boats were still tied to the dock. They'd seen better days, but Cate would risk it over flying with a stoned pilot.

He shook his head. "A man has the right to do what he wants."

Cate got in his face. "Give me the keys to another boat!"

"His wife is in labor," Henry told Michelle's husband. "There's a chance she and the baby might not survive."

"He'll take care of her."

"No, he won't!" Cate was ready to push the man into the water. "Did you know he's wanted by the FBI for kidnapping? And possibly murder?"

Michelle's husband took a step back, looking from Cate to Henry, disbelief on his face. "Is that true?" he asked Henry.

"I'm not making it up," snapped Cate. "Do you have boat keys or not?"

"True," said Henry. "Where are the keys?"

“No keys.” He shrugged. “You’ll have to ask someone else. Rich was furious that we let strangers on the island who saw his wife.”

“Dammit.” Cate could barely make out Rich’s boat now. He was speeding east, where she knew there were several other empty islands.

We’ve lost him.

A faint rumble sounded, and she turned.

It was a boat entering the cove. The sheriff’s boat with Tessa and Logan.

Cate ran to the end of the dock and waved her hands, resisting the urge to jump up and down. Tessa gunned the engine, closing the distance between them. With a series of deft maneuvers, she slowed and edged close to the dock. Logan held out a hand, and Cate leaped across several feet of water.

“Your timing is almost perfect,” she said to her brother as they stepped out of the way so Henry could do the same.

“Almost?” Logan asked.

“Head east,” Cate told Tessa. “Open it up. Rich took Ashlee, and I don’t think he plans to return.”

“We saw a piece of crap boat leave the cove,” said Tessa as she accelerated.

“That was them.”

“They’re no match for our power. We’ll catch up in a few minutes.”

Only if we can see them.

The sheriff’s boat left the cove, and Cate scanned the horizon. To the east she could make out four more islands. One closer and the others quite far. To her knowledge, the islands were empty. Logan used binoculars, searching the horizon.

“There!” Henry pointed.

Cate turned. The boat hadn't gotten as far as she had expected and was running parallel to the shore on the closest island. She could clearly see two people, one with a long ponytail. "Is he looking for a dock?"

"There're no docks on that island," said Logan. "He'll have to run it up onto the beach."

"Why would he pick the closest island?" asked Henry. "I'd think he'd want to get as far away as possible."

"His engine sounded like crap," said Cate. "Maybe it's worse now." She couldn't hear anything over the roar of Tessa's boat.

But she heard the sudden crack of the gunshot.

The four of them dropped low, all keeping an eye on the boat ahead of them.

"Was that aimed at us?" Henry asked.

"Yes." Logan continued to watch through his binoculars. "Shit. Now she's fighting with him."

"She's going to have a baby on the damned boat," said Cate, tension filling her spine. "Get us closer."

"Working on it," said Tessa. "But we're not bulletproof."

"She's pulling on his arm," said Logan. "He can't drive, shoot, and hold her back at the same time."

They were close enough that Cate could clearly see the fight on the other boat. Ashlee and Rich were in a close struggle. The boat weaved and jerked as she wrestled with him and he tried to steer.

She's a brave girl.

Their boat hit a bunch of chop as they moved closer to the island, and Cate's teeth snapped with every rough bounce. Tessa was focused, her gaze locked on the boat several hundred yards ahead. Henry was rigid, one hand on a rail for balance and the other on Cate's shoulder. They drew closer to the little boat, its struggling engine no match for the county's powerful boat.

Rich looked behind him, and Cate read the panic in his eyes.

He turned back to the wheel and suddenly jerked hard. The front end of his boat hit something and left the water. Cate caught her breath. Rich's boat launched into the air and landed on its side, flinging its passengers into the air.

A log.

The long gray wood culprit crested a wave, moving closer to the island, unaware that it'd been hit full speed by a boat. The boat righted itself and slowed, its engine suddenly silent.

Rich and Ashlee were in the water, but Cate could see only Rich. Keeping her eyes locked on the man, she slipped off her shoes. Beside her Henry did the same. Ashlee's head suddenly bobbed up in the rough waves, and Rich lunged for her, pushing her back under the water.

Cate stared, stunned by the man's brutality toward his pregnant wife.

"How . . ." Henry couldn't finish, his gaze also locked on the struggling couple as Tessa sped in their direction.

"He's going to kill her," Cate stated, fear filling her. Both boats were now within a hundred feet of the shore. She stepped up on the edge of the boat and balanced, letting her body move with the up-and-down motion of the water, gripping the post to the boat's canopy. Tessa slowed the boat, turning it so Cate's side would soon be close to the couple in the water. Cate was a strong swimmer, but the Pacific Ocean was icy cold year round. Its chill would take her breath away.

Ashlee came up for air, terror on her face, and Rich dived at her again, shoving her out of sight. Cate held her breath, mentally begging Tessa to get the boat closer. Henry slipped a life jacket over Cate's free arm, pulling it up to her shoulder. She maneuvered her other arm into it, never taking her eyes off Ashlee, who had bobbed to the surface, as he zipped it up.

"Be careful," Henry said. He already wore a life jacket, and Logan was putting one on. Cate nodded.

Ten more seconds, and we'll be in position.

Henry grabbed a life preserver and flung it at Ashlee. A wave immediately carried it out of her reach. Rich dived under the water in her direction, and suddenly Ashlee was yanked straight down; her head and waving hands vanished.

Cate searched the waves.

There she is.

Ashlee had surfaced a few yards away from Rich, who was now thrashing in the water, spinning in a circle, trying to spot his wife.

Henry threw another life preserver, and again the ocean interfered. He cursed and dug a life jacket out from under a cushion and flung it at the woman. Rescue pole in hand, Logan leaned over the edge, ready for the moment Ashlee was in reach.

Ashlee stretched and got one hand on the thick floating jacket. Determination filled her face as she pulled the jacket to her chest. She rolled onto her back, her stomach rising out of the water as she gasped for air. A wave had further separated her from Rich, but now he swam toward her with a powerful stroke.

Two seconds.

Cate wanted to leap in as close to Ashlee as possible.

Rich got there first and grabbed one of his wife's feet. Ashlee jerked it out of his grasp, rolled to her side, and kicked him with her other foot. The toe of her shoe connected with his jaw in front of his ear, knocking his head to the side. Rich sank underwater, and Cate jumped.

The slap of cold water thrust the air out of her lungs, and Cate struggled to catch her breath as salty waves slapped her in the face. She grabbed for Ashlee and caught the edge of the life jacket that Ashlee clung to and pulled her close. Henry jumped in the water far to the left of the two women. He disappeared between the waves as Cate realized he'd removed his life jacket.

What is he doing?

“You okay?” Cate asked as Tessa cut the engine. Ashlee was soaking wet and nodded, her eyes wide. Something hit Cate in the head, and she turned, expecting to see Rich, but it was Logan’s rescue pole. Cate grabbed it and hooked it to the life jacket that Ashlee held in a death grip. Logan pulled, guiding Ashlee to the rear of the boat, where he could help her in.

“Can you see Henry?” Cate asked as Logan and Tessa helped Ashlee onto the low step at the back of the boat. Cate kept her head above the water, spinning in circles, trying to spot Henry or Rich.

Henry’s not wearing a life jacket.

“He went after Rich,” said Logan. “He sank. I think Ashlee hit him hard with that kick to the jaw.”

“Good.” Ashlee’s teeth chattered as she forced out the word. “Asshole.”

“Are you okay, Ashlee?” Tessa asked as she wrapped a blanket around the woman. “Is the baby okay?”

With someone else looking after Ashlee, Cate continued to search for the men still in the water. A few dozen feet closer to the shoreline, Henry’s head broke through the surface, and he sucked in a deep breath.

Thank God.

“Henry! Where’s Rich?” Cate shouted across the water.

He shook his head at her and ducked under again.

Shit.

Cate swam toward where Henry had vanished, her life jacket making her strokes awkward and clumsy.

At least I’m moving with the waves now.

Henry surfaced again. He had Rich in a rescue hold, and the man’s head lolled against Henry, his eyes closed. Henry looked at the boat and then at the shoreline. The shore was slightly closer, and he broke into a sidestroke, towing Rich

alongside him. Cate swam after them, alarmed at Rich's passive state.

It'll be easier to do CPR on shore.

A minute later Henry stumbled up the shore, pulling Rich by his arms. Cate felt ground under her feet and stood, her wet clothes weighing a thousand pounds. She pushed out of the water and caught up with Henry. She grabbed one of the unconscious man's arms and helped drag him out of reach of the waves.

"Is he breathing?" she asked, panting hard herself.

Henry didn't answer. Water ran down his face, dripping from his hair as he focused on his patient. He shook Rich, shouting his name, and felt for a pulse at his neck. Cate pressed her fingers against the other side. She felt nothing.

Henry tilted Rich's head, lifted his jaw, and administered two rescue breaths. Cate watched the prone man's chest rise from the force of Henry's breaths. Henry paused, his gaze locked on Rich's chest as they both waited for it to rise on its own. Cate's brain spun as she tried to remember the proper steps for CPR. Her mind was blank.

"Thirty chest compressions," said Henry, moving to position his arms over Rich's chest. "Then two breaths." He started compressions, and Cate supported Rich's jaw, readying herself to give the breaths. She glanced back at the boat. Ashlee was sitting upright, and Tessa stood beside her, one hand on the pregnant woman's shoulder.

It doesn't look like she's in active labor.

Logan was speaking into the boat's communication system and had a cell phone at his ear. Tessa gave Cate a thumbs-up. Cate raised a hand, uncertain of what she was acknowledging.

Ashlee must be okay.

"Now," ordered Henry, pulling her attention from the boat.

Cate gave two breaths. Rich's lips were cold, the temperature of the ocean.

Henry resumed compressions, and Cate stared at the unconscious man's face, willing him to give some sign of recovery. She saw nothing, his body jolting in time with Henry's hands.

How long will we have to do this?

Raw determination filled Henry's face as he pumped Rich's chest.

Cate held her breath, dread curling in her stomach. She knew Henry wouldn't stop until he physically couldn't go on. And then she would take over.

I don't think it's going to help.

It didn't.

Four days later

Cate took another sip of wine and stretched out her legs. She and Henry relaxed on a blanket in a corner of the park, a small distance away from all the other concertgoers attending the final event of the Widow's Day celebration. There had been a kid's parade through North Sound, and a small carnival was still underway at the other end of the park. Deputy Bruce Taylor had just taken the concert stage and introduced his two sisters.

"Julie said the whole family is musical." Henry pared a piece of parmesan cheese and prosciutto from the little charcuterie board they'd bought at a food booth and popped it in his mouth. "I guess there's another brother too."

"Weird how it can run in families," said Cate, smearing apricot jam on a slice of cheese. She'd had only a third of her glass of wine but could already feel it in her toes.

Bruce sat down at the piano, and his sisters started to sing.

Goose bumps rose on Cate's skin. "My Lord," she mumbled with her mouth full of cheese. "They're amazing."

Bruce added his voice to the duo, and Cate wished she could turn up the volume. She and Henry listened in stunned silence.

The two of them needed this relaxation. Nothing had felt right since Rich Causey had died on the shore of the tiny empty island.

Henry had been relentless with the CPR that day. He and Cate had traded off for nearly an hour without a response from the man. They'd reluctantly stopped and sat with the body on the beach until Tessa and Logan had returned from rushing Ashlee to the hospital on Vancouver Island, crossing the Canadian border to get her to the closest medical center.

Ashlee had a baby girl that night. Both mother and daughter were healthy and had already returned to Oregon, to

the relief of Ashlee's parents.

Cate visited her in the hospital and got to hold the tiny red-haired girl. Ashlee cried as she told Cate about trying to get away from Rich Causey. "He rarely let me out of his sight," Ashlee said. "Sometimes he'd even tie me to a tree if he was going to be gone for a long period of time. The other women on the island were nice, but no one dared interfere."

"How did you get the package with Jade's bone to the store?" Cate asked.

"Rich took me with him that one time. He'd been selling my jewelry there for a while but took all the credit for creating it. I buttered up his ego by praising him for selling the work, and then I told him it was a lifelong dream to actually see my pieces in a store. He'd made me promise to not say a word to anyone while we were on the island." Ashlee looked wistful. "It was such a pretty little store, and I did love the way she'd arranged my pieces. I nearly cried when I saw it. I'd hoped to sneak the package into a mail drop once we were on the island, but he got angry about something, and I had to leave the package on the counter in the store before he noticed." She gave a small smile. "Most of my clothes didn't fit, so I was wearing a giant shirt of his. It was perfect for hiding things alongside my bulging stomach."

"He would have been furious if he'd known what you did," Cate said.

"I know." Ashlee paled. "But I knew time was getting short. He wasn't happy that I was pregnant, and I worried what would happen when the baby was born. I had to take the risk. Once I read all those articles he'd hidden, I was terrified for my baby's life." She reached out and stroked the hair of the little one in Cate's arms. "One of the articles said you'd retired and bought a bakery. Getting to that bakery was my only hope."

Cate remembered when the article was written. She'd been furious that the reporter had included her personal information, creating the potential to guide any criminal she'd

investigated to Widow's Island. Instead the article had saved the baby's life and probably Ashlee's too.

Everything does happen for a reason.

When Cate went with law enforcement to Rich Causey's island tent the day after the rescue, Cate was shown a wooden box. Inside were multiple articles about the missing child and Kori Causey's search for her daughter. A chill ran up her back when she saw her own name underlined multiple times in the articles. According to Ashlee, Rich was obsessed with the manhunt. He never talked about Jade, but he did talk nonstop about the federal agents he swore would never find him.

Ashlee put the story together when she'd found the box unlocked one day. Jade's tiny mandible was inside. Ashlee didn't know where the rest of the bones were, but she suspected that Rich had buried them and also moved them several times. He'd made "special trips" in the past, and she'd wondered about the dirt-covered shovel in his truck after each trip.

She'd also seen several pink hair clips in the box.

Cate had made sure they'd been returned to Kori, who would also receive the mandible once the investigation was closed. She'd told Cate she planned to have it cremated and Jade's ashes buried under a rosebush in her parents' yard.

Rich's death and Jade's remains brought closure to Kori. She said she'd known in her heart that her little girl hadn't survived. But having physical proof was an emotional relief. Kori and her parents listened closely as Cate told them how Rich Causey had died.

"Rich hated swimming," Kori said, a ferocious look in her eye. "I can't think of a better death for him than drowning. And I hope that Ashlee's kick to his head is what caused it. Good on her."

Cate hadn't brought up the kick with Ashlee. The young woman had little memory of the events in the water, other than being terrified she was about to die.

“Am I a horrible person for being happy he’s dead?” Ashlee whispered. “I was so stupid to leave with him. It’s my own fault that—”

“Stop,” Cate ordered. “He was a dangerous and cruel man. He is dead because of his own actions.” Ashlee nodded in response, but Cate knew the guilt would linger. She’d put in a word with Ashlee’s parents to find the young woman a good therapist.

I’ll never have to waste a thought on Rich Causey again.

Onstage at the park, Bruce and his sisters wrapped up the song, and the audience broke into loud applause and shouted for more. Henry’s voice was one of the loudest, and Cate was pleased to see him enjoying the music. He’d struggled through his own guilt from being unable to resuscitate Rich Causey, no matter how despicable a human being the man was.

The trio onstage started into another song, and the audience immediately quieted as the sound of a popular love ballad filled the air. Several couples stood and moved into each other’s arms to sway to the music. Henry jumped to his feet and held out a hand to Cate, his eyes intense with a deep emotion.

“Dance with me.”

She took his hand, lost in his eyes, and was suddenly in his arms. He held her close, one hand at the nape of her neck, his lips at her temple, and his other hand stroking her back.

Something relaxed far down in her chest, and she breathed deep, feeling herself unwind as he held her.

“We should dance more often,” he said, his mouth close to her ear, sending small shivers across her skin.

“I agree,” she murmured. “Maybe we can hire them for the wedding.”

“I’m not waiting five months to dance with you again.”

She chuckled. “Then we’ll have to make time. Maybe at the Harbor View on Thursday nights.”

He shuddered in her arms. “I refuse to dance to Herb’s oboe.”

“Not even with me?” She deliberately ran a finger across an erogenous zone on his neck.

He twitched at her touch. “Well . . . maybe.”

She laughed. “I love you. I won’t subject you to that.”

He exhaled and kissed her deeply. “Thank you. But you know I’d do anything for you. Especially if it means I get to hold you. Every cell in my body is deeply in love with you and your touch.”

Cate closed her eyes as subtle electrical chills touched her spine, a blessing from the island. She had complete confidence in their love.

We are forever.

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After writing ten Rogue River novellas, Melinda and I were ready to write about new characters and a new location. A trip to the beautiful San Juan Islands convinced us a Pacific Northwest island would be a fabulous setting for more mystery and murder, and the concept of Widow's Island was born. We carried over a couple of characters from Rogue River—we weren't ready to leave it completely behind. Thank you to Montlake and our editor, Anh Schlupe, for their enthusiasm about this project. Thank you to Charlotte Herscher for helping us sound like we know what we're doing. Thank you to our readers, who loved our first novella series and constantly begged for more. We hope you enjoy Widow's Island as much as we do.

Kendra Elliot

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Kendra Elliot has landed on the *Wall Street Journal* bestseller list multiple times and is the award-winning author of the Bone Secrets and Callahan & McLane series, the Mercy Kilpatrick novels, and the Columbia River novels. She's a three-time winner of the Daphne du Maurier Award, an International Thriller Writers Award finalist, and an RT Award finalist. She has always been a voracious reader, cutting her teeth on classic female heroines such as Nancy Drew, Trixie Belden, and Laura Ingalls. She was born and raised in the rainy Pacific Northwest with her family but now lives in flip-flops. Visit her at www.kendraelliot.com.