



A BONE TO PICK

WIDOW'S ISLAND
NOVELLA 2

MELINDA
LEIGH

A
BONE
TO **PICK**

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Montlake
Romance

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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. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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1

“Where did the screams come from, ma’am?” Deputy Tessa Black stood under the porch overhang. The night wind whipped dead leaves around her boots.

“Over there.” In the open doorway, Mrs. Driver lifted one hand from her walker and pointed behind Tessa.

Tessa glanced over her shoulder. On the other side of a quarter-acre field, the thick forest of the state park abutted Mrs. Driver’s property. Lights shining from the house couldn’t penetrate the darkness. Everything beyond the tree line was inky black. Tessa cocked her head and listened intently, but all she heard was the wind rustling through branches.

“What time did you hear them?” Tessa asked.

“Twenty minutes ago.” Mrs. Driver’s eyes narrowed with reproach. “I called you immediately.”

The *What took you so long?* was implied.

Tessa had been on call, not on duty, when the complaint had come in. She’d been on the road in less than three minutes. But navigating tight switchbacks in the dark had taken time. Slow emergency response time was a part of life that every resident of Widow’s Island well knew. But that fact never stopped anyone from complaining.

An owl screeched, the high-pitched sound startling Tessa.

She blew out a breath. “Could you have heard an animal?”

Mrs. Driver lifted an indignant chin. Despite standing barely five feet tall, including her fluffy white curls, the old woman managed to look down her nose. "I've lived on this island all my life. I know what I heard. It was no animal. It was a person screaming." She pursed her lips, concentrating. "A man, I think." She nodded. "Yes. I'm almost certain it was a man."

Could she have heard teenagers?

The state park beach, a popular hangout spot, was close by.

"Have you seen or heard anything else tonight?" Tessa asked. "Motorcycles or quads?"

"No." With a shudder, Mrs. Driver lowered her hand and clutched the edges of her blue robe together. "But I heard more than a single yell. The screaming went on for a full minute or two. It sounded so . . . terrible." She paused, her lips puckering with wrinkles as she pressed them together. "Bloodcurdling."

Goose bumps lifted on Tessa's arms. "I'll check it out. Be sure to lock your door, ma'am."

"Yes. I will. Thank you," Mrs. Driver said solemnly. Then she shuffled her walker backward and closed the door.

Tessa turned away from the house. As she stepped off the porch, she heard the dead bolt slide home with a metallic scrape. She walked to her county-issued SUV in the driveway. Across the street, a spotlight shone on the wooden arch that marked the entrance to Bishop State Park. Beyond it, the forest was murky and black. Tessa had no desire to traipse through it alone in the dark.

Three deputies lived on Widow's Island, including Tessa. Veteran deputy Kurt Olson was off the island tonight. His daughter had had a baby earlier in the day at the mainland hospital. Bruce Taylor, a new hire from Oregon, was on duty, but he had been tied up with a vehicle accident when Mrs. Driver's call had come in. There would be no backup for Tessa from the sheriff's department.

Other than the tiny satellite sheriff's station, the only other emergency service unit located on Widow's Island was a two-bay fire station manned entirely by volunteers. There was no hospital, no urgent care, and no ambulance. The community had only recently replaced the doctor who had died ages ago. The sheriff's deputies served as first responders to any situation one of the five thousand island residents considered urgent. Since Tessa had left the Seattle PD eighteen months before and joined the local sheriff's department, she'd handled everything from loose sheep to drug overdoses to domestic violence.

Tessa eyed the woods again. She was no coward, but neither was she foolish. She slid into the SUV, took her phone out of her pocket, and called state park ranger Logan Wilde. The ranger's station sat near the park entrance, with the ranger's residence just behind it. At nearly midnight, Logan would likely be in his cabin.

"Logan, it's Tessa." She explained about Mrs. Driver's report of a man screaming. "Did you hear anything strange around eleven thirty?"

"I don't know." His voice sounded rough. "Maybe."

Maybe?

She wanted to press him for an explanation, but the harshness of his tone stopped her, and she wished she could read his face and body language. Her interrogation experience had taught her that some questions were better left to in-person discussions.

He cleared his throat. "It was probably kids. If they're not drinking on the beach, they're parking in the woods or ripping up the trails on their quads. I can't run them out of the park fast enough."

"Especially on a warm night."

Widow's Island was located in the same sun belt as the San Juan Islands. Shielded by the Olympic Mountains, it received about half the precipitation of Seattle. But even for

the temperate island, early December had been unusually warm and pleasant.

“Yes,” Logan agreed. “I’ll check out the most likely spots and let you know if I see anyone.”

Tessa remembered Mrs. Driver’s shudder. The older woman was not a frequent complainer. She had definitely heard something. “I’m going with you. I’ll meet you at the clearing.”

She dropped the phone on the console, backed out of the driveway, and headed toward the park. Fog crawled across the road as she drove under the arch. A half mile down the tract, Tessa turned into a small gravel parking lot and lifted her foot off the gas pedal. A familiar Jetta sat near the entrance to the trail.

Tessa backed into a parking spot across the lot from the old car so that her headlights shone on the license plate. She recognized the **MAY THE FOREST BE WITH YOU** bumper sticker. The Jetta belonged to Jerry Hooper, the owner of the local pot shop and a lifelong friend of her mother’s. The car was older than Tessa, but Jerry didn’t drive it often. Worry twisted in Tessa’s belly. Since her mother’s dementia had accelerated, Jerry had ridden his mountain bike to the house weekly to deliver new holistic treatment options. He was a nice man. A little weird, but nice. She pulled out her cell phone and called his house, but he didn’t answer, which wasn’t unusual. Jerry believed constant connectivity was killing mankind. He also refused to put a cell phone anywhere near his brain.

The park closed at dusk. What would he be doing out here in the middle of the night? Like Tessa’s mom, Jerry was a nature-loving, crunchy, hippie type. Maybe his vehicle had broken down earlier and he’d left it to retrieve the next day. Tessa hoped the screaming Mrs. Driver had reported hadn’t come from Jerry.

Don’t jump to conclusions.

Chances were that Jerry was just fine. Who knew what Mrs. Driver had heard?

Tessa stepped out of her SUV and opened the rear cargo door. She opened the backpack she kept in her vehicle and checked the contents. She kept it loaded with everything from protein bars to Mylar emergency blankets and evidence collection bags. After zipping the pack closed, she grabbed warm gloves and slid a camera into her pocket. She wasn't planning on a long hike, but one did not go into the five-thousand-acre park without being prepared.

Headlights swept across the parking area, and a dented Range Rover slid into the next space. Logan climbed out of his vehicle and walked toward her. Tall and rangy, he wore dark cargo pants, hiking boots, and a dark-green jacket with the Washington State Forest Ranger patch on the bicep. He entered the pool of light cast by her vehicle.

He was the older brother of her best friend, Cate. A former army ranger, he'd left the military and returned home two months ago. Tessa had known him for most of her life. She'd even had a crush on him as a teen. But this wasn't the same man who had left the island a decade before to join the army. Logan's once-shaggy black hair was shorn close to his head, and his body had toughened, leaving his tanned face looking almost gaunt. But it wasn't the physical changes that stood out for Tessa. It was the absence of his easy smile. This Logan was darker, the expression in his blue eyes harder in a way she couldn't quite define.

But then, her life had taken unexpected, unwanted turns as well.

Logan gestured toward the Jetta. "Someone's here."

"It's Jerry Hooper's vehicle." Tessa switched on her flashlight.

"Let's see if we can find him." Logan started toward the entrance to the trail that led to the beach.

Tessa stopped at the edge of the gravel and directed her light on the ground. “The ground is too dry for footprints.”

Tessa and Logan walked in silence down the trail, pausing when it opened onto Broad Beach. Moonlight shimmered on the water and brightened the sand. Tessa lowered her flashlight and scanned the beach, but she saw no one.

Logan pointed ahead. “Let’s try the picnic area.”

He turned left and walked parallel to the shoreline. Tessa followed him, her ears straining for sounds over the roll of surf in the darkness. The wind blew off the water, shifting the sea spray into her face. Every footstep that brought her closer to the picnic area also lifted the hairs on the back of her neck. Something was wrong. She could feel it. Under her uniform, her skin felt more sensitive, prickling. Her bones hummed with warning, as if every cell of her body sensed danger.

They walked past a curved rock outcropping that formed a small cove. The quieter waters hosted a public boat ramp and dock. Just before the tree line, the picnic area faced the cove. Branches arced over the sand, casting deep shadows. They approached the wooden picnic tables. The wind shifted, and Tessa caught an alarming scent. Her steps hesitated, and her brain screamed, *Turn around!* It was a wet, raw smell.

Like fresh meat.

She swept her flashlight in a slow semicircle. Her beam fell upon a pair of boots. Tessa raised the flashlight and nearly dropped it. She almost didn’t believe what was right in front of her. For her last couple of years with the Seattle PD, she’d been a detective. She’d seen dead bodies. But this . . .

Her stomach lurched. This was nothing like she’d ever seen in her eleven-year law enforcement career.

Logan said something unintelligible, and his voice dropped off with a choking sound. Tessa's throat went too dry to speak.

Directly ahead of her, on the sign that listed the items prohibited in the park, the body of a man had been impaled by a harpoon.

She and Logan simply stared for a few heartbeats, the beam of her light locked on the blood-soaked jacket and the spear protruding from the middle of the victim's torso.

Then Tessa shook off her shock. She approached the body and pressed two fingers to the side of the neck. No pulse, not that she had expected one. But she had to be sure. She took two steps back. She wouldn't touch the body again until after the coroner had seen him.

Tessa shone her light on the victim's face.

"That's not Jerry," Logan said. "Do you know who it is?"

"Yes," Tessa answered, her stomach turning.

Widow's Island was a small community. Outside of the tourist season, newcomers were noticed. Heck, everyone and everything was noticed and noted.

She opened her mouth to answer. A twig snapped in the forest, the sound seeming as loud as a gunshot. Adrenaline shot through Tessa's bloodstream. Sweat rushed from her pores and dampened her chilled skin. She drew her sidearm.

Next to her, Logan pulled his weapon from its holster.

Tessa held her flashlight in one hand and her gun in the other. Logan positioned himself at her left flank. As a unit, they moved out of the open and into the trees. Tessa skimmed her flashlight over the dark woods, scanning for a human form.

The foliage rustled. Tessa pivoted. She aimed her gun and flashlight at the noise. Her heart sprinted, the beats echoing in her ears and drowning out the sounds of the forest. The beam of her light gleamed on three pairs of eyeballs. Three tiny black-tailed deer spun away and bounded through the trees.

Tessa breathed. Her lungs felt as tight as spandex.

Logan exhaled. "Damn deer."

They swept a semicircle around the picnic area, then returned to the body.

"Whoever did this is probably long gone." But Logan did not immediately holster his weapon.

Neither did Tessa.

They stood back to back, as if Logan was also thinking that the killer could still be out there in the dark. It was not possible to search the entire area, not without substantial backup, and the small satellite sheriff's station didn't possess enough portable lights.

If she had still been in Seattle, Tessa would have called in a forensic unit, a dozen uniforms, and a K-9 team. But this was Widow's Island. Assistance was hours away, available only via ferry, private boat, or helicopter.

But the death did need to be reported and investigated. Tessa would start with the coroner. She pulled her phone from her pocket. "I'll call Henry."

Dr. Henry Powers was the new doctor on Widow's Island. Much to his surprise, he'd inherited the job of coroner along with the family practice he'd taken over.

She woke Henry and gave him the location and details of the death. Then she called the sheriff on the mainland. Widow's Island was remote, and the deputies on the island had learned to function independently. His line went to voice mail, and Tessa left a message.

"Henry is on his way." She turned her attention back to the body. Her light traveled over the victim. He wore a puffy down jacket in pale blue and dark skinny jeans. A camera case lay on the ground at his feet. His heeled boots were more fashion than function. They belonged in the city, not in the Pacific Northwest wilderness.

But then, so did he.

Sadness filled her as she studied his face. He'd been handsome—pretty, even—with a long, slim face and tousled

hair that fell just below his ears.

“His name is Dante,” she said. “I don’t remember his last name. He hasn’t lived on the island long, less than a year.”

“Has he been in any trouble?” Logan asked.

“No.” Tessa shook her head. “He is—was an artist. He painted landscapes of the island and sold them in Rachel Abbott’s shop in town. He lived in the converted barn behind Jerry’s house. He must have borrowed Jerry’s Jetta. He seemed friendly enough with Rachel and Jerry. I’ve never heard any complaints about him from anyone else either.”

So why would someone drive a harpoon into his chest?

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Logan had seen terrible things in the Middle East.

Things he would like to forget.

Unfortunately, his imagination liked to remind him when he closed his eyes. But he'd never expected to see something this barbaric on Widow's Island. He'd returned home specifically hoping to escape this kind of brutality. His nightmares had subsided since he'd come back to the secluded island. He'd thought he'd finally left the horrors behind, but maybe peace was out of his reach for good. The world—and his perspective of it—had changed. There was no escaping the ugliness.

His gaze snapped back to the dead man and the harpoon speared through his body. With his legs gone limp in death, the victim dangled like a gaffed fish.

"He's young." Memories intruded into Logan's head. Other young men, bloody and dead, covered in Afghan dust. He brushed the images away and glanced at Tessa. Her initial shock had faded. She was all business now and handling the situation far better than he was, although the ambient light from his flashlight revealed shadows under her eyes.

Deep shadows that spoke of more than one night of missed sleep.

He'd known her forever—she'd been his younger sister's best friend since birth—and he was having a hard time reconciling his mental image of a long-legged teenage

girl in denim cutoffs with the grown woman and seasoned cop in front of him.

Her blonde hair fell to her shoulders, framing an oval face and intelligent blue eyes. They hadn't seen each other much over the past decade. He'd been away most of the last ten or so years, and Tessa had been working in Seattle. His trips home had been few and far between, and he'd spent his precious leave time with his grandmother.

Yet the connection between him and Tessa was as solid as if they'd never been apart.

The flash of a camera jolted him back to the present. Tessa had a camera in her hand and was photographing the scene. She started with the body, taking pictures from different angles and distances, then began capturing the rest of the area.

She lowered the camera. "I wanted to ask you a question. When I called you and asked if you'd heard anything around eleven thirty, you said *maybe*."

"Something woke me. I'm not sure what it was." Logan turned away. He hadn't talked about what had happened on his last mission with anyone except the army psychiatrist.

"Mrs. Driver said the screaming went on for a minute or so," Tessa pressed. "If it woke you, how did you not hear it?"

"I don't know." Irritated, he enunciated each word clearly.

Tessa raised an eyebrow. "I've known you my entire life, and I can see through that excuse." Her brow fell, and she reached out to lay a hand on his forearm, as if she sensed his pain. "If you don't want to tell me, and the reason has nothing to do with the case, then say so. I won't pry."

The hard thing about being with people who knew him inside and out was the inability to bullshit them, which was one of the reasons he'd mostly kept to himself since returning to the island.

Her touch and her compassion broke his determination to banish the memory. A slideshow of images rushed

through his head. The explosion had nearly knocked him off his feet. He'd fought his way through the rush of people spilling from the wrecked building, trying to get inside to help evacuate the wounded. He'd scooped up the first victim he'd come across, a little girl covered in blood, and clutched her to his chest. But he hadn't been able to save her. She'd bled out before he'd reached the triage area. Through the whole event, the only sound that had penetrated the ringing in his ears had been the victims' screams.

But Tessa didn't need to hear the whole gruesome story, and he certainly didn't need to tell it.

"When I first came back from my last mission, I had nightmares," he said simply. "I wasn't sure if the screams were real or in my head."

"I'm sorry." Tessa squeezed his arm. "If you ever want to talk about it . . ."

"I don't." He didn't even want to remember it.

"Well, I'm here if you change your mind," she said in a quiet voice. "And thank you for telling me."

He nodded, his posture so rigid that the motion was almost painful.

Her phone beeped.

"Excuse me." She released his arm and turned away to answer the call.

At first, he was grateful for the interruption, but he wasn't prepared to miss her touch. He'd avoided personal contact as much as possible for the past two months. Was he ready to return to the human race?

Or was Tessa different?

This is not the time.

Logan turned his attention to the ground. The sandy soil showed no footprints. He broadened the beam of his flashlight. Cigarette butts littered the ground. Empty water bottles and other random bits of trash were lying around the garbage can.

Tessa finished her phone call. "Henry is in the parking lot. He's walking down, and Bruce is on the way as well. He's bringing portable lights."

She returned to photographing the body.

Ten minutes later, Henry carried a plastic tackle box into the clearing. Logan's sister, Cate, was with him, which was not a surprise. She and the doctor had been dating for the past few weeks. Tessa lowered her camera and hugged Cate.

"I thought you could use an extra hand," Cate said to Tessa. "Since Kurt is on the mainland."

"Is that a harpoon?" Henry gaped at the body for a split second before shaking his head. He hadn't been the coroner for very long, but the doctor's Los Angeles ER trauma experience seemed to serve him well. "Does anyone know the victim?"

"Yes." Tessa walked toward the body with the coroner and told him what she knew. "Can you estimate the time of death? We had a report of screaming called in at eleven thirty."

Henry took out a pair of gloves. "Are you finished taking pictures?"

"Yes," Tessa said.

Henry folded his arms across his chest, scratched his chin, and stared at the corpse. "I can't examine him like this. Let's get him down."

"I've been thinking about how best to do that," Tessa said. "We don't want to disturb the entry or exit wounds. We'll take the whole sign down and cut it so that it fits in the body bag."

"Sounds like the best option." Henry snapped the gloves onto his hands.

"I'd leave the harpoon in the body," Cate added. "And simply disconnect the shaft."

Logan had a disconcerting moment as he realized that his baby sister was experienced in investigating murders.

He'd known she was an FBI agent, but he'd never seen her in action.

The fact that both Cate and Tessa had grown up to enter law enforcement was not an accident. As little girls, they'd had a third best friend, Samantha Bishop, who had gone missing at the age of fourteen. Her jacket had been found at Widow's Walk, a bluff that overlooked a sheer cliff and a long drop to the rocks and churning sea below. Her body had never been found. At the time, nearly twenty years ago, the sheriff and FBI had presumed she'd fallen and been swept out to sea.

Neither Tessa nor Cate had ever recovered from their friend's disappearance. Tessa had joined the Seattle PD, and Cate had become an FBI agent. Both women now dedicated their lives to solving crime.

"I have tools in my vehicle." Logan jogged across the sand and up the trail to the parking area. He removed his tool kit and crowbar from the cargo area of his Range Rover and returned to the scene. He and Henry used the crowbar to pry the sign from its post. As they tried to lower it to the ground, the body came free. Logan caught it before it crumpled to the ground.

"He wasn't actually staked to the sign," Henry said as he examined the back of the corpse. "The harpoon doesn't go all the way through his body. It looks like he was pushed back against the sign, and his jacket got hung up on the post."

They laid the body on its back. The harpoon jutted straight up from below the breastbone.

As he crouched next to the body, Henry took the dead man's head in his hands and turned it from side to side. He opened the corpse's mouth and manipulated the jaw. "Rigor mortis hasn't set in yet."

Logan shot Tessa a questioning look. He'd seen plenty of combat violence and trauma, but this was his first homicide scene. "When does rigor typically start?"

She moved to stand next to him and leaned close. "About two hours after death, though cold temperatures can slow the onset."

Henry removed a boot and sock. "Livor mortis is not visible yet either."

"Once the heart stops beating," Tessa explained to Logan in a low voice, "the blood begins to pool in the lowest part of a dead body."

"Gravity," Logan said.

"Exactly." Tessa nodded. "The skin takes on a purplish discoloration that should be observable by the human eye about two hours after death. But again, ambient temperature can affect the process."

Henry examined the exterior of the wound with a flashlight and gloved hands. "He'll need an autopsy, but from the position of the harpoon, it likely hit the aorta. There isn't much blood outside the wound, but I'll bet his belly is full of it."

He picked up his scalpel, cut a slit in the corpse's side, and inserted a thermometer.

"He's taking the liver temperature," she explained.

Henry read the thermometer, then checked his watch. "It's 1:01 a.m. now. I estimate he's been dead between ninety minutes and two hours."

"Could the screaming at 11:30 p.m. have been him?" Logan asked, the single beer he'd drunk earlier that evening souring in his gut as he remembered the hair-raising sound that had jarred him from his sleep.

"Yes. It's possible." Henry looked up, his face grim. "I doubt the wound killed him instantly. It probably took a few minutes for him to bleed to death."

Imagining those few terrible minutes, Logan swallowed a surge of bile in his throat.

Tessa squatted down next to the body. She patted the man's pockets and pulled a wallet from his jacket. She

shined her light on the open wallet. Logan looked over her shoulder.

“His full name is Dante Moreno.” Tessa straightened.

Henry stood. “My office isn’t outfitted to perform an autopsy. It’s barely equipped to be a doctor’s office. We’ll send the body to the regional medical examiner on the mainland.”

“The ferry wasn’t running this afternoon,” Logan said.

“Again?” Henry asked. “It was out three days last week.”

The Widow’s Island ferry to the mainland ran like clockwork, except for the days that it didn’t run at all. Locals were used to being isolated. As the islanders always said, no one complained until the Black Tail Bakery ran out of coffee.

“Welcome to island living.” Tessa slid the wallet into an evidence bag. She stripped off her gloves and stuffed them into their own bag. Then she pulled out her phone. “Let me make a few calls. Keep an eye out for Dante’s cell phone.”

After she stepped away, Logan studied the corpse. “Harpooning isn’t the easiest way to kill a man, and no one carries a harpoon around. The killer had to bring the harpoon to the beach. That suggests premeditation. But did the killer know the artist would be here or lure him here? Either way, this feels very personal to me.”

“Whoever killed him was very angry,” his sister added, her lips pressed into a thin line. “Which could make the motive very personal.”

Logan might not have been a crime scene expert, but his years as an army ranger had taught him plenty about rage and violence.

“How hard is it to use a harpoon?” Henry asked.

Logan considered the question. “The dart on the end of a harpoon is sharp, and the head is weighted for optimal leverage. It’s a tool specifically designed to be thrust or thrown into flesh. I’d say its use is more dependent on momentum and coordination than pure strength.”

Tessa lowered her phone. "The ferry should be up and running in the morning. The funeral home will transport the body to the mainland."

"Do you want to fingerprint the body here or let the medical examiner do it?" Henry asked.

Tessa frowned, her forehead creasing as she considered the questions. "Let's not disturb his hands. We know who he is. If he struggled with his killer, there could be DNA or other evidence under his fingernails."

Henry nodded. "Then we should protect his hands with paper bags."

Tessa agreed. "You've been studying."

"I don't like to half ass any job." Henry had worked his first case as coroner just a few weeks before. He'd made one mistake and seemed determined not to make any more.

Tessa stared at the corpse. "I don't see how it could possibly have been a suicide or accident, which leaves manslaughter and murder."

"Not many people go for a late-night stroll on the beach with a harpoon in hand," Cate added.

"As Logan already pointed out," Tessa said as she gestured toward the body, "this was premeditated."

Henry said, "This was murder."

"Let's get the scene processed." Tessa blew a stray hair from her forehead. In the light cast by various flashlights, Logan watched tension gather at the corners of her eyes as she sent a text.

I should make myself useful.

Logan turned in a circle and scanned the picnic area and the dark forest beyond. As park rangers were responsible for enforcing the law within the park, his training had included classes in basic criminal investigation. "Do you have more evidence collection bags?"

Tessa paused, looking up. "Yes. There's a lot of ground to cover. We'll start with the picnic area tonight. Searching the surrounding woods will have to wait until daybreak." She

shrugged off her backpack and set it on the picnic table farthest from the body. She removed some small paper and plastic bags and handed them to him, along with a pair of vinyl gloves. “We’ll bag everything. Bruce will be here any minute with the lights.”

Nodding, Logan tugged on the gloves.

Her phone beeped. She frowned at the display, then said, “Excuse me,” and stepped away, pressing the phone to her ear. She paced, ending one call and making another. When she returned a few minutes later, her eyes were troubled.

“What’s wrong?” asked Cate.

“That was my sister.” Tessa had a much younger half sister from her mother’s most recent marriage. “Mom isn’t in the house.”

“Does she wander away often?” Logan asked.

“No. This is the first time.” Tessa frowned. “She’s usually a homebody.”

Logan remembered Bonnie Turner-Black-Flagg as erratic, undependable, and—as a three-time widow—unlucky. He hadn’t been surprised to find out that Bonnie was suffering from dementia—or that Tessa had given up her career in Seattle to return home to care for her mother and raise her teenage half sister after husband number three had suffered a massive fatal heart attack.

No wonder Tessa looked tired.

“I’ll round up your mom,” Cate said. “She can’t have gotten far.”

“Are you sure?” Tessa asked, her eyes relieved.

“Of course.” Cate pressed a hand to Tessa’s forearm. “You’d do the same for me.”

Tessa sighed. “Your grandmother would never take off in the middle of the night. She’s too sensible.”

“That she is.” Cate held out her hand. “Henry, can I take your vehicle?”

“Yes.” He stripped off a glove to toss her the keys. “I’ll get a ride home.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” Tessa said to Cate.

“It’s not a problem. I’m glad to help.” Keys in hand, Cate turned away.

“I’ll walk you to the parking lot.” Logan fell into step beside his sister.

“You don’t need to do that. I’m armed.” The keys jingled in Cate’s hand. “But thank you.”

“You might be a badass FBI agent, but you’re still my baby sister.” Gun or no gun, there was no way Logan was letting his sister—or any other woman—walk through the forest in the dark.

Not with a vicious killer on the loose.

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3

Tessa trudged up the porch steps of the cottage she'd grown up in. Her mom was inside, safe. Cate had texted that she'd found her within an hour of leaving the crime scene.

Tessa crossed the raw boards she'd recently replaced but hadn't had time to paint. The house was a bit worn but comfortable, like an old pair of jeans. A squawk from the backyard stopped her midstride. She might as well feed the chickens before she showered.

She changed into the knee-high rubber boots she kept on the front porch and walked around the corner of the house. A coop sat in the corner of a wire-and-wood enclosure the size of a volleyball court. Tessa grabbed a bucket of feed and pushed through the wire entrance, then closed the door behind her. A dozen chickens pecked at the ground. Tessa spread the feed and checked the water. A motion to her left caught her attention. She spun as a large golden chicken darted out of the coop and headed straight for her like a velociraptor.

Tessa jumped. "Shit!"

She bolted out of the enclosure, then closed and latched the door with her heart still hammering. She pointed at the hen. "Don't get too cocky. I could cook you for Sunday dinner."

The hen strutted past the door, obviously aware that Tessa would do no such thing.

Back on the porch, she toed off her rubber boots. Tessa went inside in her socks, stripped off her jacket, and hung it

on the coat-tree in the foyer.

She stepped into the kitchen. Exhaustion muddied her thoughts, and her head felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. She wanted a hot shower, a gallon of coffee, and a dozen donuts.

Cate sat at the kitchen table, reading a file. She looked up. "What happened?"

"Killer Hen scared the hell out of me. Again. Chickens are a giant pain in the butt."

"I doubt you'd have any trouble selling them. Backyard chickens are the new black."

Widow's Islanders liked their hobby farms. They raised everything from chickens to alpacas.

"As weird as it sounds, my mother loves those chickens. It would break her heart." Tessa would not take a single source of joy from her mother, not when she was already losing everything. "It wouldn't be so bad if that alpha hen didn't hate me so much."

Cate coughed, clearly covering a grin. "I made coffee."

"Thank you." Tessa took her stainless steel travel mug from the cabinet. She wouldn't be at home for long. "And thanks for staying with my mom."

"You're welcome."

"Did Patience leave for school on time?" Tessa drank deeply, wishing for a faster way to get caffeine into her system.

"Almost," Cate admitted. "This morning was a scramble. In her defense, she was up late, helping me settle your mother."

Tessa turned and leaned on the counter. "Where did you find Mom?"

Cate looked away. "Walking north on Orcas Road."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No." Cate shook her head. "She didn't seem to know."

Sadness rolled through Tessa. She glanced at the clock on the oven. "How can it be ten o'clock already?"

“It was a big scene to process,” Cate said.

“Yes, it was.”

Tessa, Logan, and Bruce had labeled and bagged every piece of possible evidence, from empty bottles to cigarette butts, and then had transported everything back to the station. Each item had to be logged in. Bruce had still been working on sorting through the rubble when Tessa had left.

“What are you going to do about your mother?” Cate asked.

“I don’t know.” Tessa rubbed the back of her neck. “Up until now, she’s been okay here by herself until Patience gets home at two thirty. In fact, she’s been generally lucid in the daytime. Her mental state declines in the evening. Henry called it Sundowner syndrome. But I have to reassess Mom’s needs. I can’t have her wandering.”

“How is the new med Henry wanted you to try?”

“It’s too soon to know if it’s working.” Tessa was grateful to have a doctor on the island. Her mother did not like to leave Widow’s.

“How is Patience coping?”

“Not well. She’s upset and stressed. I’m asking too much of her, but I don’t have many options.” Tessa was spread too thin. Her mother could have been hurt last night. What if she’d headed for Widow’s Walk and fallen over the edge?

Tessa’s stomach turned as she thought of Samantha—and of the sea crashing on the rocks at the bottom of the cliff.

“I can hang out here until Patience gets home from school,” Cate offered.

“Thank you.”

But Cate’s help was temporary. There was no senior center on the island. No nursing homes, although that would be an absolute last resort for Tessa. The doctor had warned her that the day might come when Tessa could no longer

keep her mother safe. But Tessa would do what she could to keep Mom at home as long as possible.

But today, she had a murder to investigate. Her mother's medical expenses would no doubt start piling up. Tessa was going to need her job.

"I'm going to take a quick shower and put on clean clothes." She refilled her mug and took her coffee with her. The bedrooms were at the back of the house. Outside her mother's room, she turned the knob, careful not to make any noise, and opened the door an inch.

"Hello, sweetheart." Her mother sat up. She had always been a light sleeper.

"Hi, Mom." Tessa walked in and stood next to the bed.

"I must have overslept." Her mother reached for the lamp on her nightstand.

Does she not remember wandering off last night?

Tessa couldn't think about the long-term prognosis. She'd be grateful that today, Mom was safe. Tomorrow's problems would come soon enough. "I have to go to work, but Cate's in the kitchen."

"Is she?" Her mom swung her legs over the side of the bed. She steadied herself with a hand on the bed as she stood, then put on a robe. "I'd better get moving."

Tessa closed the door and continued to her own room. She took a five-minute shower, then put on a fresh uniform. After a long, wet night, nothing felt better than dry socks. She heard the shower running in her mother's bathroom when she walked down the hall to the kitchen. A basket of fresh cinnamon rolls sat on the table in front of Cate.

Salivating, Tessa slid into a chair. "Are those your grandmother's cinnamon rolls?"

"She just dropped them off." Cate pushed the basket toward Tessa. "She was sorry she couldn't stay, but her knitting group is headed to the town council meeting to protest the proposed changes to the ferry schedule."

Cate's grandmother had been the head of the Widow's Knitting and Activist group for as long as Tessa could remember.

"The council only wants to shift one route by an hour." Tessa shoved half a cinnamon bun into her mouth. The warm sweetness melted on her tongue and brought back happy memories of sitting at Cate's grandmother's kitchen table. Jane Sutton was still a special lady.

Cate shrugged. "You know islanders don't like change, even if they know deep down that it's for the better."

Chewing the second half of her cinnamon roll, Tessa turned her head to read the label of the file on the table. "Is that Sam's FBI file?"

"Yes."

A few weeks before, the discovery of a child's bones had renewed interest in their friend's disappearance. The bones hadn't been Sam's, but her mother had pleaded with Cate and Tessa to reopen the case, which was the reason Cate had requested and reviewed the FBI's file. Mrs. Bishop had never believed—or had been unable to face—the fact that her daughter was dead.

Tessa washed down her roll with coffee. "The file looks thin."

Cate frowned in agreement. "Do you remember the talk we had in front of our lockers the day Sam disappeared?"

As if it were yesterday.

Tessa nodded. "She wanted us to sneak out with her that night. She had pot and was getting a ride from someone. Neither one of us was willing to break the rules to go with her."

They were both silent for a moment.

"If one of us had either been willing to go, or to tell on her . . ." Cate left the implication hanging, but Tessa knew exactly what she meant.

Would Sam still be alive if she hadn't gone out alone that night?

“We were fourteen,” Tessa said. “We can’t blame ourselves for what happened to Sam.”

Cate nodded. “My brain knows that.”

“But the heart isn’t so easily convinced,” Tessa finished.

Cate rested her hand flat on the closed file. “Copies of our interviews with the sheriff are not in the file. Nor is there any mention of the fact that Sam was going to meet someone.”

Shock pushed Tessa back in her chair. “I remember telling the sheriff.”

“We both did. We talked about it afterward.” Cate’s eyes were grim. “Was the FBI agent there when the sheriff questioned you?”

“I remember two other men being in the room.” Tessa closed her eyes and tried to recall the interview—the hard chair under her butt, her stomach churning, her heart knocking, dread gathering like a tornado in her chest. Opening her eyes, Tessa blinked the memory away. She wiped clammy palms on her thighs. It had been a truly horrible day. “But I can only picture the sheriff. The other faces are a blur.”

Cate sighed. “That’s all I remember too. It feels as if the other men were strangers.”

“Didn’t the sheriff note who else was present during the interview?”

“He did not.” Reproach sharpened Cate’s voice.

Tessa rubbed her temple. “I’ll request the file from the sheriff’s office. Cold case files are stored in the mainland station’s basement. Maybe the sheriff didn’t share all of our statements with the FBI. He could have looked into it on his own.”

“That’s possible. The previous sheriff had been old school. He might have been territorial about the FBI sticking its nose into his case.” Cate toyed with the edge of the file. “How will Sheriff Griffin feel about you pulling the case file?”

“I don’t see why he would object. It wasn’t his case.” Tessa did a quick calculation in her head. “Sheriff Griffin wasn’t even with the department back then.”

“Let’s not tell Sam’s mother yet,” Cate suggested.

“I agree. She’s never left that house in case Sam were to come back.” Tessa thought for a moment and then continued, her voice thick. “Other than Sheriff Griffin, no one needs to know what we’re doing.”

“We’re just reading files for now.” But Cate’s voice echoed the doubt in Tessa’s own mind.

There’s more to Sam’s disappearance than we were told.

Tessa could feel it.

She stood and stretched a kink out of her back. “Now I’d better get back to my current murder.” She went to the counter and filled her travel mug with fresh coffee. Then she grabbed another cinnamon bun and a napkin. “Please thank your grandmother for the rolls.”

“Will do.” Cate reached for another bun. “I’m going to need bigger jeans if I don’t stop eating these.”

“You and me both.” Tessa laughed.

She went into the foyer and grabbed her uniform jacket. Then she went out onto the porch and stepped into her boots. Shrugging into her jacket, she walked to her vehicle and slid behind the wheel.

She should head to Dante’s residence now to search the premises. But as she prepared to turn out of her driveway, her phone beeped with a text from Bruce: *FOUND SOMETHING.*

She’d stop at the station before searching Dante’s home.

Tessa drove in the opposite direction to the tiny satellite sheriff’s station in town. The small building housed two desks, a restroom, and a single holding cell. A minifridge and microwave crammed into the corner were the only concessions to the deputies’ personal comfort.

She went inside. Crime scene evidence cluttered one desk. At the other, Bruce studied a driver's license through a magnifier under a goosenecked desk lamp. His rumpled uniform looked like the same one he had been wearing the previous night at the crime scene.

He looked up as she passed the desk. He was clean cut and young looking, but his brown eyes were older than his years. "I've been looking through Dante's wallet. He has an Oregon driver's license."

"Maybe he forgot to get a new one when he moved here." But she'd thought Dante's accent had sounded like he was from the East Coast.

"It's also fake."

"Are you sure?" Tessa hung her jacket on a peg on the wall. She crossed the small space to look over Bruce's shoulder.

"I'm sure." He turned over the license and pointed. "No microprint."

Shocked, Tessa leaned closer and followed the tip of his finger.

Microprint was a security feature on driver's licenses from most states. To the naked eye, microprint appeared to be a solid line, but when magnified, text was easily readable. The back of Dante's Oregon driver's license should have had a microprint line repeating the word *Oregon*, with the last occurrence of *Oregon* intentionally spelled incorrectly.

"Well, damn." She straightened.

"It's a pretty good fake, though." Bruce set the license on the desk.

"But why did he have one? And who was he?" Tessa paced to the empty holding cell and back. "Call the medical examiner's office, and let them know the name of the deceased is now in question. If the dead man is in the system, it won't take the ME long to get his real identity."

The medical examiner should be able to electronically submit the fingerprints into the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS).

“Have you found anything else?” Tessa scanned the evidence laid out on the spare desk.

“Not yet.” Bruce gestured to the organized piles. “I’ll keep at it.”

“Kurt should be back soon. He’ll help. Don’t forget to take a break. We don’t have many deputies, and we all work overtime when necessary, but you need to eat and sleep. And I’m sure your fiancée would like to see you at some point.” Tessa gave the air an exaggerated sniff. “A fresh uniform wouldn’t hurt either.”

“Noted.” Bruce grinned, the smile taking years off his face. “I’m meeting Julie for lunch. I’ll be sure to shower first.” Julie worked as a nurse in Henry’s office.

Tessa retrieved her jacket from the peg by the door. “I’m headed to Dante’s place.”

Even with his identity in question, it was easier to think of him as Dante than *the victim*.

She went out into the cold and climbed into her patrol vehicle. Jerry’s place wasn’t far from her house via a trail used by mountain bikers and horseback riders. But the forest on this side of the island was protected from further development, and the road made a huge loop around it. Fifteen minutes later, she turned into his driveway and parked in front of his bungalow.

The house looked like it belonged to a little old lady, not a bachelor of sixty. Painted bright yellow with white trim, it was small and dainty, with neat flower beds that were filled with blooms spring through fall. Even on a gloomy December day, the house looked cheerful.

Tessa walked up the steps onto the front porch. She knocked on the door, but no one answered. Shading her eyes with her hand, she leaned close to the skinny window alongside the door but didn’t see anyone inside.

Leaving the porch, she followed a brick path around the bungalow. There was no sign of Jerry.

She crossed fifty feet of grass. The property hadn't been an active farm in many years. The barn had been painted white to coordinate with the house. Thick woods sat behind it. Tessa knocked on the door. When no one answered, she tried the knob and was surprised to find the door locked. No one locked their doors on the island, but Dante hadn't been a native.

A rattling sound alerted her to someone coming. She turned around. Jerry was leaning a mountain bike against the side of the house. He removed his helmet and hung it on the handlebars by the chin strap. Then he walked across the backyard toward her, his face grave.

"I heard about Dante," he said.

Of course he had.

"I need to get inside." Tessa gestured toward the barn.

Jerry dug a set of keys out of his pocket. "No problem."

"Did Dante live alone?" Tessa asked.

"Yep." Jerry unlocked the door and stepped aside.

"Do you know if he had a cell phone?"

"He did not." Jerry gave a small smile of approval. "He had an answering machine hooked up to the landline."

"How long has he rented from you?" Tessa asked.

"Almost a year."

"Did he pay on time?"

"Eight hundred dollars on the first of every month," Jerry said. "And he was a quiet tenant, which I appreciated. I need my chill time."

"Did he have your Jetta last night?"

"Yes. I prefer my bike when the weather is cooperative, so I let Dante use the car whenever he liked. The keys were in it. He'd leave gas money on the seat if he borrowed it." Jerry reached for the doorknob.

Tessa stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "I need you to wait outside."

“Okay.” He stepped back. “I’ll be up at the house if you need me.”

“Thank you,” Tessa said. “I’m going to have questions for you when I’m finished.”

She donned gloves and opened the door. The blinds and curtains were closed, shrouding the interior in darkness. All she could see was the swath of light streaming through the open door. Though she heard nothing, the hairs on the nape of her neck lifted. She felt eyes on her. A floorboard creaked to her right. Her hand landed on her sidearm automatically. She drew her weapon.

A gray cat zoomed across the wood floor, hissing. Tessa placed a hand on her chest. Her heart thundered. Sweat dripped down her back.

Breathe.

She felt for the light switch on the wall, but it wasn’t where she expected it to be. She reached for the flashlight on her duty belt. Before she could pull it out of its loop, fabric rustled.

Tessa’s racing pulse jump-started again. She spun around just in time to see a dark hooded figure lunge out from behind the drapes. Something whirled toward Tessa’s head.

4

Tessa ducked. A floor lamp whooshed past her head. She pivoted, sweeping her handgun around as she moved, but she couldn't shoot what she couldn't see.

The hooded figure rushed at her like a bull. She turned to evade his charge but wasn't quick enough. Tessa was five seven and very fit. Outnumbered by male cops on the Seattle PD, she'd made a point of lifting weights, running, and hiking to stay in top shape. She was strong for her size. Her attacker wasn't overly big, but he had momentum. Their shoulders collided, and Tessa stumbled backward.

Dropping one hand to the floor, Tessa recovered and spun on the balls of her feet. But he was already looming over her.

An arm swooped down. With no time to bring her weapon around, she raised a hand over her head to block the blow. The blade of his hand struck a nerve on her forearm. Her fingers opened on reflex. Her gun dropped to the floor and skittered across the wood planks.

Tessa grabbed for her attacker's arm with both hands. She couldn't grip the slippery leather of his jacket. She drove an elbow hard into his rib cage.

He grunted, and the air rushed out of him. He spun behind her and grabbed her in a bear hug, his black-gloved hands linked at her waist. He pinned her arms to her sides and lifted her off the floor. Her feet kicked in the air.

She went limp, maximizing the effect of her weight. Then she smashed her head backward and struck his face.

Something squished, but no blood spurted, so she must not have hit his nose. He twisted his face out of reach.

There was no space between their bodies. Tessa could not strike him. There was only one vulnerable area she could attack. Reaching behind her, she closed her fist around his testicles and squeezed hard.

He dropped her as if she were on fire. “Bitch!” he wheezed.

Tessa fell to her knees. The impact with the hard floor rang her bones from her kneecaps to her teeth.

The man turned and scrambled for the open door.

She stumbled to her feet. By the time she made it to the doorway, her attacker was fifteen yards away and limp-running for the woods.

She could catch him.

She dug into the floorboards and pushed off. She managed exactly one stride. Then her feet tangled with an object, and she went down hard. Her lungs expelled air like fireplace bellows. Something tugged at her trousers, and pain sliced through her leg.

“What the—?” Her pants leg was caught on a nail protruding from a floorboard. She pulled it free.

In the doorway, the cat arched its back and hissed. With an angry yowl, it bolted around the barn and disappeared. She’d tripped over the damned cat.

Tessa levered a knee under her body and stood.

Where is he?

She scanned the meadow. The figure had disappeared into the trees. She’d smooshed his balls. He wouldn’t be moving too quickly. She broke into a jog, intent on catching him.

The high-pitched whine of a small motor cut through the air.

Tessa stopped. He was on a dirt bike or ATV. Leaning on her thighs, she caught her breath. The sound of the engine drew farther away. She rapped a fist against her leg.

Damn it.

She entered the woods. About twenty feet inside the tree line, she found ATV tracks. There was no way she could catch an ATV on foot. She went back out of the trees to the barn.

“Hey, Tessa! What’s wrong?” Jerry shouted as he ran out of the house and across the backyard toward her.

“There was someone inside,” she said. “Wait here.”

She slipped through the door, found a light switch, and flipped it. An overhead light turned on. She scanned the living room and kitchen. Sofa cushions were overturned. Drawers hung out of a small desk. Books littered the wide-planked wood floor.

The intruder had been busy.

She recovered her gun from the corner. Even knowing the intruder had fled, she systematically cleared the rooms anyway. The high-ceilinged space had been divided loft-style into a few large rooms. The living room and kitchen were one giant open space. The single bedroom had an attached bath. A large, sunny room served as an art studio. There was one more room next to it, where it appeared Dante stored his paint supplies and drying canvases. The bedroom and studio areas were tidy, so the intruder hadn’t finished his search.

Bruce was still tied up reviewing evidence. Kurt hadn’t called, which meant he was still on the mainland. Tessa pulled out her phone and dialed Logan’s number. He answered on the first ring.

“Are you busy?” Tessa asked.

“I was just going to call you and see if you needed help,” he said. “Murder investigations are your expertise, but the state park is my turf. I’d like to work with you on the case.”

“That’s perfect.” Tessa told him about the intruder at the barn.

Logan swore under his breath. “You’re not injured?”

“No.”

“He was looking for something.”

“Seems like it.”

“I’ll be right there.” Logan ended the call.

She returned to the main room. The window in the eating nook overlooked the woods. She walked closer, noting the broken latch.

Jerry stood in the doorway. “Hey, Tessa. You’re bleeding.” He pointed at her leg.

A dark stain colored her uniform pants below the knee. She returned to the little porch, lowered herself to the front stoop, and rolled up her pants leg. Blood ran from a gash across her calf. The minute she saw the cut, her leg began to throb.

Tessa limped to her vehicle. On the way, she called Bruce, told him about the break-in, and gave him a description of the suspect. “Male, approximately five feet, ten inches tall, wearing jeans and a dark-colored leather jacket layered over a hoodie, possibly riding an ATV or motorcycle.”

“Do you want me to come out there?” he asked.

“Is Kurt back?”

“No. His daughter had a complication.”

That didn’t sound good.

“Then I need you to keep sorting through the evidence.” Tessa would not drag Kurt back if his family needed him. “I’ll manage.”

In Seattle, she would have issued a BOLO alert. Every patrol car would have been looking for the suspect. But she and Bruce were the only deputies on Widow’s Island today. She debated calling the ferry terminal and giving the operator a description of the man so they could keep him on the island, but she hadn’t seen his face. She wouldn’t recognize him if she saw him again. She doubted he’d ride up to the ferry terminal on a quad.

After opening the cargo area of her SUV, she unzipped the first aid kit. With her boot propped on the bumper, she applied a disinfectant wipe to her wound, breathing through the eye-watering sting. Then she covered the gash with a thick layer of gauze and bound her whole calf with an Ace bandage. She'd need a few stitches, but at least for now she wouldn't bleed on the crime scene. She gathered the wrappers, removed her gloves, and stuffed the trash inside one of them.

When she set her foot on the ground, pain shot up her leg. For a wound she hadn't known she'd had five minutes ago, it hurt like it was on fire.

Donning fresh gloves, she went back to the barn. She put her hands on her hips and scanned the mess.

"Tessa?" Logan's voice called.

"In here," she said.

Logan walked in. He'd showered and changed since the previous night. His face was freshly shaved, and he smelled good. *Really* good. Like fresh cedar and citrus.

Tessa resisted the urge to lean closer and inhale.

He'd think I was nuts.

She thought she was losing it.

This felt nothing like the innocent teenage crush she'd had on him. Their relationship dynamic had shifted, and the sniff she wanted to give him was nothing like the one she'd given Bruce. But then, she and Logan had both changed.

His gaze roamed over the room. "Looks like someone gave the place a good toss."

More comfortable with the case than her sudden notice of Logan, she agreed. "It seems I interrupted him before he got to the bedroom or studio."

"Do you know how he got in?"

"He jimmed the kitchen window."

"Prints?"

Tessa shook her head. "He was wearing gloves."

“Assuming he was still inside because he hadn’t found what he was looking for, we should probably start in the rooms he didn’t have a chance to search.”

“Agreed.” Tessa limped into the master bedroom.

“What happened to your leg?”

“Just a cut. It’s not a big deal. I’ll stop and see Henry when we’re done here.”

Tessa started with the nightstand and dresser, checking in and under drawers and behind the furniture. They worked their way around the bedroom methodically. Logan lifted the mattress, then the box spring. He pulled the bed away from the wall and looked behind the headboard. In the closet, Tessa checked the pockets of coats and clothes.

Logan emerged from the bathroom. “So far, I don’t see anything unusual.”

Just inside the closet, a hamper overflowed with dirty clothes. Tessa began lifting pants and shirts and checking pockets. Underneath the dirty laundry, she found a duffel bag. She unzipped it. The bag was stuffed with bundles of cash, each bundle about an inch thick.

“Now this is interesting.” She crouched, picked up a bundle, and removed the rubber band. Fanning the bills, she whistled. “Mostly twenties, and there are a lot of them.” She did a rough count of the cash. “Looks like about three thousand in this stack.” She reached into the bag and flipped through the ends of a few more bundles. They seemed to be the same mix of bills. “Assuming the other stacks are about the same, there could be a hundred thousand dollars here.”

Logan’s brow rose. “Then he wasn’t a starving artist.”

“I doubt he made that much money painting landscapes of Widow’s Island.” Tessa rocked back on her heels. “No one except a major drug dealer would keep this much cash on hand. I wonder what Dante was up to.”

She set the duffel bag aside to be logged in to evidence, then stood and walked through the doorway into the studio.

Light streamed in from a bay window. A chaise lounge stretched out in the patch of light that fell in front of the window.

Tessa turned in a circle. There were a dozen paintings lined up against one wall. An orca surfacing in the bay. Ruby's Island in the center of a sparkling Widow's Bay. Waves crashing on rocks below Widow's Walk.

An easel stood in the center of the brightly lit space. It held a half-finished painting of a cove. Moonlight shimmered on the water and rocks. Tessa stopped in front of the painting. A half dozen photographs of the same beach were pinned to the wall next to the easel.

"This is the beach where he was murdered," Tessa said. "It looks like he painted from photographs. He had a camera with him. Maybe he was taking pictures when he was killed."

"Makes sense." Logan leaned over her shoulder. "He was no Van Gogh, but he had talent. Do you have any idea how much he asked for one of these paintings?"

"The last time I was in the art shop, I believe the price on a canvas this size was around five hundred dollars."

"How many did he sell a month?" Logan asked.

Tessa pulled out her phone and called Rachel Abbott, the owner of the art store. "Hi, Rachel. This is Tessa."

Logan walked into the adjoining storage room.

"Oh, my God," Rachel said, sobbing. "I heard about Dante. How did this happen? He was such a nice young man."

Tessa heard the sound of Rachel blowing her nose. "Did you know of anyone who didn't like Dante?"

Rachel sniffed. "No. Everyone liked him. He was sweet and thoughtful."

"How well did his art sell?"

"Tourists loved it. I sold twenty paintings last summer."

"What about during the off-season?" Tessa asked.

“You know it’s slower in the winter. Maybe two or three a month at best, depending on the tourist traffic.” Rachel’s breath hitched. “I can’t believe he’s dead.”

“It’s horrible,” Tessa agreed. “Thanks, Rachel.”

She lowered her phone and relayed the information to Logan. Dante definitely hadn’t accumulated \$100,000 by selling local landscapes.

Logan emerged from the storage room. “Have you looked in there?”

“No.” Tessa followed him in. Canvases leaned on the wall. Tessa had assumed they were blank canvases, but Logan turned one around. It was a portrait of a woman, reclining on the chaise in the studio, clad in nothing but a long string of pearls. It was a tasteful depiction, with her legs strategically angled. Her hair cascaded over her shoulder and across her breasts, showing just a hint of flesh.

Tessa recovered from her shock to look at the subject’s face. “That’s Shannon Moore.”

Logan stared at the opposite wall, as if uncomfortable looking at Shannon’s portrait. “Is Shannon still married to Brad?”

“Yes, and they still own the Naked Sheep Winery.” Tessa linked her hands behind her back and studied the painting. “The painting is amazing. I mean, Shannon looks great for her age, but . . .”

Dante had made the most of her best traits. He hadn’t made her look younger or super skinny. He’d smoothed and accentuated her curves, but he hadn’t painted away her flaws. Tessa could see the edge of a stretch mark along Shannon’s hip and a spider vein on her leg. But the small imperfections didn’t detract from her beauty at all. Dante had made her look as if they didn’t matter. Her sexiness came from within. On the canvas, her skin glowed. Her gaze was sensual and direct, as if she knew exactly how incredible she looked. It wasn’t a come-hither gaze. It was powerful, even demanding.

Logan nodded. "There are more."

"What? How many more?"

"Three." Logan moved to the other canvases and began turning them around.

Tessa didn't know the next two subjects, but then Logan spun the final painting.

"That's Pam Rhodes," Tessa said.

Like he had done in Shannon's painting, Dante had portrayed each woman as realistic—and yet incredibly beautiful. Pam's cesarean scar peeked out from behind her bent leg, and a bit of cellulite mottled her thighs. All three were attractive women in their mid- to late forties, all were nude, and their portraits were stunning. It was the look in their eyes, Tessa decided. It was confidence.

"This was his real talent," she said. "Making women see themselves as beautiful."

Logan frowned at Pam's painting. "I don't know her."

"Pam owns Shiny Objects, the jewelry store in North Sound."

"Is she married?" Logan asked.

"Yes. Her husband, Steve, is some Hollywood big shot. They bought a place here a few years ago, but I don't see him around much." She glanced around the studio. "This case has taken some interesting turns. We have an artist using a fake name, with a big bag of cash hidden in his laundry hamper, and paintings of naked local women."

"I wonder if their husbands knew. Jealousy is an excellent motive for murder."

"A definite possibility."

"Tessa." Logan's voice was filled with warning. "I found another painting."

She turned and nearly tripped over her own feet. Her mother.

Thank God, her mom was wearing a long flowered dress in the painting. Her gray-and-blond hair fell in waves to her shoulders, and her feet were bare. She looked like the aging

hippie that she was. But it was the look in her eyes that stopped Tessa cold.

The blue eyes that gazed out of the painting were soft and clear.

Dante hadn't lived on the island for an entire year. Mom was already starting to decline by the time he'd arrived. Yet he'd managed to paint her exactly how she'd looked before her eyes had gone vague and watery.

"Did you know he was painting your mother's picture?" Logan asked.

"No." Tessa wondered what else she didn't know about her mother's relationship with the dead man.

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Logan didn't believe Tessa's mother had anything to do with the artist's death, but the paleness of Tessa's face told him that she was clearly disturbed by the painting.

"Your mom was at home when you received the call about the murder, right?" he asked.

"Yes." Tessa's brow furrowed.

"Then you have nothing to worry about. Your mother wouldn't hurt a soul."

"No, of course not. But she could easily be taken advantage of. I have to double check her bank accounts and see if any money is missing."

"Brad Moore and Steve Rhodes are on the top of my suspect list." If Logan were married, he would not want his wife getting naked for another man.

Tessa seemed to shake off her shock. She went back into the studio and sat at a desk in the corner. "There's nothing illegal about painting women in the nude."

"Jealousy has nothing to do with the law. Was this artist good looking?" Logan had only seen the man dead. Dante hadn't been at his best after catching a harpoon with his chest.

Tessa pushed a button on the answering machine. There was only one message—Shannon Moore asking when her painting would be dry enough to pick up. Tessa opened a drawer. "He was too young for my taste. I prefer men to boys." She pulled a manila file out of the desk and set it on

the blotter. "But he was certainly easy on the eyes. I imagine plenty of women would have been interested."

Why did the thought of Tessa being interested in a man irritate him?

She opened the file and flipped through several pages. "Here are the invoices and contracts for the four nude portraits. The women each paid a two-thousand-dollar deposit, with an equal amount being due upon delivery. The two women we didn't recognize are both from Seattle."

"Maybe they were tourists." Logan pulled a bookcase away from the wall and checked behind it.

"It seems Dante's arrangements with Shannon Moore, Pam Rhodes, and the other two women were the same." She looked up at him. "This is all on the up-and-up. There's nothing subversive here. They weren't sneaking around."

"I'll bet their husbands didn't know." Logan crossed his arms over his chest.

"We'll have to interview them and find out." Tessa tapped her finger on the desk. "There's no contract for my mother's painting."

"Maybe we'll find it somewhere else."

"Maybe." Tessa surveyed the room. "We'll take the paintings, the invoices, and the cash with us as evidence."

Tessa's phone beeped. She read the display and pressed "Answer." A minute later, she ended her call. "The medical examiner ID'd our body. Dante's real name was Frank Martin. He was from New Jersey, and he was wanted for fraud. They haven't found any next of kin yet."

"So he was a con man." Logan wasn't surprised. The whole setup felt sleazy.

"Could be," Tessa said. "Let's talk to Jerry."

Logan followed her out of the barn. Her limp was getting worse.

Jerry was leaning on a tree, his face turned up to the sky. The sun had broken through the clouds. Even the weak winter rays were appreciated.

“Jerry, did you know Dante’s name wasn’t really Dante?” Tessa stopped in a ray of sunlight.

“No way, really?” Jerry shook his head.

“His real name was Frank Martin. He was from Jersey.” Tessa winced and shifted her weight off her wounded leg.

“No shit?” Jerry barked out a laugh. “If I was Frank Martin from New Jersey, and I wanted to talk a bunch of rich women out of their clothes and their money, I’d have changed my name too.”

“You knew about the women?” Tessa asked.

“Sure.” Jerry nodded. “Dante could turn on the charm. He had a nice little enterprise going. You don’t think he could have actually made any real money painting lighthouses and crap like that?”

Tessa frowned. “Do you think there was more going on between Frank and the women than was strictly professional?”

“No.” Jerry shook his head. “He told me he wasn’t sleeping with them. That was the most beautiful thing about his plan. All he had to do was flatter them and tell them how beautiful they were. He was so good, he didn’t *need* to sleep with them to get their money.”

“He played them,” Logan said.

“Hey.” Jerry raised both palms to the sky. “He made them feel good about themselves. They would walk out of the barn beaming. They were so happy. What’s the harm in that?”

Logan thought there was plenty, though he couldn’t come up with any specific argument on the spot.

“I’ll need the key to the barn,” Tessa said.

Jerry handed it over.

“Thanks,” said Tessa. “If we have more questions, we’ll call you.”

She returned to her vehicle and found a roll of crime scene tape.

“I’ll seal the door.” Logan went back to the barn and fastened the tape across the entrance.

“We need to talk to Pam Rhodes and Shannon Moore and their husbands.”

“After Henry takes a look at your leg,” Logan said.

She sighed. “Fine.”

They dropped the evidence at the sheriff’s station, then made a detour to Henry’s office. The office was empty when Tessa limped into the waiting room and eased into a plastic chair.

Logan stepped up to the reception counter and called out, “Hello?”

Henry walked out from the back room. At one o’clock in the afternoon, the office was closed for lunch. His nurse, Julie, would be having her lunch with Bruce.

“I know it’s your lunch hour, but I cut myself,” Tessa said.

“Come on back.” Henry gestured toward the doorway that led to the exam rooms. “I just spoke with the regional medical examiner. You might want to come in too, Logan.” Henry paused. “As long as Tessa doesn’t mind.”

“Not at all.” Tessa hobbled down the hallway.

“First door on the right.” Henry pointed.

Logan followed Tessa and Henry into a small room. Tessa hopped up on the table and rolled up her pants leg. Blood had seeped through the Ace bandage wrapped around her calf.

Henry put on gloves and removed the bandage. He adjusted an overhead task light. “Do you know what you cut it on?”

“A nail.” Tessa leaned back on her hands.

Henry sized up the wound. “I’ll give you an antibiotic injection along with a tetanus shot.” He took a vial from the cabinet and drew clear liquid into a syringe. “This is a local anesthetic.”

Tessa didn't flinch as Henry injected liquid in several locations around the wound, but her fingers curled around the edges of the table.

"The ME said he would be calling you next, Tessa." Henry gathered supplies and laid them out on a sterile cloth. Then he cleaned and disinfected the cut. "There weren't any major revelations during the autopsy. The harpoon nicked the aorta. He bled to death."

"You had that spot on," Tessa said as the doctor started the first suture.

Henry tied off a stitch. "You know about his real identity?"

"We just found out," Logan said. "Did you ever treat him?"

Henry shook his head. "He never came into the office while I was here. I checked the patient files but found nothing in his name." Henry snipped a thread, applied a bandage, and taped it into place. "Finished. Only five stitches."

"Thank you, Henry." Tessa rolled down her pants leg.

"If I told you to stay off your leg, would I be wasting my breath?" Henry removed his gloves.

"Yes."

"Thought so." Henry smiled. "In that case, keep the wound clean and covered. Come back in seven days so I can remove the stitches."

"Thank you." Tessa led the way out of the doctor's office.

Logan followed her outside.

"Why don't we leave your truck here?" she asked. "We can pick it up later. Seems silly to follow each other around in separate vehicles all day."

"Are you sure you want to drive?" Logan asked, nodding at her leg.

"It's my left leg. Not a problem."

“All right.” Logan climbed into the passenger seat of her patrol SUV. “While you drive, I’ll see what I can find out about those other two women in the paintings. Where do you want to go first?”

Tessa drove out of the lot. “The Naked Sheep Winery is the closest. Let’s talk to Shannon and Brad Moore.”

The winery was on the east side of the island. They drove out of town and into the rolling hills. By the time they arrived at the winery, Logan had determined that both of the tourists Dante had painted were currently in Seattle and had strong alibis. “They’re off our suspect list for now.”

“That leaves Shannon and Pam and their husbands.” Tessa parked in front of the winery’s office. The vineyards stretched out behind the quaint white building.

“How does the leg feel?” Logan watched Tessa climb out of the driver’s seat.

“Fine, though I suspect it will not be quite as fine when the local wears off.”

They went inside the building and entered a wood-floored lobby. On the right, a sign pointed toward the tasting room. Logan poked his head through the doorway. The winery was a small business. Brad was behind the gleaming wood bar, polishing wine glasses. He looked up as they entered.

“Are you here to try some wine, or is this official business?” Brad set a glass on a shelf above the bar and picked up another. He was in his late forties. His hair was more salt than pepper, and a small paunch strained the front of his blue button-down shirt.

“Official business, I’m afraid,” Tessa said. “We’re investigating the murder of local artist Dante Moreno.”

Brad’s mouth flattened. His gaze shifted to the open doorway behind Logan and Tessa.

Logan’s instincts went on alert. Brad knew something.

“What do you know about him?” Tessa asked.

Brad's empty hand gripped the edge of the bar, the veins on the back corded, as he fought—and lost—his battle for control. "Shit!" He threw the glass in his hand at the wall. It shattered, shards flying through the air and raining to the floor.

Logan eased his shoulder in front of Tessa's. She shot him a look. He shrugged. She could be in charge of the investigation, but Logan would handle Brad if the man got physical.

Tessa moved closer to the bar. Logan took two steps to the left, ready to cut off Brad's escape if he decided to run.

She leaned in. "When did you last see him, Brad?"

"I don't know." Brad's voice rose.

"Are you sure? Where were you last night?" Tessa asked.

Brad looked confused. "I was home." His eyes widened. "You don't think I had anything to do with his death?"

"Did you?" Tessa's tone was serious.

"No." Brad shoved both hands through his hair. "Look, the guy barely registered for me until today. But Shannon has been crying all day. I asked her why." Brad rubbed both hands down his face. "Apparently"—he enunciated each syllable—"he was painting her."

"You didn't know?" Tessa asked.

"No," Brad snapped. "I wouldn't have allowed it."

"Allowed?" Logan asked. "Does your wife have to ask permission to do things?"

"No." A vein in Brad's neck throbbed. He glared at Logan. "This was different."

Tessa jumped in. "What happens if Shannon doesn't ask you?"

Brad took a step backward. He spun, pacing the tiny space behind the bar. Two steps, angry pivot, two steps. "It's not like that."

"Why don't you explain it to us," Logan suggested.

Brad flashed him another glare. "You don't understand." His voice dropped until it was nearly a whisper. "She was

naked," he said through gritted teeth.

"But it was just art," Tessa said. "Did you think there was more to it than that?"

Brad took two steps and whirled around. "No."

"Then why are you so upset? Don't you trust your wife?" Logan rested both forearms on the bar, holding Brad with his gaze.

Sweat broke out on Brad's forehead. "I didn't do anything. You can't pin this on me. I was home all night last night. You can ask Shannon."

"We will," Logan said.

"Where is she?" Tessa asked.

Brad crossed his arms over his chest and sulked. "At the house."

Logan pointed at Brad. "Stay here."

Tessa glanced over her shoulder. "One more thing. You're a fisherman, right?"

"Yeah." Brad's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Do you own a harpoon?" Tessa asked.

"Sure." Brad nodded. "A harpoon is better than a gaff for bringing in a really big fish. Safer. Does less damage to the fish."

Logan and Tessa went outside and got back into the SUV.

Tessa started the engine. "We can't make him stay anywhere unless we arrest him."

"I know." Logan cracked his window. "But it felt good to say it. And maybe he doesn't know."

The Moores' house was just down the road from the winery. Tessa parked in front of the large two-story white house with a circular driveway. They went up to the front door and knocked. No one answered. Tessa stabbed the doorbell, leaning into it impatiently. Logan could hear the chimes echoing in the house.

A few moments later, the door opened. Shannon stood in the entryway. Yoga pants showcased a fit body. Her long

dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she wore no makeup. She'd clearly been crying. Her eyes were red and swollen. She clutched a tissue in one hand.

"Are you here about Dante?" Shannon's voice quivered.

"Yes," Tessa said. "We need to ask you a few questions. Could we come inside?"

Nodding, Shannon stepped back and opened the door wider. With her hand fisted around the tissue, she gestured for them to come in. She led them to a huge white kitchen with a marble island and a stunning view of the vineyard. Through the picture window, Logan could see rows of grapevines stretching across the acres.

Shannon slid into a kitchen chair and leaned her elbows on the table. A half-empty bottle of merlot and a glass sat in front of her. She tossed back a swallow of red as if it had been tequila.

Tessa slid into the chair across from Shannon. Logan leaned a hip on the counter and watched.

"When was the last time you saw Dante?" Tessa kept her voice soft.

Shannon waved a hand helplessly in the air. "My final sitting at his studio was last week. On Friday." She closed her eyes and sniffed. "The portrait was finished and drying. I was waiting for Dante to call me to tell me when I could pick it up. It was going to be Brad's Christmas present."

"Brad didn't know about it?" Tessa asked.

"No. I worked really hard to keep it a secret." Shannon's voice stretched out the last word into two sobbing syllables. More tears spilled from her eyes.

Tessa snagged a tissue from a box on the table and handed it over. "How many times did you meet with him?"

Shannon took the tissue and blotted her eyes. "I don't know exactly. Maybe six or eight?"

"You've been planning Brad's Christmas present for a long time." Tessa plucked another tissue from the box.

"What was Dante like?"

“He was very sweet and charming. At first, I was self-conscious. But he made me feel comfortable.” Shannon pressed the fresh tissue to her mouth. “He made me feel good about myself.”

“Did you know anyone who was angry with him?” Tessa asked gently.

“No.” Shannon, crying, shook her head. “I can’t believe he’s dead.”

Tessa’s voice sharpened just a hair. “Did you know that his name wasn’t really Dante?”

Shannon stopped crying. “What?”

“His name was Frank Martin,” Tessa said. “He was from New Jersey.”

Shannon’s mouth opened for a few seconds. Then she recovered. Her gaze dropped to the table. She began to shred the tissue in her hand. “It doesn’t matter. He probably wanted to use a different name for his art, the same way writers use a pen name.”

Her voice sounded as thin as her excuse. She didn’t want to believe he’d taken advantage of her.

“He lied to you,” Tessa pointed out.

“That portrait of me he painted . . .” Shannon’s eyes shifted toward the window, but she wasn’t focusing on the landscape. “No one has ever made me feel that beautiful.”

Which didn’t say much for Brad.

“Was Brad here all night?” Logan asked.

Shannon studied the shredded tissue in her lap. “Yes.”

Logan didn’t believe her. “Are you sure? There’s no way he could’ve slipped out while you were sleeping?”

Shannon seemed to be surprised by the question. Something flashed in her eyes. “I don’t think so.”

“Think?” Logan pressured.

“Well, Brad was in a bad mood last night.” Shannon gathered the bits of tissue into a tight fist. “I had two glasses of wine and went to bed early.”

Shannon drank a lot of wine.

“What time did Brad come to bed?” Tessa asked.

“I don’t know,” Shannon admitted. “I didn’t wake up when he came to bed.”

Logan imagined Brad’s alibi sinking slowly, like a boat with a hole just big enough to fill faster than one could bail. “Did he tell you what he was upset about?”

Shannon shook her head. “The winery didn’t have a good year. He’s been tense about money for months.” Her gaze traveled around the big-ass kitchen. Guilt crossed her face. “We redid the kitchen last summer. I overspent. You know how renovations are. Every problem you uncover leads to ten more.”

Logan scanned the professional range, high-end drawer dishwasher, and fancy fridge. Unexpected issues aside, Shannon had expensive taste.

“Brad didn’t know Dante was painting your portrait?” Logan asked.

“No. As I said, I wanted it to be a surprise. Now it’s all ruined. He’s mad that I let Dante paint me naked, and he’s furious about the money I spent on the portrait too.” She stared down at her hands.

Tessa stood. “We might be back with more questions.”

Shannon nodded. Without looking up, she cleared her throat. “I know this sounds wrong and selfish to ask, but where is the portrait?” Her gaze skittered away, and she chewed on her lip. “I mean, I paid for it, and it was finished. Doesn’t that make it my property?”

“For now, the portrait is evidence,” Tessa said. “After we solve Dante’s murder, we’ll sort out ownership. Thank you for speaking with us. We can let ourselves out.”

They left Shannon sniveling and sniffing at her kitchen table and went outside.

Tessa climbed into the SUV and slammed the door harder than necessary. “I can’t believe Shannon wants the painting.”

Logan slid into the passenger seat. “Why not? She paid for it.”

“True.” Tessa turned right and drove toward the northern shore of the island. “But it would forever remind me of murder.”

“We know one thing for sure. Shannon was very happy with Dante’s work.”

Tessa gave her head a wry shake.

“Brad Moore stays on the top of my suspect list. His wife tossed out his alibi like last week’s trash. She could have lied and said he was with her all night, but she didn’t. Do you think their marriage is shaky?”

“I don’t know. Shannon is sweet, but I don’t think she was thinking straight. I’m not sure she understood she was hurling Brad under the investigative bus. Why would Brad have killed Dante if he didn’t know about the portrait?” Tessa asked.

“We only have his word that he didn’t know. What if that’s why he was in a bad mood last night?” Logan had seen the jealousy on Brad’s face. It hadn’t looked fresh. No. Brad had been steaming for a while. “No one can keep a secret on Widow’s Island. Shannon went to the art studio at least a half dozen times. Someone saw her. Someone told Brad. He knew.”

6

Tessa didn't want to believe Brad could be a killer. She'd always liked the Moores. On appearance, at least, they had the type of marriage everyone wanted. They'd been high school sweethearts and had married right after college. They had two kids attending college on the mainland. Brad still bought his wife flowers for no reason at all. They held hands when they walked down the street. Until recently, the decades had seemed to have brought them closer together instead of pulling them apart.

She was not normally a romantic in any sense, but today seemed different. Was it because her feelings for Logan had become much more than a high school crush? She glanced at him sitting next to her in the SUV.

Interesting.

But even if Logan felt the same way, Tessa had no time for romance. When had her last date been? Before she'd moved back to Widow's Island. She shoved a piece of hair behind her ear. She had no time for a haircut, let alone dating.

"It's three thirty. Do you have time to interview Pam and Steve Rhodes?" Tessa asked as she drove north.

"Let's do it."

"Can you call Shiny Objects and see if Pam is there?"

Logan lifted his cell phone and made the call. "The answering machine is on."

Tessa thought about Shannon and all her crying. "Maybe Pam closed the store today."

Steve and Pam Rhodes lived in a mansion on the north shore of the island. Set inside its own tiny inlet, the house faced west. Two boats, a nimble little runabout and a larger serious fishing vessel, bobbed at the private dock.

Tessa parked in front of the house, and they went to the door. Steve answered the bell. Dressed in worn jeans and boat shoes, he didn't look like a Hollywood hotshot. His hair was gray and windblown. Tessa introduced herself and Logan.

"Come in." Steve waved them into a two-story foyer. "I assume this is about the dead artist."

"Yes." A gleam of reflected sunlight hit Tessa squarely in the eyes. She looked up. The modern chandelier that hung over their heads was constructed of intertwined silver rods. It was the size of an SUV. Tessa wouldn't want to be standing under it during an earthquake. "Is Pam home?"

They walked up a flight of steps to the second level. A huge living room spanned the entire width of the house. Like the chandelier, the decor was modern, with pale-gray carpet and darker-gray walls. Two leather couches faced each other in front of a fireplace surrounded by dark-veined marble.

"She's resting. The news has left her distraught." Steve led them down a long hall to an office.

"I'm sure she's upset." Tessa was content to talk to Steve first, but Pam would have to answer questions too.

Logan scanned a row of framed photos on the wall. "Are these your clients?"

Steve nodded. "Some of them."

"That's Jason Welling." Tessa pointed to a picture of Steve and a tall, thin man standing in front of a race car. "I saw his last movie. It was really funny."

"Can you believe he didn't want to take that role?" Steve asked.

"Really?" Tessa was surprised.

"Jason wants to be taken more seriously as an actor." Steve leaned back against a gleaming black desk. "I pointed

out that he could not continue his current lifestyle without income, and the offer was more than generous.”

Logan paced the perimeter of the room. “That would convince me.”

No. Logan would not understand an actor’s ego.

Tessa turned to face a picture of Steve and a gorgeous blonde woman taken on the back of a yacht. Despite how different she looked in dark sunglasses and no makeup, Tessa recognized the actress. “That’s Leslie Lamont. Is she your client?”

“She is,” said Steve.

“I can’t believe how incredible she looks in a snapshot,” Tessa said.

“She’s even more stunning in person.” Steve shook his head. “That photo does not do her justice.”

“Jason Welling and Leslie Lamont are big stars,” Tessa said. “But most people on the island don’t know anything about the work you do in Hollywood.”

“No one here pries into my Hollywood life,” Steve answered. “Which is one of the things we love about living here.”

“Locals consider it impolite to talk about your profession,” Tessa said.

“Really?” Steve shrugged. “We didn’t know, but it suits us perfectly. Widow’s Island is our sanctuary. We have enough stress and publicity back in LA. When we come here, we want to get away from all the Hollywood drama.” Steve took a long breath. “My wife is weary of being in the public eye. She likes to live a quiet life, which is why she often stays here when I go back to LA.”

“The island has its quirks, and people seem to love it or hate it,” Tessa added.

Steve gestured toward a gray leather sofa angled toward his desk. “Please sit down.”

Perching on the edge of a cushion, Tessa circled back to the investigation. “Does the name Dante Moreno sound

familiar?"

"Yes." Steve hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans. "He was painting a picture of my wife. She doesn't know that I've known about it since the beginning. I was going to act surprised when she gave me the painting for my birthday. But this morning, when the news of his death came, she was so upset she had to tell me why."

"How did you find out?" Tessa asked.

Steve snorted. "Three different people told me. I suspect it is all but impossible to keep a secret on this island."

Tessa agreed.

"And you were okay with the arrangement?" Logan's tone suggested he would not be.

"Honestly, I wasn't thrilled with the idea of my wife taking her clothes off for some young artist, but Pam used to be a model. Nudity isn't such a big deal to her. She's going to turn fifty next summer. She's been rather glum about it. If having her portrait done made her happy, then that was okay with me." Steve pointed to his own chest. "Any issues I have with it are mine. And I'll deal with them like an adult."

"That's very . . . progressive of you." Logan leaned on the wall. "I'm not sure I could be so civilized."

"I love my wife. Her happiness is more important than my male ego." Steve's gaze was direct. "That's my bottom line."

Tessa tilted her head toward the window. Through the glass, she could see the boats tied up at the dock. "Those are nice boats. Do you fish?"

"As often as I can." Steve looked out at the inlet. "There is nothing more calming than the sea. My job in LA is very stressful. My blood pressure dropped twenty points the second I set foot on this island."

"Now that I understand," Logan said.

Logan had barely talked to her about his experiences in the Middle East, but the grimness in his tone and expression

spoke volumes.

Tessa shifted her position on the sofa. "What kind of fishing do you enjoy?"

"I'm not fussy," Steve said. "I like halibut, salmon, whatever's running. As long as I'm out on the water, I'm happy."

"Do you have a harpoon on that boat?" Tessa motioned toward the window.

"You mean like the one that was used to kill the artist?" Steve was smarter than Brad.

"Yes," Tessa said. "Exactly like the one that was used to kill the artist."

Steve's eyebrow lifted. "The larger boat is stocked with harpoons, gaffs, and various other pointy objects. You'll find the same on half the fishing boats on the island."

Unfortunately, he was likely right.

"Where were you last night, Steve?" Tessa asked.

"I was here, sleeping." Neither Steve's voice nor his gaze faltered. Either he was telling the truth or he was a damned good liar. Tessa didn't know him well enough to decide.

She could guess the answer to her next question, but she had to ask it. "Can anyone verify that?"

"Just Pam." Steve pushed off his desk. He walked to the window, then turned to face them again. "If I'd known I was going to need an alibi, I would have been sure to arrange one."

Tessa ignored the comment. "I'd like to see Pam now."

"I'll get her." Steve walked from the room. He returned in a few moments, his arm linked with his wife's.

"I need to speak with Pam privately." Tessa gave Steve a look.

"I understand." He squeezed his wife's hand, then released her arm. "I'll be in the study if you need me."

Steve left the room, closing the door behind him.

Though Steve had told them Pam was approaching fifty, Tessa would never have guessed she was that old. Tessa remembered someone telling her that Pam had played volleyball in college. She still looked fit enough to rush the net and spike the ball. Her dark hair was long and glossy, and except for a few crow's-feet around her eyes, her skin was smooth and unlined. Around town, islanders gossiped that Pam had had a few nips, tucks, and augmentations, but if she had, the surgeon had been skilled and subtle.

Like Shannon, she'd been crying. Pam's eyes were puffy, and her nose was red. But she wasn't drowning her sorrows in merlot. She held a mug of tea between her hands, gripping it as if she couldn't get warm. In leggings and a tunic-length sweater, she sat on the couch opposite Tessa and curled her legs around her body.

Tessa turned to face her. "When did you last talk to Dante?"

"I went to the studio on Monday for a sitting. The portrait is almost done." She frowned. "I suppose it won't ever be finished now." She sighed. "What's going to happen to the painting?"

The women were all obsessed with their paintings.

"We'll address ownership after we find Dante's killer. Did you know his real name was Frank Martin?" Tessa watched Pam's face closely for a response.

Still frowning, Pam set down her tea. "No. But it doesn't surprise me. He was a talented artist, but he was also very smooth." Her mouth twisted into a crooked smile. "You know what, though? I don't care."

"Did you know he was painting other women?" Logan asked.

"Yes." She picked up her tea again and sipped. "But I never saw any of the others. He was discreet and kept the other paintings in a back room."

Tessa leaned closer. "Where were you at eleven p.m.?"

“Here.” Pam sipped. “I’ve been having terrible insomnia the last few weeks. I took a sleeping pill and went to bed early.”

“What about Steve?” Tessa asked.

“He was here too.” She tucked her feet farther under her body. “He was watching TV in bed when I fell asleep.”

Tessa pushed harder. “Did you wake up during the night?”

“No.” Pam shook her head. “Those pills knock me out. I would have slept through an earthquake.”

Noted.

Tessa stood. “Thank you for your time.”

“Of course.” Pam nodded. “Maybe he had a good reason for lying about his name.”

Tessa thought he may have had a hundred thousand of them. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Witness protection?” Pam had spent too much time in Hollywood.

“We’ll look into that. We might need you to answer more questions, but that’s all for now.” They saw themselves out. Tessa led the way back to the vehicle. Behind the wheel, she said, “Pam can’t alibi Steve either.”

“No.” Logan drummed his fingers on the console. “If she took a sleeping pill, Steve could easily have slipped out, killed Dante, and returned without waking her up. Could either Steve or Brad be the man who attacked you in the studio?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t get a look at his face, but they’re both the right size. Both are in decent enough shape.”

Tessa frowned at the horizon. The sun had set, leaving only the faint trace of pink light peeking over the sea.

Sundown. The word had taken on new meaning since her mother’s disease had progressed. Mom would get more confused as darkness set in, and Patience should not have to deal with her deterioration alone. Cate would have left

when the teenager returned from school. "I need to get home. Can we pick up the investigation tomorrow?"

"Yes. Call me in the morning."

The thought of spending another day with Logan pleased her. Probably too much, but her life was short on happiness at the moment. She was going to let herself enjoy their time together, even if nothing came of it.

She dropped him off at his vehicle and drove home. Her leg throbbed. The local anesthetic was wearing off. She sat in her vehicle for a minute, staring at the house, summoning the energy to deal with her mother.

It's not her fault.

But even knowing that, the last thing Tessa wanted to do at that moment was go inside the house. She was exhausted, physically and emotionally, from fighting a battle they were destined to lose.

But what else could she do?

She climbed out of the vehicle, changed her boots on the porch, and headed for the chicken enclosure, almost grateful for the detour. She opened the wire door and stepped inside. A squawk and flutter of feathers was her three-second warning. Killer Hen beelined for Tessa's legs. She grabbed the broom by the entrance and used it to block the territorial hen's attack. Once the hen had made her point, she smoothed her ruffled feathers and strutted off. But her swagger and backward glance told Tessa their feud was not over.

Tessa fed the chickens, changed their water, and collected six eggs. The coop and enclosure needed a good raking and fresh straw, but that chore could wait for daylight. She left the chickens and trudged up the porch steps. Leaving her boots outside, she went into the house and hung her jacket on its peg.

The kitchen was too warm, almost stifling. Her mother sat at the kitchen table, peeling carrots. She wore a summer nightgown. Her feet were bare.

Patience pulled a casserole dish from the microwave and carried it to the table. Her long red hair was bound in a ponytail. Without makeup, the teen looked young and heartbreakingly vulnerable. "It was easier to turn up the heat than to make her change her clothes."

"I understand. It's fine." Tessa set the basket of eggs on the counter, removed her uniform clip-on tie, and unfastened the top two buttons of her shirt.

"Cate's grandmother sent us a lasagna," Patience said.

"She is so thoughtful." Underneath her stiff uniform, sweat began to gather under Tessa's body armor. She turned to her mother. "Hi, Mom."

Her mother brushed a strand of gray hair away from her eyes. "You're late." Her gaze shifted to Patience, then back to Tessa. "Dinner will be cold. Can't you see we have a guest?"

Tessa glanced at her sister. The teen's face was tight, her eyes misty. Tessa's heart ached for her. Their mother's decline was hard enough for Tessa to handle. A fifteen-year-old should not have to deal with her own mother not recognizing her. Patience needed a break.

Tessa lifted the front of her shirt away from her chest. "I'll be here all evening if you want to hang out with a friend."

The teen's eyes brightened. "There's no school tomorrow. Mallory asked if I could stay over. Her mom said she'd pick me up after dinner. I'll be back before you have to leave for work in the morning."

Tessa had forgotten about the teacher in-service day. "I think that's a great idea. I'm going to change. I'll be right back."

She went to her room, exchanged her uniform for a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, and returned to the kitchen. Her sister was cutting squares of lasagna. They ate with no major blowups. Tessa was grateful for the peaceful meal. A lack-of-

sleep headache had formed behind her eyes, and her leg pulsed with pain. She downed two ibuprofen to cover both.

Patience stood and reached for her plate.

“I’ve got this.” Tessa pushed her chair back. “You go get ready.”

Her sister fled the room as if afraid something would happen to cancel her plans. She emerged ten minutes later carrying a flowered backpack. “Mallory’s mom is here.”

Tessa walked her to the front door and waved as her sister jogged out to the minivan and climbed inside. After locking up, Tessa returned to the kitchen and scooped ice cream—a known weakness of her mother’s—into two bowls.

She set both bowls on the table and sat across from her mother. “I need to ask you a few questions.”

“All right.” Her mom picked up her spoon and dug in.

“It’s about Dante Moreno,” Tessa began carefully.

Her mom set down her spoon. “Well, shit. I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Tessa concealed her shock. She’d never heard her swear before. “The painting?”

Her mother nodded.

“Whose idea was it to paint you?”

The papery skin of her mother’s forehead wrinkled. “I don’t remember.”

“Do you remember going to his studio?”

“Oh, yes.” Mom smiled.

“How did you get there?”

“In the beginning, when the weather was nicer, I walked. But once it got cold, Dante picked me up. He was such a nice boy.”

How could Tessa have had no idea what her mother had been doing? But then, how would she? She would have been at work, and Patience was at school. Tessa had assumed her mother hung around the house all day, weeding her garden and talking to her chickens. Obviously, that wasn’t so.

She hadn't seen her mother happy in a long time, and it broke her heart to have to kill her joy. "Mom, I have some bad news."

Mom's smile faltered.

Tessa took her hands. "Dante passed away."

Shock opened her mother's mouth. "But he was young. Was it an accident?"

Tessa picked her words carefully. She didn't want to frighten her mother, but she didn't want her to hear the news from someone else—even though tomorrow she might forget. "It was very unexpected."

"That's horrible." Mom pushed her ice cream away. "He was such a nice young man."

"That's what people have been saying. How much did he charge you for the painting?"

"Charge me?" Confusion clouded her mother's face. "He didn't charge me anything."

"You didn't give him any money?" Tessa couldn't believe it.

"No. Why would I give him money?"

"Because that's what he did for a living," Tessa said.

"I gave him fresh eggs," her mom said, as if a few dozen eggs were more than enough payment. Her face scrunched up in deep thought. "He also said I reminded him of his mother, and he hadn't been a good son. I told him to go home and apologize for whatever he'd done. He said he could never go home."

Tessa made a mental note to find out more about Dante's criminal history. "Do you remember how you met him?"

"I don't want to answer any more questions." Her mother sat back. "What happened to my painting?"

"It's logged in with the other evidence."

"I want it."

Tessa didn't know who owned it now that Dante was dead. The ME hadn't found any next of kin yet. The other

four women had contracts and bills of sale for their paintings. They would likely be able to prove ownership, but if Dante had truly painted her mother for free, would the painting become part of his estate?

"I'll try to get it for you," Tessa began. "But it's complicated."

"I need that painting, Tessa. It's me." A tear slipped out of her mother's eye. "It's me before." She waved her hands in the air, as if she knew what she wanted to say but couldn't find the words. She gave up, defeated. Her shoulders slumped, and she began to sob.

"I know. And I'm sorry. I locked up the painting, so it's safe for now." But her mother was crying too hard to hear anything. Tessa got up, walked around the table, and put an arm around her mother. "So sorry."

They cried together for a while. Then Tessa got them each a fresh bowl of ice cream. Within a half hour, her mother seemed to forget the whole discussion.

By eight o'clock, her mother went to bed. Tessa lowered the temperature on the thermostat. She called Bruce and asked him to request more information about the fraud charge from the police in New Jersey. Then she settled on the couch with her laptop. There was no way she was going to sleep in her bedroom tonight. She'd bunk right here on the couch, within steps of the front door so she'd hear her mother if she got restless during the night. Tessa opened her computer and began typing her reports on the day's interviews.

She'd worked through several pages of notes when her phone vibrated. Logan's number displayed on the screen.

"Hi," she answered, expecting news about the investigation. "What's up?"

"I just wanted to see how your mother handled the news of Dante's death?"

How thoughtful. Warmth spread through Tessa's chest. He'd been thinking of her, not the case.

“She was upset at first, but it didn’t last long.” She told him what her mother had said about Dante not being able to go home. “I hope the killer is someone from New Jersey. It would be so much better if the killer wasn’t one of us.” She laughed. “That sounds odd, but you know what I mean.”

“I do, and it would,” Logan agreed.

“I probably want that too much,” Tessa admitted.

“Me too, but it’s entirely plausible that one of Dante’s past crimes—or one of his victims—caught up with him.”

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“Please pass the rolls.” Logan dropped his cloth napkin into his lap and kept his elbows off the table.

One of Logan’s most favorite places in the entire world was his grandmother’s table. Jane Sutton was an eccentric and headstrong woman. Instead of using a normal grandmother nickname, she had chosen to be simply called Jane by her grandchildren. But Logan adored every one of Jane’s quirks. Her love was the one constant in his entire life.

His father had died when he was two, and his mother had moved to Arizona when Logan was twelve, leaving her children behind. Adult Logan understood that his mother had not been cut out to be a parent and that it had likely been Jane’s idea to keep Logan and Cate with her. Jane had known her daughter’s limitations. But teenage Logan had been angry and hurt and had hated Widow’s Island with every cell in his body. He’d gone to college on the mainland, then joined the army, only coming back to Widow’s to visit his grandmother.

But when he’d been in the desert, all he’d wanted to do was come home. He’d missed his grandmother’s cinnamon rolls. He’d missed the cool sea air and the forest. When he’d discovered the state forest ranger job was open, he’d taken it. He wasn’t sure how long he’d stay on Widow’s Island, but for now, being here seemed right.

Jane handed him the bread basket, then passed the butter dish.

“Where’s Cate?” Logan buttered a roll.

“Having dinner with Henry.” Jane cut a large square of lasagna and transferred it to his plate. “I made an extra lasagna, and she dropped it at Tessa’s house on her way. That poor girl has her hands full. I thought she could use the break. She’s not going to be able to manage her mother alone much longer.”

“No.” Logan remembered the dark circles under Tessa’s eyes.

“I’ll bring it up at the next meeting of my knitting group.”

The Widow’s Knitting and Activist group was the reason the island had been an early adopter of recycling. Its current project was raising money to help islanders overwhelmed with medical bills.

“Many of the ladies have dealt with ailing husbands,” Jane added. “I’m sure they’ll have suggestions. What did you do today?”

“I’m assisting her with her murder investigation.”

“I know.” The laser gaze Jane set on him meant one of two things. Either he was in trouble or she had ideas about his relationship with Tessa. The thought of his grandmother taking an active interest in his love life made Logan sweat.

Jane cut a smaller slice of lasagna for herself and set it on her plate.

“Does anything happen in this town that you don’t know about?” Logan teased.

Jane’s eyes gleamed. “I should hope not.”

“On that topic.” Logan cut into his lasagna. The scent of melted cheese and tomato sauce wafted to his nose. His stomach rumbled. “Have you heard about any strangers staying in town?”

“Do you think a stranger killed the artist?”

“We don’t know.” Logan forked food into his mouth. The lasagna tasted as good as it smelled.

Jane picked up her fork. "I'd hate to think one of our Widow's Island residents was capable of such a terrible act."

Logan agreed, but he had to be objective. He'd seen firsthand what terrible acts men were capable of committing. "Whoever it is, we will find him."

"I have complete faith in you." Jane reached over and patted his hand as if he were in high school and worried about a test. "Do you remember Mrs. Duvall? She owns the Harbor View Inn."

"I do." Vaguely.

"At today's knitting group protest, Patty was complaining about one of her guests, a man with a New York accent. Patty said he looked shady. She's afraid he might stiff her for the bill. She ran his credit card deposit the minute he left the counter."

Logan drank milk and tried not to laugh at his grandmother's use of the words *shady* and *stiff*. "Do you know how long he's been there?"

She nodded. "He checked in yesterday."

Dante had been from New Jersey, and now a stranger with a New York accent was staying at the inn. After dinner, Logan was going to drop by the inn's lounge for a beer.

"Are you going to check him out?" Jane asked.

"Probably," Logan answered noncommittally.

"Will you take Tessa? It's cold, but the sky is clear tonight. The view of the harbor would be romantic."

Logan shook his fork at Jane. "I do not need a matchmaker."

"You're thirty-five and still single. Do you even have a girlfriend?" At Logan's silence, she said, "Then maybe you do." Leave it to Jane to tell it like it was.

"Considering how widows vastly outnumber widowers on this island, maybe I should stay single," he joked.

"Besides, I've known Tessa since we were kids."

"She's a grown woman now," his grandmother said.

"Yes. I'm aware of that." Very aware.

“Good.” Her smile was far too pleased.

“Anyway. Tessa doesn’t like to leave her mother alone at night. I’ll check out the guest before I bother Tessa. It’s not a crime to have a New York accent.”

He ate a slice of homemade apple pie. Then he carried the dishes to the kitchen, scraped them, and put them in the dishwasher.

“You don’t have to clean up,” Jane protested as she put the leftovers in the fridge.

“Between you and the army, I am as trained as a man can get.” Logan grinned.

She flicked a dish towel at him. “In that case, you can put out the trash before you leave.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

An hour later, Logan parked in front of the Harbor View Inn. The moon glimmered on the shifting waters of Harlot Harbor. He jogged up the wide steps and onto the porch. The dark-wood lobby smelled like furniture polish over mustiness. Logan paused as the sound of Elton John’s “Honky Cat” being played on an oboe reached him.

Logan went through a doorway next to the registration desk into the Breakneck Taproom. A fire blazed in the fireplace. In front of it, Herb Lawson finished his song and lowered his oboe. Three people seated on the couch clapped. Someone brought Herb a beer. He and his oboe had been a Thursday-night tradition for generations.

He slid onto the leather barstool, waved for the bartender, and ordered a local ale on tap. Only three other stools were occupied, with men watching a hockey game on the TV over the bar.

George had been the bartender at the taproom for as long as Logan could remember. At least seventy years old, he didn’t need a wig or beard to play Santa every Christmas. His bartending job supplemented his Social Security.

George tilted and filled the glass, then set it in front of Logan. "You want to run a tab?"

"No. I'll cash out." Logan sipped his beer. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." George wiped a water ring from the bar.

"Have you seen a New Yorker in the hotel lately?"

George nodded. "There was a guy in here last night with a heavy East Coast accent."

"What did he look like?"

"About six feet tall, dark hair, maybe thirty years old," George said. "He was wearing a black leather jacket. He didn't stay. Took his burger to go."

Logan rested both elbows on the bar and leaned closer to George. "Too bad it would be against the rules for you to tell me what room he was in."

"It sure is." George flipped through a stack of receipts.

Logan dug out his wallet. He removed a twenty and handed it over. George went to the cash register and punched some buttons. Ripping off the receipt, he wrote something on the back, then turned around and handed it to Logan with his change. Logan turned over the receipt and read *224 Nick Garcia*.

"I also can't tell you that he called in a room service order about thirty minutes ago." George smiled. "Or that the kitchen has been slow tonight."

So Garcia is probably in his room.

"Do you know if the ferry is running tonight?" Logan asked. There was only one way off the island.

"It is."

"Thanks, George. Keep the change." Logan stuffed his wallet back in his pocket.

George waved his thanks and turned toward another customer. Abandoning his beer, Logan walked out of the bar, crossed the hotel lobby, and hustled out into the cold.

Room 224 was a ground floor end unit in one of the long buildings on the hillside that overlooked the harbor. Logan

debated his options. He could stake out the room. The parking lot would grant him a clear view of the entrance. Then again, if Garcia had just ordered takeout, maybe he was in for the night. Logan did not feel like sitting in a cold SUV all evening.

He checked his watch. Nine o'clock. The last ferry would leave in an hour. He'd watch the room until then. Once the ten o'clock boat had left the dock, Garcia couldn't leave Widow's Island until the seven a.m. ferry.

He moved his SUV to a shadowed space facing the unit. A few minutes later, a hotel employee carrying a tray approached the room and knocked on the door. Logan lowered the vehicle window to listen.

The door swung open, and a man in jeans and a too-tight long-sleeved T-shirt stepped into the light cast by the porch lamp. "My food better be hot." His New York City accent was slurred. His lip was swollen and scabbed in the middle. He signed for his food and closed the door.

Had Garcia received his fat lip in the scuffle with Tessa?

Anger surged in Logan's chest. Though a fat lip was not hard evidence that the New Yorker had been the man who'd attacked Tessa, Logan didn't like the coincidence. But Logan had limited authority outside of the park.

What to do?

He didn't have to debate the issue for long. Fifteen minutes later, the door opened again, and Garcia stepped outside, a duffel bag slung over one shoulder. He hurried toward a path that led to the parking lot closest to the main road. If Logan had been preparing to make a hasty, quiet exit, that's where he would have parked.

Logan climbed out of his SUV. He couldn't let the man leave the island. He crossed the asphalt and stepped onto the path, intercepting Garcia.

"Nick Garcia?" Logan stared at his fat lip. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Garcia sized Logan up, his gaze settling on Logan's park services patch. "Who the fuck are you, head of the Boy Scouts?"

"Logan Wilde, state forest ranger."

"You're not a cop."

"No," Logan admitted.

"Then it looks like you're lost. This ain't the park."

Garcia moved to step around Logan.

Logan blocked his movement. "Where were you this morning?"

"None of your business." Garcia sneered.

"I'm working with the local sheriff's department on the investigation of Frank Martin's murder. Did you know Frank?"

Moving with an agility Logan did not expect, Garcia ducked around him and sprinted for the lot. Logan went after him. The road sat on higher ground than the hotel. The parking lots were terraced and separated by strips of grass and trees. Each tier was higher than the previous one, with the final parking area level with the road.

Garcia raced across the blacktop and bolted up the embankment to the next lot. In city shoes, he slipped halfway up the slope, going down on his knees in the wet grass. He scrambled to his feet.

Logan's hiking boots gave him better purchase on the slick ground. Plus, Garcia looked like he favored TV and burgers, while Logan ran on the park's trails every morning and was still army ranger fit.

He caught up before Garcia had run twenty feet. He reached forward and snagged Garcia's leather jacket at the shoulder, then yanked backward. Garcia's feet kept going, and he went down hard, flat on his back with his head lower than his feet. The air whooshed out of him with an audible grunt. He lay on the sloped ground, gaping like a fish out of water, the wind clearly knocked out of him.

He sucked air for a few seconds, then wheezed, “I’m gonna sue.”

“Go for it.” Logan grabbed him by the bicep and hauled him to his feet. “But first, we’re going to have a talk with the sheriff’s deputy, the one you assaulted this morning when you broke into a crime scene.”

“You can’t prove anything.”

Logan leaned close. “Then why did you run?”

Garcia tried to jerk his arm from Logan’s grip. “Get your hands off me.”

“Yeah. That is not happening.” Logan frog-marched him toward his room. “Behave yourself, or I’ll knock you on your ass again.”

“Where are you taking me?” Garcia shivered. His jeans were wet from his slide in the grass, and his jacket wasn’t zipped.

“Back to your room to wait for the deputy. Unless you want to wait out here.” Logan shrugged. “That would be fine with me. I’m dressed for the weather.”

“You can’t arrest me,” Garcia whined. “You’re not a cop.”

“Which is why I’m calling one now.” Technically, Logan had law enforcement power. Unfortunately, once he left the park, that authority became a little murky. But he wasn’t letting a potential murder suspect get away.

Logan pulled out his phone one-handed and called Tessa. As much as he hated to bother her, he didn’t have a choice. He pressed the speed dial number he’d assigned to her that morning.

The phone rang several times before she answered in a groggy voice, “Logan? What is it?”

Shit. She’d been asleep.

“I’m sorry for waking you. I’m holding a Mr. Nick Garcia in the parking lot of the Harbor View Inn. He has a New York accent and a big fat lip. Do you want to talk to him, or do you want me to contact whoever is on call tonight?”

Fabric rustled on the other end of the line. "I want to talk to him. I'll be right there."

Tessa hung up. Logan and Garcia had reached Garcia's room.

"Do you want to wait outside or in?" Logan couldn't force his way inside without a warrant, and he didn't want to compromise any evidence that could be in the room.

"Might as well go inside." Garcia trudged over the threshold. "There's nothing incriminating here." He spoke with the certainty of a man who had experience eliminating evidence.

Logan followed him into the unit. Garcia perched on the edge of the bed, glaring at Logan in defiance.

Was Garcia a thug or a killer?

Logan turned the desk chair around to face the bed.

"I didn't kill him," Garcia blurted out. "You can't frame me."

"But you know that he's dead."

"Well, yeah. Everyone in town was talking about it."

"Then why did you break into his place?"

Garcia's temper got the best of him. A vein on the side of his neck pulsed, and his face reddened. "He ripped off my mother, that's why. I just want to get back what he owed her." Garcia's jaw tightened with indignation. "He charmed her into letting him stay in her extra bedroom, then he stole her ATM and credit cards. That little shitbag cleaned out her bank accounts."

Garcia huffed. "I got here the other day and did a little surveillance. When I learned he was using a fake name, I figured he didn't have a bank account. He'd have the cash stashed somewhere."

"How much did he steal?"

"Twenty thousand bucks." Garcia jabbed a finger at Logan. "I know it's not a fortune, but it was all she had. It's the principle of the matter. He stole from my ma. I'm

disappointed that he's dead 'cause I wanted to punch him in the face."

"So you didn't kill him."

"No," Garcia said. "I just wanted what's owed to her. Not a penny more."

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Disoriented, Tessa set down her phone and sat up on the couch. Still processing Logan's call, she ran a hand through her hair. Her stitches burned under the bandage on her leg. Her gaze fell to the blanket that covered her, then to the laptop that was closed on the coffee table. She'd been working when she'd fallen asleep.

Who had brought her a blanket and closed her laptop?

A sick feeling stirred in her belly. There was only one other person in the house. The thought of her mother walking around, unsupervised, disturbed her. She stood and limped to the foyer. Moonlight shone through the front windows. Tessa turned the doorknob. Unlocked.

No.

After being awake the entire night before, Tessa must have been sleeping so soundly that her mother had covered her with a blanket and walked right out the front door without waking her.

She whirled and raced back to her mother's bedroom. The door was open, the room empty.

"Mom!" Tessa ran through the rest of the house, calling for her mother, knowing she wouldn't find her but needing to methodically check every room before she moved her search outside. Out of habit, Tessa grabbed her gun and off-duty holster from the gun safe as she passed her bedroom. She clipped the holster to the waistband of her jeans.

Noticing that her mother's coat and boots were missing from the foyer, Tessa stepped into her own boots and

grabbed her jacket. Outside, the temperature had dropped. Dampness on the wind and clouds overhead promised rain. Shivering, Tessa checked the chicken enclosure and barn.

But her mother wasn't anywhere on the property. Maybe she hadn't gotten far.

Panic twisted in Tessa's belly and numbed the pain in her leg. She stood in the driveway, scanning the road in both directions. To the north, the left side of the road was lined with thick forest that eventually bordered the state park. To the south, the road led to Widow's Walk. Which way to go?

Tessa's mom had been headed north when Cate had found her the previous night. If dementia had proven one thing, it was that her mother was a creature of habit. Tessa jumped into her patrol vehicle and began driving north on Orcas Road.

She said a silent prayer that she'd made the right choice.

As she drove, she switched the phone to speaker and called Logan. "My mother slipped out of the house. Would you take Garcia to the station and have Bruce put him in the holding cell? I'll question him after I find my mother."

"I'll drop him off and help you look for her."

"Thank you." If Tessa didn't find her in twenty minutes, she was calling in additional reinforcements. The night was warm for December, but people could suffer from hypothermia in fifty-degree weather. She thought of her mother, dressed only in her nightgown, sitting at the table the night before, refusing to put on warmer clothing. Her coat and boots were missing, and Tessa hoped she was wearing them.

She called Bruce, who was the on-call deputy that night, and asked him to meet Logan at the station. Then she drove north, her gaze sweeping from one side of the road to the other. She lowered the window and called for her mother. Three miles later, with a leaden heart, she turned around

and backtracked to the house. It was time to get help. She called Kurt and then Cate.

When she returned home, Logan's Range Rover was pulling into the driveway. Logan got out and walked to the driver's side. "Any sign of her?"

"No." Tessa stared through the windshield at the road pointing south. "I went north because that's where Cate picked her up last time. But what if she went south?" Tessa choked on the rest of the words—*to Widow's Walk and the cliff?*

But Logan knew what she meant. His mouth tightened. "We need more people."

Tessa breathed. "Cate and Henry are already on their way to Widow's Walk."

The walkway above the cliffs was the most dangerous place on the island. That's where Sam had disappeared. But there were other places just as deadly for a confused older woman: lakes, streams, beaches, woods. Except for the quaint tourist areas, Widow's Island was largely wild and rural. "Kurt is calling for volunteers and organizing a search."

Considering the vast acreage surrounding them, desperation gathered in Tessa's belly.

Where could she be?

"How long has she been gone?" Logan asked.

Tessa checked her watch. "It's ten thirty now. I remember being awake and working past eight. I'd say the earliest she left was eight thirty."

"We need a map of the area. Most lost people can travel about two miles per hour, so we're looking at a maximum distance of four miles from the point last seen. But older people suffering from Alzheimer's tend to be found closer to home, so it's unlikely that she wandered too far away."

Logan scanned the woods on the other side of the road.

"But we have to remember your mother's illness. She might not think she's lost. She could have a specific place she's

going. She might not recognize the people calling for her, even if she knows them. She might even hide from rescuers.”

Logan’s words hit Tessa like a steamroller. As a rural cop, she also knew search and rescue basics, but her brain felt short-circuited by fear. Her mother was emotionally and mentally fragile, and she was alone out there in the darkness.

Logan eyed the forest. “Do you have any idea where she would have gone? Does she like to walk in the woods?”

“When I was a kid, we used to hike in the state park, but she hasn’t hiked anywhere in years. Mostly she hangs around the house.” Or at least that’s what Tessa had thought.

“Well, you checked the road. The land to the south is open. If she’s out there, Cate and Henry will spot her.” Logan reached into the vehicle and put his hand on Tessa’s forearm. “Your mother isn’t the first older person to wander off. We’ll find her.”

“I know.” Tessa had participated in several searches in the past year and a half.

“We need supplies if we’re going into the woods.” Logan released her arm.

Tessa’s phone beeped. Kurt’s number displayed on the screen, and she answered the call.

“I have a dozen volunteers so far,” he said. “We’re going to set up a command center at your house. I’m on my way to you now.”

“Thanks, Kurt.”

The line went dead.

Tessa stared at the woods. There were trails all through the forest. Jerry used one to visit her mother on his mountain bike.

Suddenly she knew exactly where her mother had gone.
I need that painting.

Tessa waved to Logan. "We have to go. I'll explain on the way."

Logan rounded the vehicle and climbed into the passenger seat. Tessa pulled away while he was still closing the door.

Logan fastened his seat belt.

Tessa looked like she wanted to throw up as she white-knuckled the steering wheel. "I have an idea of a place to look for my mother."

"Where?"

Tessa pressed the gas pedal down. "I think—I hope—she went to Dante's barn to get her painting. If she's not there, then I don't know where else to look."

"But the painting is at the station."

"Mom doesn't know that." The vehicle lurched forward. Tessa filled him in on her discussion with her mother from the night before. "I told her the painting was safe, but she was so upset about Dante's death and her not being able to have her painting right away. She didn't hear anything else I said. Could you call Jerry and see if he's seen Mom?"

"This is not your fault." Logan made the call. "He's not answering."

Tessa shook her head, her expression grim. "I slept on the damned sofa so I'd hear her if she walked toward the door. I can't believe I didn't wake up."

"You'd been awake for thirty-six hours. Of course you slept hard." Logan couldn't imagine the guilt Tessa was feeling right now. But then, as he well knew, sometimes you didn't have to be at fault to carry guilt.

"I know." But her face was strained and her voice tight.

"Take a deep breath. If you're right, we'll collect your mom and take her home," Logan said, mostly to take

Tessa's mind off her lost mother. "You said she took her boots and coat?"

Tessa nodded.

"That's a good sign."

"And what if she's not at Dante's studio?"

"Then we'll head into the woods. Kurt's command center will be set up within the hour." He reached over and squeezed Tessa's hand. "We're going to find her."

If only he had half the gadgets that had been available to him as an army ranger. A heat detector and NVGs would be most useful tonight.

Tessa nodded again, her face tight with worry. Logan released his grip. To distract her, he filled her in on his conversation with Nick Garcia.

"Do you believe him?" Tessa asked.

"I don't know." But Logan was afraid that Garcia wasn't the killer and that the true murderer was still out there.

The road straightened out, and Tessa accelerated. Jerry's house and barn appeared on the right. Tessa pulled into the driveway and parked. She and Logan jumped out of the vehicle.

"Mom!" Tessa called, striding toward the barn. No one answered.

Logan reached for the doorknob and froze. Crime scene tape fluttered in the doorway, no longer fastened on both ends. Had the wind broken the seal, or had a person?

Tessa moved past him into the converted barn. Logan stayed close. He whispered, "Do you think your mom would cross the crime scene tape?"

"I don't know. She does a lot of things I would never have expected."

"Someone else could be inside."

Tessa's quiet steps indicated that she agreed with him. They walked through the living areas but saw no one. The rooms had already been ransacked. Logan couldn't tell if they'd been searched again.

Logan poked his head into the storage area. “She’s not in here either.”

Tessa checked a closet. There were no other hiding places large enough to conceal an adult. “She’s not here.” Her voice was disappointed.

“We’ll try the trail that leads back out to Orcas Road. Maybe she’s still on the trail.”

Tessa nodded and turned around. Her nose wrinkled. “Do you smell smoke?”

Logan sniffed. The pungent scent of gasoline penetrated his nostrils. Alarm and adrenaline shot through his bloodstream. “We need to get out of here.”

They hurried from the studio back into the living area. The heat hit Logan immediately. As they crossed the threshold into the living room, flames licked up the front wall of the barn. Logan turned away from the burning front door. “There has to be a back door.”

Smoke filled the room. Whoever had set the fire must have used a large quantity of gasoline for the flames to catch and spread that quickly. Tessa and Logan ran for the kitchen area in the back of the building.

“Wait!” Tessa darted back into the studio.

“Damn it!” Logan ran after her. *What the hell is she doing?*

She emerged a few seconds later, carrying a hissing and flailing orange tabby cat.

Wood creaked overhead.

“The roof!” Logan pointed upward.

A beam fell behind Tessa. Embers flew into the air and ignited the carpet. Flames rushed across the floor as another piece of wood fell from the ceiling. Smoke filled the space.

“Run!” Logan gave Tessa a push toward the windows.

Trying to hold on to the panicking, fighting cat, she staggered. Logan opened the window. The flames rushed toward the fresh oxygen—and them. He took off his jacket

and wrapped it around the terrified animal, then took the wriggling bundle from Tessa. She slipped over the sill. After tucking the cat under his arm, Logan climbed out behind her.

They raced out into the night air as the roof caved in. Sparks showered around them. Logan stayed close to Tessa, shielding her as best he could.

Coughing, they ran around to the front of the barn and stopped short. Pam Rhodes was standing in the grass, holding a gas can and staring at the burning building. More cans littered the yard.

Logan stared at her. The cat howled, clawed its way over his shoulder, and took off for the woods.

Pam froze. Anger lowered her brow. "What are you doing here?"

Tessa pulled her weapon and aimed it at Pam. "Slowly put down the gas can, and raise your hands."

Pam's eyes caught the firelight, reflecting rage.

A door slammed. Jerry ran across the backyard clad in a pair of flannel pajamas and slippers. He grabbed the garden hose, turned it on with a squeak, and raced for the fire. He yelled, "I called the fire department. What the hell is going on?" Apparently, he hadn't seen the gas can Pam was holding.

Widow's Island's fire company was made up of volunteers. Each man had to drive to the station and suit up before they could respond to the call. The barn would be beyond saving by the time they arrived.

Pam's gaze was fixed on Tessa. Logan eased backward one step, moving slowly so he didn't distract Pam, hoping he could circle around behind her. He shifted closer to the shadow of the burning barn. Heat seared his shoulder and face. Flames engulfed the corner of the barn, and the fire climbed up the side toward the roof. It wouldn't be long before the entire structure burned.

“Pam!” Tessa’s voice hardened. She slowly stepped sideways, moving away from the flames. “Put down the gas can.”

“Not until this entire barn and everything inside it burns to the ground,” Pam snapped, but she mirrored Tessa’s movement, taking two steps away from the fire. Unfortunately, she also angled her movement backward, which put her closer to Jerry.

Pam lifted the can until it was in front of her chest. If Tessa shot at her, the can might explode, especially if it contained more fumes than liquid. Jerry was close enough to get caught in the explosion.

Tessa shouted, “Jerry, get away from the fire. You can’t save the barn.”

Either the roar of the fire drowned out Tessa’s command or Jerry was too focused to hear her.

Pam turned toward Jerry and lifted the gas can.

Logan read her intention in her body language. She was going to turn them both into human torches. But Logan was too far away to stop her.

“Don’t do it, Pam!” Tessa shouted.

“Fuck off.” Pam doused Jerry and herself with gasoline. She grabbed him by the sleeve, dropped the gas can, and held a lit lighter in front of their bodies.

9

Tessa had no good options. If she shot at Pam, she could drop the lighter, setting both her and Jerry on fire.

Jerry went still. His eyes opened wide in panic. Tessa caught his gaze and held it for a second, then she dropped hers to the hose he still held. He followed her line of sight. Relief crossed his face, as if he'd forgotten he was holding a running hose.

His jaw tightened, and he raised his hand and pointed the hose at the lighter. Water extinguished Pam's flame. She tried to relight it, but nothing happened. Frustrated, she tried to drag Jerry closer so she could use him as a shield. But he jerked his sleeve from her grip. He broke away and fell to his knees. Turning the hose on himself, he soaked his pajamas, then scrambled back toward the house.

Pam snatched the gas can again and held it in front of her body. Tessa had had enough. The barn was toast, but she wasn't going to let Pam hurt anyone. Tessa stalked forward. Pam backed up, then stopped when she realized the fire was in her retreat path.

She turned as if to run around the barn. Logan emerged from around the corner, blocking her escape.

Panic lit Pam's eyes. She backed up again toward the fire, her eyes shifting between Tessa, Logan, and the burning barn. Rain began to fall, dampening Tessa's face.

"I'll jump in," Pam threatened.

Tessa ignored the threat. At this point, the only person Pam could hurt was herself. Tessa was grateful that her

mom hadn't been in the barn, but she still needed to find her. The night was getting colder, and the rain would slow their search and increase the risk of hypothermia.

"It's over, Pam." Tessa stooped and snatched the hose from the ground. She aimed it at Pam and pulled the lever. Water gushed. Pam dropped the gas can and raised her hands to block the water streaming in her face.

Tessa gave her a thorough soaking. Pam was sputtering and wiping her eyes when Tessa approached. "Put your hands on your head, and turn around."

Pam complied.

"You're under arrest." Tessa holstered her gun and brought one of Pam's hands behind her back. "On your knees."

When Pam resisted, Tessa gave her wrist a twist, using leverage to force her to submit.

Pam sank to the ground. "Bitch."

Tessa turned out Pam's wet pockets and found a sopping book of matches and a set of keys but no other weapons. Tessa's hand automatically went to her waist, looking for her handcuffs. But she wasn't in uniform. She'd been looking for her mother. She hadn't planned on arresting an arsonist. "Logan, could you get my spare handcuffs from the SUV?"

After he returned with the handcuffs, Tessa fastened them around Pam's wrists.

Sirens sounded in the distance.

Jerry waved toward the barn. "Why the hell did you burn down my barn?"

But Pam just glared at him.

"Did you kill Dante?" Tessa asked her.

Pam looked away and didn't answer, but Tessa could see the anger and guilt in her eyes. Was Pam strong enough to have harpooned Dante? Tessa thought yes. Pam was not a small woman. She was also athletic, and as Logan had

pointed out at the crime scene, a harpoon was specifically designed to impale flesh.

Anyway, Tessa didn't have time to interrogate her now. It would have to wait until she found her mother.

Fire trucks roared down the road, turned into the driveway, and drove past Tessa's vehicle and a BMW she assumed belonged to Pam. Kurt and Bruce arrived in their patrol vehicles right behind the fire department.

Tessa gave them a quick rundown of the evening's events. "Bruce, can you take Mrs. Rhodes to the station? Put her in the holding cell. Get a formal statement from Garcia about his relationship with Frank Martin, and cuff him to something heavy."

"Will do." Bruce took Pam by the elbow and marched her toward his patrol car.

"I was on my way to your house to set up the search and rescue command center when the fire call came in," Kurt said.

Firemen hauled hoses across the yard and began spraying Jerry's house. With the barn a lost cause, the best they could do was to keep the fire from spreading.

"Logan and I are going to hike the trail from here to Orcas Road." Tessa limped away from the barn. As her adrenaline ebbed, the pain in her leg returned, and nausea swirled in her belly. "This is still the most likely place she would go."

"I'll set up the command center at your house." Kurt got into his vehicle and drove away, strobe lights flashing in the darkness.

Tessa turned to Logan. Soot streaked his face and jacket, and his eyes were red and watering from the smoke. Her own eyes and lungs burned, and her leg throbbed. "Are you ready?"

He paused. "All of this commotion might scare your mother if she's on the trail. Why don't you drive around to the other side? I'll run up the path and meet you. That way,

we won't miss her if she decides to double back." Logan paused. "No offense. I know you run every day, but you're injured. I can move faster without you."

As much as she wanted to, Tessa couldn't argue with his logic. Her leg felt like it was on fire. She could still function, but she wasn't at her best. She'd only slow him down.

"All right. I have a flashlight in the SUV." She went to her vehicle. Logan followed her. Taking two bottles of water from the cargo hold, she handed one to Logan. "And thank you."

Logan poured water over his face, then drank the rest in a few long swallows. He tossed the empty bottle into the vehicle.

Tessa pulled out her backpack and held it out to him, along with a flashlight. "It's stocked with water, a first aid kit, a survival blanket . . ."

"I got it." Logan slung it onto his back. "I'll meet you on the road."

"Remember, she might be scared. She might not recognize you."

Logan stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Tessa, I know how to hunt people down who don't want to be found."

"I guess you do." To find her mother, she was going to have to give up control. She couldn't fix this alone.

"If she's there, I'll find her." Logan turned and ran toward the woods.

If she's there . . .

Tessa's phone beeped as she opened her vehicle door. Cate's number displayed on the screen.

"Cate?" Tessa answered.

"We checked all along Widow's Walk," Cate said. "There's no sign of your mom."

Tessa didn't know whether to be relieved or not.

"We're going to drive back to your house," Cate continued. "We'll meet up with Kurt there."

“Thanks, Cate.” Tessa climbed into her vehicle, turned it around, and headed away from the fire. As she drove, she put Cate on speaker and filled her in on the fire and Pam Rhodes.

“Why Pam?” Cate asked.

“I don’t know yet.” Tessa would worry about the whys and hows after her mother was safe.

“If you want help interrogating her, I’m in.” Anger sharpened Cate’s voice.

“I appreciate that.” Tessa ended the call. Then she made the loop around the forest and slowed her SUV. The rain intensified, obscuring her view of the woods. She turned on her high beams and crawled along the shoulder of the road, looking for the opening to the trail.

Her mother had to be out here.
Somewhere.

Logan jogged down the trail. He could move faster, but he didn’t want to miss any signs that Tessa’s mother could have wandered off the trail. He stopped every twenty-five yards, scanned the ground with his flashlight, and listened, trying to sort out forest sounds from the honk and squawk of fire trucks in the distance.

Gradually, the sound of the rain falling through the foliage became louder than the sirens.

He swept the flashlight back and forth across the trail. He didn’t want to emerge at the other end of the trail without Tessa’s mother.

Branches rustled in front of him. He pointed his flashlight toward the sound. Five tiny deer bounded away from him, their black tails bobbing with each stride. Disappointment surged through him. If she wasn’t on this

trail, if she hadn't gone to find her portrait, she could be anywhere within a three-mile radius.

The wind moaned through the trees.

Wait.

Logan tilted his head, his ears straining. The sound was not the wind. It was a person.

"Mrs. Flagg?" he called.

The moan grew louder. Logan followed it around a bend in the trail. Tessa's mother lay on her side, huddled in a ball. At the sight of her, lying completely still, alarm spiked through him.

Please be all right.

Logan approached her as slowly as if she were one of the wild island deer. "Mrs. Flagg?"

She didn't react.

"Bonnie?" he tried her first name. "I'm here to help you."

Nothing.

Logan knelt beside her. Holding his breath, he pressed two fingers to the side of her neck. Her pulse thumped weakly against his fingertips. Relief flooded him.

He pulled out his cell phone and called Tessa. "I found her. I'll have her at the trailhead in ten minutes."

"Is she all right?" Fear tightened Tessa's voice.

Shining his flashlight on her, Logan assessed her condition. The toe of her boot was caught under an exposed tree root. A thin line of blood trickled down her temple. Logan ran a hand over her head and found a sticky spot behind her ear. A rock lay on the ground near her.

He didn't want to tell Tessa how bad her mother looked, but lying to her would do more harm in the long run. If her mother . . .

No. He wasn't going there. Not yet.

"She's unconscious." He stuck to the facts. "It looks like she tripped and hit her head."

Logan splayed his hand at the base of her throat. The skin of Bonnie's neck was far too cold. All she wore was a wool coat unbuttoned over a thin cotton nightgown. The skin of her face and neck was white, her lips tinged with blue.

"Hypothermia is a strong possibility as well," he added. Pale and still, Bonnie looked fragile. "I can't tell if she's broken any bones."

"Where are you?" Tessa asked.

"About a half mile from the road." He looked down the trail. It was narrow, barely wide enough for a bike to pass. "I'll carry her out."

"I'll call Henry and have him meet us at his office."

Logan freed Bonnie's boot from under the root. "Call the ferry terminal too. The boat should be back by now. Tell them to get ready for an emergency run."

The ferry would be in its pen, waiting for the morning run, and available for emergency medical transport to the mainland.

"I have to hang up now. I'll meet you in ten minutes." Logan stuffed the phone into his pocket, opened the backpack, and found the Mylar emergency blanket. He tucked it under Bonnie's coat as best he could. Then he buttoned the coat. He removed his own jacket and wrapped that around her too.

Logan slipped the flashlight into his pocket. He couldn't carry her and simultaneously light the way. He slid his arms under her body and picked her up, cradling her close to his body.

Between the heavy cloud cover and thick canopy overhead, the trail was dark. Logan couldn't run for fear of tripping. A second head injury would not help Bonnie. Moving as quickly as he dared, he made his way up the trail. Ten minutes later, he emerged at the road.

A set of headlights approached. The vehicle slowed and stopped in front of him.

Tessa.

She jumped out of the car. Tears and rain streamed down her soot-streaked face. Logan walked toward the SUV, and Tessa opened the rear door.

He gently deposited her mother onto the back seat. “Why don’t you sit back here with her and let me drive.”

Tessa climbed in beside her mother and closed the door.

Logan slid behind the wheel. He cranked up the heat and turned the vehicle around. “Did you get Henry on the phone?”

“Yes,” Tessa said from the back seat. “The plan is for him to stabilize her before we get on the ferry. He’ll come with us.”

Logan glanced in the rearview mirror. Bonnie hadn’t moved. He drove to Henry’s office and carried her inside.

Henry assessed her, covered her with warm blankets, and started a heated IV. “Her vital signs are surprisingly good.”

Bonnie stirred as he checked her pupils. Relief flooded Logan as she opened her eyes and murmured, “What happened? Where am I?”

10

The next day, Tessa leaned against the ferry railing. Beside her, Logan drank coffee from a cardboard cup. The afternoon sun shone on the water.

They'd spent the entire night at the hospital on the mainland. Her mother was going to be okay. She was lucky to have only suffered mild hypothermia, a concussion, and a sprained ankle. Tessa shuddered to think how badly she *could* have been injured.

She turned, putting her back to the sea and facing Logan. "Thank you for carrying my mother out of the woods. If you hadn't been there . . ."

"You're welcome." Logan's eyes met Tessa's. "But you would have managed. The residents of Widow's would have come together, just like they did to get the ferry out in record time."

It was true. Medical emergencies reminded islanders how isolated they were—and how much they needed each other. The ferry operators had had the big boat ready to go by the time Tessa and Logan had arrived at the terminal with her mother. Henry had gone with them, but he'd returned on an earlier ferry.

Widow's Island came into view. The ferry blew its horn. It sounded like home.

"When is Patience coming home?" Logan asked.

"She's staying with Mallory until tomorrow." Tessa had called her sister from the hospital. She hadn't wanted her to

hear the news from anyone else. Gossip spread faster than the flu on Widow's Island.

Logan stretched. Tessa was too tired to think about it right now, but tomorrow, she was going to remember how nicely the muscles of his back shifted under his sweatshirt.

"Now what?" Logan led the way down to the vehicle level. "You should get some sleep."

Tessa climbed into her SUV. She'd slept less than two hours in the past three days. Every inch of her body ached. They stared through the windshield and waited for the boat to dock.

"I have to question Pam first," she said.

"I'll go with you."

"You don't have to." Tessa started the engine. "I know you want to get back to the park, and you have to be exhausted too. You've been awake as long as I have."

"I want to finish the investigation," Logan said.

"Glad to hear it." Tessa drove off the ferry. "I'm not even going to stop at home to shower or change. If I do, I'll fall asleep. I apologize if I'm not smelling my freshest."

"I spent two weeks in a hundred-and-twenty-degree heat wearing full body armor with no access to a shower. You still smell fresh as a daisy."

Her voice softened. "Why did you leave the army? I thought you were career military."

Logan sighed. "On my last mission, a suicide bomber blew up a vaccination clinic." A slight choking sound emanated from his throat. "It was full of women and children."

"I'm so sorry." She couldn't imagine . . .

"I came back to the States. When it was time to sign my papers to re-up, I couldn't do it." He looked out the window, the conflict clear in his eyes.

"I'd say you did more than your share," she said.

"Anyway. The only thing I wanted was to come home and be alone. The park ranger job seemed perfect." He

rubbed the back of his neck. "I expected to be dealing with poachers and pain-in-the-ass teenagers, not murder."

"The murder was most unexpected." Tessa still couldn't believe it had happened on Widow's Island.

"Do you miss Seattle?" he asked.

"At first I did, but now that I've settled in here, I can't imagine going back to the traffic, the crowds, the fast pace of city life." She scanned the stunning green vista. "The island feels like home."

Logan sighed. "It does."

Tessa parked in front of the station. "Let's get this done so we can both go to sleep."

Inside, Pam waited in the holding cell. Cuffed to a pipe, Garcia dozed in a chair. His head rested on the wall behind him. Under the scent of coffee, something smelled delicious.

Bruce was pouring a large mug of coffee. "I just brewed a fresh pot, and Logan's grandmother dropped off a pan of cinnamon rolls."

"Hallelujah." Tessa filled her giant travel mug with coffee and shoved half a cinnamon roll into her mouth. The sugar and caffeine might keep her going for another hour.

"Here's Garcia's statement." Bruce handed Tessa a printed report. She read through it. Garcia hadn't exactly admitted to breaking and entering the barn, but he had doubled down on his claim that his mother had been scammed out of her life savings by Frank Martin.

Tessa set the report down and went to the holding cell door. "Come here and turn around," she said to Pam.

Pam obeyed. Her anger seemed deflated. Tessa handcuffed her before opening the cell door. She led Pam to a chair next to the second desk. A video camera faced the chair. Tessa began recording. Murder was the most serious of all charges. Despite her exhaustion, Tessa took her time and paid particular attention to following legal procedure. She read Pam her rights and had her sign a form stating that she understood them.

But Tessa was too damned tired to dance around the charges. “Why did you kill Frank Martin, also known as Dante Moreno?”

“Everyone thought Dante was such a sweet boy.” Pam’s glare could have cut through the steel bars of the cell. “But he was actually a nasty little weasel.”

Tessa had no problem believing that, not after reading Nick Garcia’s statement. She waited, letting the silence play out.

“I wanted my deposit back,” Pam said. “And I wanted him to destroy the painting. That’s all.”

“Why?”

“He painted in my fucking C-section scar and the cellulite on my thighs. Who does that?” she spat. “If I’d wanted reality, I would have hired a photographer. My husband spends his time in LA with beautiful young women like Leslie Lamont. I wanted to look hot too, for the last time in my fucking life.”

“You killed Frank because you didn’t like the painting?”

Pam grimaced. “No, I killed him because when I told him I wasn’t giving him any more money, he said he’d finish the portrait without me and sell it in the art shop in town.”

Then Tessa understood. He’d threatened to put Pam out on display if she didn’t pay him. It was blackmail. “You thought the painting was in the studio, and you wanted to destroy it?”

Pam straightened. “Wasn’t it in the studio?”

“No,” Tessa said. “It’s here in the evidence locker.”

Pam’s head dropped. “I can’t fucking win.”

Logan shifted his weight. “You gave Steve your sleeping pill, didn’t you?”

Pam didn’t answer.

“He didn’t hear you leave the house,” Logan continued. “You knew Dante would be at the beach. It was a clear night, and he’d been working on that painting of the beach in the moonlight. Did you drive there or take the boat?”

Tessa thought about the little runabout tied up at the Rhodeses' dock. "You took the small boat and used the public dock at the park. That way, no one would see you driving along the road or entering the park."

The large fishing boat would be difficult for one person to dock at the state park.

"I went there to talk to him. I didn't intend to kill him. All I wanted was for him to destroy the painting, but he was a greedy little bastard. He laughed at me."

Logan pressed her. "You took the harpoon from the fishing boat with you, didn't you?"

Premeditation. Despite what she'd said, she *had* intended to kill him when she'd left the boat.

Pam started to cry.

Tessa had no pity. Pam had killed a man over her vanity.

"Get back in there." Two days later, Tessa squeezed out of the chicken enclosure and shut the door in Killer Hen's face.

She could hear Cate laughing from her seat on the porch steps.

"When does your mom come home?" Cate asked.

"She's being released tomorrow." Tessa walked back to the porch, set down the basket of eggs she'd collected, and sat next to her friend. Cate handed her a beer.

She took a long pull.

"Have you found someone to stay with her while you work?" Cate asked.

"No." And Tessa was starting to panic about the day-to-day realities of managing her mother. "I'm looking into hiring a home health aide, but frankly, they're scarce on the island, and my budget won't cover live-in help. I'm waiting to see what medical insurance will cover."

“I might have another option for you.” Cate’s blue eyes brightened.

“Really?” She latched on to the hope.

“Actually, I can’t take the credit. It’s my grandmother’s idea,” Cate admitted. “She says the knitting group will handle it. Someone will be here to look after your mother while you’re at work. There are enough members so that it won’t be a burden on any one of them.”

Tessa’s eyes misted. “I can’t believe it.”

A smile tugged at Cate’s mouth. “Once the Widow’s Island Knitting and Activist group tackles a problem, it gets solved.”

“They know how to get shit done.” Tessa threw an arm around her best friend’s neck and hugged her. “I know it’s only a temporary solution, but for now, at least I’ll be able to go to work and know my mom is safe.”

“What are you going to do about her nighttime wandering?” Cate asked.

“I’m looking into some options.” Tessa was considering a watch with GPS capabilities, but they were pricey. “For the short term, I bought a hotel room door alarm. I can hang it on her doorknob at night, and it will go off if the door opens.” Tessa didn’t want to think about how much the noise would frighten her mother. But her savings was quickly dwindling. The new Alzheimer’s medication was obscenely expensive and had not been covered by insurance. If only her savings multiplied as quickly as the black-tailed deer of Widow’s Island. But the situation was what it was. Tessa stood and brushed some dirt off her pants.

“Where are you going?” Cate asked.

Tessa picked up her basket. “To take your grandmother some fresh eggs and thank her. Are you coming?”

“Of course.” Cate got to her feet. “Did you ever find out if Dante took money from your mother?”

Tessa shook her head. "I found no evidence that he did. Her bank accounts are untouched, and we don't have much cash lying around the house."

"Seems weird that a guy who made his living scamming women would do something nice."

"According to my mom, she reminded him of his own mother. We located Dante's—I mean Frank's—sister. She doesn't want anything that belonged to her brother. Apparently, he stole their own mother's money before he left New Jersey. I think the gesture to my mother was an attempt to alleviate his guilt."

"Your mother can have her painting." Cate smiled.

"Yes." Tessa welcomed anything that gave her mother a small amount of happiness. There would be precious little of that in her future.

"What happened to Garcia?" Cate asked.

"We transferred him to the mainland, and he's been formally charged with breaking and entering and assaulting an officer." But considering the circumstances and his lack of priors, Tessa doubted he'd serve any time in jail.

"I love getting straight confessions," Cate said.

"They make wrapping up cases so much neater," Tessa agreed. "Speaking of wrapping up cases, Sam's file was delivered from the mainland today. I'll start reading it tomorrow."

"You don't have to rush. You've had a rough few days."

"I know, but these past few weeks, with two murder investigations on the island, I can't stop thinking of Sam," Tessa said. "Do you think there's any chance she's still alive?"

"I don't know, but we both know the statistics aren't in her favor."

"No, they aren't."

Cate's focus shifted to the road. "Someone's coming."

Tessa shielded her eyes and followed her friend's gaze. An SUV approached. A minute later, Logan's Range Rover

pulled into her driveway. He climbed out.

"I'll see you at my grandmother's house later," Cate said. Then she hurried to her vehicle, kissing her brother on the cheek as she passed him and leaving Tessa slightly suspicious of her hasty exit.

Logan opened the SUV's cargo hatch and removed two shopping bags.

"What is that?" Tessa asked as he approached.

"A few gadgets I thought might be useful to you." He set the bags on the porch and lifted out a small box. "These are contact sensors. I can install them on your doors, including your mom's bedroom door. You can program an audible sound to signal that one of the doors has been opened. You can also have a notification go on your cell phone, and you can set each sensor separately, depending on the time of day."

"I'd know if she left her room or the house."

"Yes." Logan lifted a small white camera. "Motion-sensing cameras. In the event that your mother does leave the house, you'll be able to see which way she went. I can mount these at each exterior door. I can also put one or two inside so you can check on her while you're at work. You can watch a live feed on your phone." Next, Logan held up a slender silver bracelet. "This looks like a piece of jewelry, but it has a GPS tracker inside. You can find your mother anywhere as long as she's wearing it. The clasp is very hard to open. I doubt she'd be able to get it off by herself." He paused. "We don't have to use anything you think is too intrusive."

"I don't think any of this is intrusive." Tessa remembered the sheer panic at thinking her mother might have headed for Widow's Walk. "I want to keep her safe and at home as long as possible."

"She comes home tomorrow, right?"

"Right."

"Then I'd better get busy installing these devices."

Gratitude overwhelmed her. “I don’t know what to say.”
“You don’t need to say anything.”

“I disagree.” Tessa stared at the shopping bags, then raised her gaze to meet his. “Just tell me what this all cost, and I’ll repay you.”

“No.” His chin went up. “We might have had a murder or two, but this is still Widow’s Island, not Seattle or Afghanistan, where we can be in a crowd of people and yet still be alone. We might be isolated out here, but we help each other.”

“Thank you’ doesn’t seem like enough.”

Logan’s eyes shifted away for a second, as if he were debating something important. “How about you make me a home-cooked dinner, and we call us even.”

“One dinner?” Tessa laughed at the absurdity of balancing a pot roast against a few thousand dollars in electronic gadgets.

Logan shrugged. “I’ll be here all day installing these devices. I’ll be hungry.”

Tessa shook her head. “All right. One pot roast it is. I’ll head to the grocery store now.”

“I’ll get busy.” Logan turned back to his SUV. After looping the handles of the shopping bags over one arm, he grabbed a toolbox. “Could you close the hatch?”

Tessa did. Then she looked up at him. “But I still say dinner isn’t enough.”

She rose onto her toes and kissed him. The soft press of her lips against his lasted just a few seconds. When she dropped back onto her heels, her cheeks heated with a blush.

At Logan’s easy smile, more warmth rolled through Tessa. There was something between them that hadn’t been there a few days ago—or ever. She didn’t know what it was or where it would lead, but for today, knowing it existed was enough.

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After writing ten Rogue River novellas, we 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 Schluep, for your 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.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Wall Street Journal bestselling author Melinda Leigh is a fully recovered banker. A lifelong lover of books, she started writing to preserve her sanity when her youngest child entered first grade. During the next few years, she joined Romance Writers of America, learned a few things about writing a novel, and decided it was way more fun than analyzing financial statements. Leigh's debut novel, *She Can Run*, was nominated for Best First Novel by the International Thriller Writers. She has also garnered Golden Leaf and Silver Falchion awards, along with two RITA nominations and three Daphne du Maurier awards. Her works include the She Can series, the Morgan Dane novels, the Scarlett Falls novels, the Midnight novels, and the Rogue River novellas. She holds a second-degree black belt in

Kenpo karate, teaches women's self-defense, and lives in a messy house with her husband, two teenagers, a couple of dogs, and two rescue cats.

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