

The background of the cover is a dramatic seascape. A small, light-colored boat is seen from a high angle, floating on a dark, choppy sea. The sky is filled with heavy, dark clouds, with some light breaking through near the horizon. The overall mood is mysterious and ominous.

BELOW THE BONES

WIDOW'S ISLAND
NOVELLA 5

KENDRA
ELLIOT

**BELOW
THE
BONES**

ALSO BY KENDRA ELLIOT

COLUMBIA RIVER NOVELS

The Last Sister

The Silence

MERCY KILPATRICK NOVELS

A Merciful Death

A Merciful Truth

A Merciful Secret

A Merciful Silence

A Merciful Fate

A Merciful Promise

BONE SECRETS NOVELS

Hidden

Chilled

Buried

Alone

Known

BONE SECRETS NOVELLA

Veiled

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

Vanished

Bridged

Spiraled

Targeted

ROGUE RIVER NOVELLAS

On Her Father's Grave (Rogue River)

Her Grave Secrets (Rogue River)

Dead in Her Tracks (Rogue Winter)

Death and Her Devotion (Rogue Vows)

Truth Be Told (Rogue Justice)

WIDOW'S ISLAND NOVELLAS

Close to the Bone

Bred in the Bone

**BELOW
THE
BONES**

WIDOW'S ISLAND
NOVELLA 5

KENDRA
ELLIOT

 Montlake

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Published by Montlake, Seattle
www.apub.com

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e-ISBN-13: 9781542018197

Cover design by Caroline Teagle Johnson

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

1

Jerry Hooper scratched his gray beard as he pushed a fir branch out of his path. The morning May air was cool in the deep forest of Bishop State Park, and he had decided a hike on the island would clear the fuzzy cobwebs from his brain. He always sampled new marijuana from his distributors. As a longtime connoisseur of pot, he found it important to share his personal opinion of each variety with his buyers. He took pride in Buzz's Pot Shop's wares, but last night's sample had created a miserable morning.

"I won't be carrying this garbage in the store," he muttered. "Can't think at all today."

He stopped in a clearing, appreciating the sight of the dense mist that hovered over the tall grass.

"Rocky! Here, boy!" he shouted, wondering where the dog had wandered. Rocky's hearing wasn't too sharp, and he usually stuck close.

Jerry checked the time. Nine fifteen. The sign on his store's door stated he opened at nine, so it was nearly time for him to head back to North Sound to set up shop for the day. To him the opening time was an estimate, not a definite. As summer came closer, the tourists had started to crowd the streets and stores of Widow's Island in the Salish Sea off the coast of the state of Washington. The out-of-staters loved to browse in his store, giggling at the jars of weed they couldn't legally buy back home and slyly hinting they wanted a sample.

As if he'd never been asked that before.

The tourists annoyed the hell out of him. Lots of lookers. Few buyers. Especially when they learned he was a cash-only business. The island residents respected his business; mainlanders treated it like a freak show. Almost made him miss the days before marijuana was legalized in Washington and he sold only pot paraphernalia.

And a little homegrown marijuana on the side.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. “*Rocky!*”

The tall grass on the far side of the clearing shuddered, and he watched the wiggling of the stems move toward him. “Good boy.”

The dog burst out of the grass, happiness and pride in his dark eyes, a new bone between his teeth.

Rocky sat at Jerry’s feet and dropped his prize. Jerry stared at the bone, blinking several times, his brain still slightly fogged.

“No way,” he mumbled. “No fucking way.” He crouched to get a closer look and got a sloppy kiss from Rocky. He rubbed the dog’s head, dread growing in his stomach.

A life-size plastic skeleton had hung in the corner of his store for twenty years. The educational type found in a high school science room. Many shoppers had wanted to buy it, but Jerry wouldn’t part with Mr. Bones.

Jerry sucked in a deep breath. He’d dusted the skeleton enough times to be pretty confident that Rocky had found a human femur.

2

Cate Wilde sat on a gigantic flat rock as she watched deputies Tessa Black and Bruce Taylor excavate the skeleton along with Dr. Henry Powers. She and her boyfriend, Henry, had been drinking coffee at her bakery when Tessa had called the doctor to report that Jerry Hooper believed he'd found a human femur. Henry had unknowingly inherited the job of coroner when he'd bought the island's sole medical practice a year ago.

Jerry had led the four of them deep into Bishop State Park. Cate didn't think even she had been this far into the forest in all her years of exploring the island while growing up. Jerry had brought them to a clearing, and at the small meadow's edge, rough dirt had indicated where his dog had dug up the bone. Jerry had previously poked around in the dirt a little until he'd seen more leg bones. Then he'd hiked to a spot where he got cell service and called Tessa.

It hadn't taken long to expose the entire skeleton. A female.

They carefully continued to excavate and document each bone.

"Gonna be a nice day," Deputy Bruce Taylor said as he approached Cate's rock. He twisted the top off a water bottle and stretched his back. Bending over the shallow grave was backbreaking work, and Cate was frustrated that Tessa had refused her help. Cate was no longer in law enforcement. She'd left the FBI last winter and moved back to the island, her childhood home. Now she owned a bakery and a bookstore.

A much quieter, less stressful life.

But sometimes a little dull.

"Tessa told me your mother is coming for a visit," Cate said, studying the young deputy. He'd been on Widow's for a year or so, a transplant from Southern Oregon.

Bruce's eyes lit up. "Yeah. Tomorrow. Haven't seen her since Christmas."

Cate knew he came from a large close family, many of whom were in law enforcement.

"Julie and I have searched unsuccessfully for a house for her to rent," he said. "We don't have the space in our home, and I won't let her sleep on the couch for a month, but Chris found her a place down the street," he said, referring to the island's real estate agent.

"That's great. It'll be nice to have her close."

Bruce's lips curved. "She's an opinionated character, so she'll fit in just fine on Widow's."

"Bruce!" Tessa yelled from the grave site. "Bring some water."

He grabbed two more bottles and went back to work.

Cate's instinct urged her to examine the grave site, to search for clues as to why the woman had been buried in such a remote area. Her brain wanted the challenge of solving the puzzle, working the investigation. She'd done it for years. She'd loved her job, but after she was shot on a routine interview, her mind couldn't handle the stress any longer.

She tried to distract herself from the grave and thought about relaxing on the big rock. Maybe stretch out in the sun. It'd be a perfect lounge for sunbathing if it wasn't in the middle of nowhere. And that'd be rude when three people were tirelessly working close by. Instead she closed her eyes and listened for sounds of the forest beyond the digging and low conversations.

A faint electrical tickle went up her spine as a pocket of cold air touched her neck and arms. Her eyelids flew open, and she scanned the meadow.

Twenty yards away, a wisp of rising steam hovered above the grass. And then vanished.

"Ruby?" Cate whispered. Infamous Ruby Bishop was the island's ghost. Some locals believed they had seen her on the cliff on the island's southern edge known as the Widow's Walk. But Cate had a special connection to the spirit: Ruby was her great-great-grandmother.

The chill. The electricity in her spine. The wisp.

No one else had mentioned those sensations when they'd claimed to have seen Ruby.

Cate had encountered her long-dead ancestor a few times since she was a child but had kept her sightings—and sensations—to herself, worried she'd sound like a nut.

She felt the tickle again, and an overwhelming urge to *act now* made Cate hop off the rock and approach Tessa and Henry, who had their heads together, closely examining something on Tessa's palm.

Drawing closer, Cate watched Tessa remove a locket from a dirty plastic bag.

Her lungs stopped as her gaze locked on the large piece of jewelry. She didn't recognize it. She was positive she'd never seen it before.

Tessa flicked it open as Cate arrived. "Shit," muttered Tessa.

The image inside was water damaged, but Cate could see the bound hands of the naked woman in the photo. She froze, her vision locked on the picture.

Not again.

"Cate?" Henry asked sharply. "What is it?"

She jerked her gaze away from the locket, meeting his concerned eyes. "There's more," she said quietly. "There will be more graves here. We need to search the whole area."

* * *

Henry listened as Cate quickly spoke to him and Tessa. He was watching Cate for signs that she felt faint again. She'd gone white when she'd first seen the locket in Tessa's hand, but now her color was back and her speech was rapid, her tone higher than usual as she explained what she'd meant about more graves.

"It's been eight years," Cate said. "I was assigned to support a case in a rural Central Washington community. Several graves had been discovered in a wooded area." She glanced around at the firs. "Not unlike this one. Six women had been killed. All from different cities but within a two-hundred-mile radius."

"Did you catch him?" Tessa asked.

Cate nodded. "We did. His name was Jeff Lamb, and he confessed." She looked at the skeleton again. "Each victim was buried with a locket of some type. Inside was a photo of the woman not long before she'd been killed. They were always bound and had tape over their mouths."

“An odd MO,” Henry said. “You’d think he’d keep the images instead of burying them.”

“Lamb kept images,” Cate said in a grim voice. “We found tons in his home. There were photos from his victims’ everyday lives that he must have taken as he stalked them. And then there were the images of the women being tortured before he killed them.”

Henry watched the fast pulse at Cate’s neck. She seemed stable and in control now, but her face was somber, and he recognized she’d transitioned into work mode. Alert. Focused. Challenged. He hadn’t seen her like this since she’d officially left her FBI job.

It suited her.

He’d often worried she’d find the pace of her bakery and bookstore too slow after the intensity of being an FBI agent.

Does she regret her decision?

He’d asked her a few times, but she’d always asserted she loved the slower speed and having less responsibility.

“Lamb must not have told you about this grave because it was in a different location.” Tessa scanned the immediate ground. “Or possibly graves.”

Cate frowned. “He admitted to the ones we found. I believed him when he said there weren’t more.”

“So this grave is at least eight years old,” Tessa said.

Henry raised a brow. “Don’t you think that’s a big assumption? You can’t be certain he did this. It could be a copycat . . . or coincidence.”

“Good point,” agreed Tessa.

Cate shook her head. “It can’t be a copycat. The public knew a photo had been left with each victim, but they were never told that the photo was in a locket or that the women in the photos had been tortured. I can’t see something this specific being a coincidence either.”

“Someone working the murders could have talked about it to their family or friends,” Tessa pointed out. “Sometimes a hundred people can be involved in a case that size.” Studying the ground, she walked a couple of yards to their left. “See the subtle depression here? I want to dig here next.”

Henry knew that when buried bodies’ torsos collapsed from decomposition, a depression could be created in the ground above them. He saw the faint dip that had caught Tessa’s attention.

“Call the FBI first,” Cate said. “You need someone who knows the background of the Lamb case, if this turns out to be what I think it is.”

Tessa eyed her. “I have someone. You.”

“Absolutely not,” Cate stated. “I’m done with that.”

Henry heard a faint questioning tone behind her firm words.

She wants to be involved.

“I’ll call, but what else can you tell me first?” Tessa asked Cate. “Why did he choose the women he did?”

Cate closed her eyes, her brows coming together in concentration. “He wouldn’t say. They were all mothers. They all had young children.” Her lids flew open. “I almost forgot. He always kidnapped them on the fifth of the month. Not every month, but always on the fifth.”

“Shit,” said Bruce. “That’s just days away.”

“This skeleton has been here for a few years,” Henry pointed out. “I think we would have heard if women were disappearing every month.”

Bruce grinned sheepishly. “True.” He turned to Cate. “Did he tell you why he picked that date?”

“He said it was a coincidence.”

“Six coincidences?” asked Henry.

“A psychiatrist theorized that the date and the fact that the victims were young mothers had to do with some trauma from his childhood.”

Henry didn’t respond. He respected psychology. But not killers. Mental health issues were real; he’d seen more than he could count in a Los Angeles ER. But plenty of people had shitty childhoods and trauma without turning into murderers.

“What’s going on?”

Henry spun around to find Luke Ruell watching them. Luke’s gaze went to the excavation site, and he pushed his hair out of his eyes.

“Is that a skull? Cool.”

His tone was diffident. Henry hadn’t interacted often with the island resident who avoided most people and rarely talked—a rarity on Widow’s Island. Luke’s age was uncertain. Somewhere between thirty and fifty. It was hard to tell behind the thick beard and the hair in his eyes. Luke shaved the sides of his head, exposing intricate tattoos on his skull, but let the dishwater-blond top grow long.

He didn’t have tattoos anywhere else.

That I can see.

Luke owned the kayak-rental shop near the bay, but his business was very seasonal. Henry didn't know what the man did to support himself the other nine months of the year. He was an odd duck on an island full of unique people.

Even Jerry Hooper thought Luke was weird.

"This is a police investigation," Tessa told him. "Please leave the area."

"You don't own the park," Luke told her. "I have every right to hike through here." His gaze went to the grave again. "Got a murder?"

"Deputy Black politely asked you to leave," said Bruce, stepping between Luke and his view of the grave.

"You gonna make me, big guy?" Luke's tone was bored.

Luke was pencil thin with spiderlike limbs. His kneecaps protruded and looked as if a mild blow would knock them off. How he managed to lift a kayak was a mystery.

If Henry were Luke, he wouldn't challenge Bruce Taylor. The deputy was young and muscular.

"Beat it, Luke," Tessa told him. "Or I'll tell everyone here what I caught you doing behind the ice creamery."

Luke flushed. Even his tattoos on his skull reddened. He turned and left without a word.

Cate snorted as Luke vanished into the woods. "What'd he do?"

Tessa wrinkled her nose. "It was last summer. One of the insanely hot days. He was using ice cream like suntan lotion on his chest and shoulders and legs." She raised a brow. "He was just about to start on body parts that don't need suntan lotion when I found him."

Henry couldn't speak. "In public?"

"Not really. His kayak shop isn't that far from the creamery if you take the alley behind the buildings. No one else was around."

"That's creepy," added Cate.

"He's harmless," said Tessa. "Other than being rather odd, he's never done a thing."

"Will he spread the word about what's going on up here?" Henry asked.

"I don't think so," said Tessa. "He's not a gossip."

"Unlike everyone else on the island," said Cate. She was studying the ground, walking away from the current grave.

Henry agreed. There were few secrets on Widow's.

Cate halted. "I think we've got another depression. And it makes an almost perfect line if the first depression is another body." She paused. "That's how we found them before. Six graves in a line. This is looking more and more like Jeff Lamb's work."

Tessa sighed and pulled out her phone. "Anyone got a signal?"

No one did.

"Radio works," said Bruce.

"I need to make a call, so we're done for now. Bruce, I'd like you to stay here to keep an eye on things. Hopefully no one else will come by," Tessa told him. "I need to talk to the FBI before we dig any more."

Henry squatted to see the depression Cate had spotted. She was right. He looked up and met her gaze, then caught her mix of emotions. Dread. Sorrow. And interest.

She wants back in the game.

3

“What do you think, Cate?”

Cate paused, her phone against her ear. She had called Phillip, her former supervisor at the FBI, after she'd returned home from the excavation. Phillip had held a different position in the Seattle office when she'd worked on the case of the murdered women.

“I think it's too big of a coincidence,” she said slowly. “I'm positive there are two other graves nearby. All three line up neatly. The locket. The photo. That's too many similarities.”

“I've been reviewing the case since your county sheriff's office called. There's no hint in the notes that Jeff Lamb buried victims on an island . . . or killed more women than we found.”

“I know. But he wasn't one to volunteer information. He was incredibly cocky even after we arrested him. During our interviews I always had to fight off the feeling that he was the teacher and I was an inept student. He always asserted that it was pure luck that we'd caught him.”

“So it's possible these bodies are more of his.”

“It's possible.”

“What about a copycat?”

“That's possible too,” she admitted. “It *has* to be one or the other. We kept tabs on everything that was said by the media. The lockets were never mentioned, but that doesn't mean the word didn't get out another way.”

“You know Les Mallin passed away a year ago, right?” Phillip asked.

“Yes.” Les had been the lead investigator on the Lamb murders. A quiet and hardworking agent, he'd taught Cate many things during the case, and she had wept bitterly at the loss of her friend.

“That makes you the person with the most experience on Jeff Lamb.”

“It’s a moot point. I’m not with the FBI—and anyone can read the files to catch up.” Her pulse quickened. The thought of delving back into the Lamb murder case nauseated her.

And excited her. “I’m a business owner and baker now.”

“Bullshit. You bored out of your mind yet?”

“I appreciate the lack of stress.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Before finding the burial location, Cate would have staunchly defended her statement. But she couldn’t deny the appeal of the mental stimulation surrounding the mysterious grave. Something inside her had woken that morning. Something she’d suppressed.

“I’m sending Mike Scarn to the island to handle the investigation,” Phillip told her.

Cate was silent.

Phillip continued. “He knows the Lamb case pretty well, and he’s available.”

Mike did know the case. And he knew Cate very well. They’d dated for six months until it had simply fizzled out. There was no one to blame, but it had made working in the same building a bit awkward. Cate wasn’t sure if Phillip was aware of the relationship; she and Mike had kept it quiet.

“He does know the investigation,” she agreed. Mike hadn’t been as involved in the Lamb murders as she had been, but he was the logical choice since she and Les weren’t available. Besides, she and Mike had ended their relationship five years ago.

It’s no big deal.

Last year he’d visited her in the hospital when she’d been shot. She’d been too drugged to interact, but she remembered his concerned face. They hadn’t crossed paths since.

“Officially you’re still on sabbatical,” Phillip said. “Say the word, and I’ll get you back to work.”

“Phillip.” Exasperation filled her voice. “I’m done. I’m no longer an effective agent. You know this.”

“What I know is that you were—are—a damn good agent. Yes, there are situations that trigger panic attacks for you, but we can work around those.” He paused. “We miss you here.”

Cate was touched.

Then Henry’s face entered her mind.

Henry knew her official status was that she was on sabbatical. If he disliked that she'd left a back door open to return to the FBI, he didn't mention it. But Cate knew it had to bother him on some level. Returning to the FBI would mean leaving the island.

Their relationship was strong; they'd just moved in together. The last six months had been some of the toughest but the best in Cate's life, and that was primarily because of Henry.

She *knew* she belonged on Widow's Island, and she felt it in her bones. She'd been born on the island, and her roots were deep, going back to the prominent Bishop family. A person couldn't go anywhere on Widow's without running into a business or park named in reference to the Bishops, who had left a murky legacy.

Some of the references were unkind, reflecting the scandalous relationship of Elias Bishop and his mistress, Ruby.

Cate's ancestor.

Whenever Cate left the island, something physical inside of her remained off balance until she returned, making her worry that going back to the FBI on the mainland was out of the question.

Why don't I officially quit?

The job had been a part of her identity for a long time. She had struggled to accept her new identity of baker and bookstore owner, so it was difficult to say goodbye and close the FBI door for good.

"I miss you guys too," Cate told him. "It'll be good to see Mike again."

I hope.

"How's the doctor?" Phillip asked.

"Henry is great."

"He put a ring on it yet?"

Cate snorted in amusement. "It's only been six months."

"When you know, you know."

I do know.

"We're progressing at a good pace. We're very happy." Her cheeks warmed as she remembered an amorous Henry waking her that morning. She had smiled all morning from the contentment and closeness. Until they'd arrived at the grave.

"I can hear it in your voice," Phillip said. "Sorry I'm selfish, wanting you back."

“It feels good to be wanted, but this is my home.”

“I understand.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

He’s waiting for me to say I officially quit.

She couldn’t do it. Not yet.

“Mike should be there this afternoon,” Phillip said. “If you don’t mind, I’d like you to review the case with him. It can’t hurt for him to pick your brain a bit.”

“I assume he’ll interview Jeff Lamb in prison at some point?”

“Only if we think this is related to his case.”

Cate had no doubts. A brief shiver went up her spine as she recalled sitting across from Jeff Lamb. He had cold eyes and a sneer that turned her stomach. He could turn on the charm when he chose, looking nothing like the killer she knew him to be.

Did he kill more than the six women we found eight years ago?

Her senses silently screamed that he had.

* * *

“Here you go, Doc.” Inside Black Tail Bakery, Jane set Henry’s giant lavender iced tea on the counter as he checked his phone for the tenth time. Cate had texted him that she was minutes away, but he kept checking anyway.

Henry grabbed the cup, thanked Cate’s grandmother, and took a sip. Heaven. Somehow Jane had changed the iced tea recipe when Cate had bought the business, and she had made his favorite summer drink more addicting than ever.

Jane had smoothly stepped into her role as the bakery manager. It’d been a perfect fit. She’d been baking all her life and was the ultimate hostess. Business was brisk. The bakery’s much-needed face-lift had created one of the most welcoming spaces on the island, but Henry’s back might never forgive him for the amount of work he had done on the landmark shop. He and Cate had logged too many hours whipping the aging bakery into shape. Refinished floors, new paint, new decor, new tables, two big overstuffed couches, and several recliners had refreshed the tired store.

Since the weather had warmed, the uptick in tourists on the island had provided a constant stream of customers, and Henry was proud to see the

results of his and Cate's work. Jane's cheerful, grandmotherly attitude kept people coming back. And returning for her pastries, of course.

In the back of the shop, Samantha opened an oven. The bakery had also been good for her. The job got Cate's traumatized childhood friend out of the house. Held prisoner for twenty years by a madman on the mainland, she wasn't comfortable interacting with the public, but Henry had seen her grow more confident every week. Cate had originally thought Samantha would enjoy working at Cheater's Bookstore, her quiet business next door to the bakery, but even the small number of shoppers had been too stressful. Working as a baker was a much better fit for the nervous woman. Sam also made stunning jewelry for her mother's store, Shiny Objects.

"Everything okay? Your drink right?" Jane asked him, her hands on her hips, her eyes studying him sharply from behind the counter.

He nodded. "I was watching Samantha," he said quietly.

Jane's face lit up. "I see more of her old self every day. I don't think she'll ever be the same, but she's got lots of support. The island looks out for its own."

It was true. The Widow's Island locals were protective. They were polite to the tourists—their income relied on good tourism—but there was an invisible barrier between the islanders and the tourists. It took a lot of time and vetting before a newcomer was accepted into the inner circles of the island's full-time residents. Henry had battled their suspicion when he'd bought the medical practice. If Jane hadn't quickly put her stamp of approval on him, he'd probably have still been on the outside. It also helped that he and Cate had become a couple. The locals had been pleased when Cate had returned to the island last fall after being gone for a decade.

On Widow's everyone knew everybody else's business. The gossip train ran hot and fast.

Most of it was well intentioned.

Most.

"Her mother, Marsha, is doing better too," Jane said in a low voice. "I think having Samantha and Mickey move in with her made a huge difference. People need other people to care about."

"Having a daughter missing for that long would affect anyone's mental health. I'm glad she's embraced her role as a grandmother."

"Mickey's a great kid," Jane said. "Having that sort of energy at home will put a spring in anyone's step."

“It’d exhaust me.” Henry waved at Jane and headed out of the shop. He’d spotted an open Adirondack chair on the bakery’s porch. A rarity during tourist season. He dropped into it, waiting for Cate. She and Tessa had gone to the ferry to pick up the FBI agent assigned to investigate the graves on the island.

The mild warmth of the day was rapidly evaporating. Henry loved how it stayed lighter into the early evening hours, and apparently the tourists did too. Families and couples filled the sidewalks of North Sound. Most wore shorts and flip-flops—an optimistic mindset in the unpredictability of the Pacific Northwest weather.

Henry loved the island. It was far off the western coast of Washington, set in blue waters among smaller forested islands. On a sunny day, there was no place more beautiful on earth. He wasn’t sure what had guided him to the remote island last year. Jane claimed the island had called him all the way from Southern California. He didn’t believe in some of her mystical theories, but when he’d stepped on the island, he’d known he was meant to stay.

“Hi, Henry.” Emma Dean and her daughter, Abby, approached. Emma was newer to the island than he was and had also been embraced by the locals. Last fall Abby had briefly been kidnapped by Emma’s former boss as he’d tried to avoid arrest. Emma had bounced back from that traumatic experience, shown the gumption that locals appreciated, and carved out a life for the two of them.

“Hey, you two,” Henry said. He winked at Abby, who gave him a gappy smile.

“Abby, why don’t you go tell Jane what we want?” Emma gave her eight-year-old daughter some cash, and the girl darted indoors. Emma watched to make certain she was out of earshot and then turned to Henry. “What’s this I hear about a body in Bishop State Park?”

Yes, Emma had truly become a resident of Widow’s. She hadn’t flinched as she flat-out asked for gossip.

“Better talk to Tessa about that.” Henry knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Disappointment flashed in her face.

“Come on. Tell me something. I don’t want to ask Jerry Hooper. I can’t trust anything he says.”

“It’s an investigation,” Henry said. “And I’m not starting gossip.” His gaze went past her. “Here come Tessa and Cate. You can ask the deputy now.”

“That’s okay,” Emma quickly said. “I need to check on Abby.” She gave him a small wave and went in the bakery.

Henry grinned. He’d figured she wouldn’t ask Tessa. They both knew the county deputy wouldn’t part with information. He stood as the two women approached. A tall dark-haired man in a suit was on their heels. The suit gave Henry a start. He hadn’t seen anyone wear one in months. Island life was too casual.

Cate’s eyes lit up as his gaze met hers, and she gave him a peck on the lips. “Henry, this is Mike Scarn.”

The men shook hands, and Henry noticed how closely Mike scrutinized him.

Must come with the job.

Cate had been like that when they’d first met. She’d held herself distant, her gaze and questions probing. But he’d caught glimpses of a woman in pain under her FBI exterior, and he’d been intrigued.

No pain was visible in Special Agent Scarn’s gaze. Just curiosity.

“Welcome to Widow’s,” Henry said, slipping an arm around Cate’s waist. She stiffened slightly instead of leaning into him like usual. Mike had watched the movement, and Henry suddenly felt he’d done something wrong.

There’s a history between them.

Now he understood, and he bit back a laugh. The agent had no chance. Henry had complete faith in his relationship with Cate. He even felt a little sorry for the agent; Cate was a beautiful, intelligent woman. “You have a hotel?” he asked Mike.

“I do. But I want to go over some notes with Cate and Tessa first.”

“Henry’s input will be valuable,” said Cate. “He helped unearth the body and can make sense of the medical examiner’s old notes on the original case.”

“Sounds good,” Mike said, his tone flat. “Where do you want to work?”

4

Cate exhaled. The testosterone rolling off Mike and Henry was ridiculous, but she knew it'd subside in a few moments. It was simply a result of a meeting of two headstrong men.

When Mike had stepped off the ferry, she'd admitted he still looked good. But Henry was where her heart lived.

"I've got a quiet room in the back of the bookstore where we can work," Cate said. "It has a good-size table."

"Perfect," said Tessa. She tipped her head at Mike for him to follow and led him around the side of the bakery toward the rear door of Cheater's Bookstore.

Cate took Henry's hand and went after them. He tightened his fingers around hers, and she glanced at him, her heart contracting at the affection in his eyes. "What?" she whispered.

"You're beautiful."

The simple words weakened her knees. Actually it wasn't the words; it was his tone. It sounded adoring, stunned, and thankful in one short phrase.

"Thank you." She drank him in, never tiring of studying his face.

"You and Mike dated in the past, yes?" he asked, curiosity in his eyes.

"Yes." She wasn't surprised that Henry had figured that out in under a minute. He knew how to read people and paid close attention to body language. "It fizzled out years ago. He's a good guy."

"I'm sure you only dated good guys."

She laughed. "I wish."

He let go of her hand and put his arm around her shoulders, pressing a kiss into her hair. "Then it's a good thing you're done."

Behind the bookstore, Tessa opened the door and led them to the room. As she entered, Cate inhaled, her heartbeat slowing and her muscles

relaxing at the smell of books. Her days were now a succession of amazing smells, from the books to the bakery. In the last few months she'd become acutely aware of how the pleasant scents made her days brighter.

The four of them took seats. Mike pulled out a laptop and files.

"I want to see the burial site tomorrow. I have a forensic anthropologist arriving in the morning, and he'll organize the rest of the excavations," he said. "But for now, the pictures you sent have me ninety-nine percent convinced that this is related to the Lamb murders."

Cate silently agreed.

"But are we looking at a copycat or more of his victims?" Tessa asked.

"That's the big question." Mike opened his computer. He glanced past Cate, and his shoulders jerked as his gaze locked on something. "Christ. That startled me."

Cate turned around, knowing what she'd see. Ghost perched in an empty spot on the dark bookshelf several feet behind her, the cat's black fur blending with his surroundings and his golden eyes glowing. "That's Ghost. The bookstore has been his home forever."

Ghost meowed in agreement.

Mike shook his head and focused on the laptop.

"How was Jeff Lamb originally caught?" Tessa asked.

Cate forced herself to stay quiet and let Mike answer.

Not my investigation.

"We found a fingerprint on one of the lockets," answered Mike. "A perfectly centered thumbprint." He gave Cate a rueful look. "Remember that? We were positive he was being cocky or trying to mislead us. There'd been no prints on the others."

"I assume his prints weren't in any databases?" Henry asked.

"Nope. All it did was frustrate us for a long period of time. A tip from someone who used to own property near the bodies brought Jeff to our attention. She'd dated him a few years before, and they'd often hiked near the burial site. She said he'd been engrossed with—"

"The rock," Cate choked out. "I'd forgotten that part." She clapped a hand to her forehead. "I was sitting on a similar one this morning. I thought it'd be a great place to sunbathe." She shuddered.

How could I forget?

"There's a rock near the new graves that would serve his purpose?" Mike asked sharply.

“What purpose?” asked Tessa, looking from Cate to Mike.

“An altar to pose his victims on,” Cate said softly. “Long . . . flat . . . it’s where he took a lot of their photos before killing them.” She briefly closed her eyes, remembering the hard surface of the rock from that morning.

Were there any dark stains?

She hadn’t paid attention. A shudder rolled up her spine.

“Anyway, this former girlfriend said he’d taken photos of her on a rock near where the bodies were found,” Mike said. “Normal photos—fully dressed. But she asserted that he’d fixated on the rock in such an odd way it’d stuck with her. He’d joked that she should take her clothes off to pose on the rock, which disturbed her.”

“I trust that’s when she dumped his ass,” Tessa said, crossing her arms.

“He’d also told her it looked like a sacrificial altar. We never released information that the photos of the murdered women had been taken on that rock, but when she learned the bodies had been found nearby, she called.”

“Your investigation went on for almost six months,” Henry said. “Why did she wait so long to come forward?”

“She’d moved to Arizona. Wasn’t aware of the case.” Mike wrinkled his forehead and looked at Cate. “A family member eventually mentioned it to her, right?”

“A friend who still lived in Washington,” corrected Cate.

“That’s right,” said Mike. “Our witness said she’d broken up with him soon after the photos were taken, but we decided it was a good lead and started to watch Jeff Lamb.”

“He was a manager at a local winery,” Cate added. “Everyone there seemed to like him. We wanted to get his fingerprints before moving forward.” She grinned at Mike. “I remember you and I did wine tastings three days in a row, hoping Jeff would wait on us so we could get his prints off a glass.”

“We weren’t the only ones.” He smiled back at her.

He doesn’t make my stomach flutter anymore.

“What would you have done if the thumbprint didn’t match?” Henry asked. “You said it could have been a fake.”

“We would have eventually questioned him,” said Mike, “but we got lucky when the thumb matched.”

“Very lucky,” agreed Cate. “It helped everything fall into place.”

“What was his motivation?” asked Henry.

“We never were certain,” said Mike. “He wouldn’t say, but we had a few theories. We do know he found his victims through the winery. Most of them were from out of town. He’d get their addresses when they signed up for the wine club or some other promotion. I know he really enjoyed the stalking process.”

“Absolutely he did,” said Cate. “That was clear in his interviews. He almost bragged as he described following the woman he’d chosen. He’d tail one every day for several days as he worked up a plan to kidnap her.”

Tessa spread out the photos Mike had just set on the table.

Cate knew every face and name. Eight years had not dimmed her memory of the murdered women.

Jeff Lamb had a type. Long blonde hair, petite, and attractive.

At least that was his type of victim. The majority of the girlfriends Cate had interviewed had been tall and brunette. He’d been popular. Everyone at the winery had had nice words to say about him, as had his neighbors, but most of the girlfriends had eventually lost interest. “Inattentive,” “worked too much,” and “I didn’t feel special” were the most common complaints.

Cate hadn’t been surprised; the killer was a narcissist.

She reached across the table and gently arranged the photos in front of Tessa in order of their murders. Cate touched the first one. “February fifth.” And then moved on to the others. “June fifth. November fifth and then March, April, and August of the following year. All on the fifth.”

“No discernible pattern other than always using the fifth?” asked Tessa. “The months do get closer together. He probably thirsted for more thrills. Couldn’t wait as long in between.”

“We couldn’t find a pattern,” said Mike. “And we did feel he was ramping things up.”

“Glad you got him.” Henry studied the photos. “They’re all so young.”

“Jasmine Heath was the youngest at nineteen,” said Cate. “She had a three-year-old.”

“What about the idea of a potential copycat?” asked Tessa.

Mike leaned back in his chair. “I’ve started making a list of everyone who associated with Jeff Lamb back then, but it will take some time to get current statuses on these people. Cate, does anyone stand out in your memories?”

Cate had already spent time trying to remember. “There was an old roommate of his that keeps coming to mind. His name escapes me.”

Mike straightened. “I know exactly who you’re talking about, but his name . . .” He tapped on his keyboard.

“Why’d he make an impression?” asked Tessa, with a curious look at Cate.

“He had a domestic violence record,” said Cate. He was also memorable because he’d look past Cate to talk to whichever man she was working with instead of to her. Even when she’d asked the questions. It’d amused her. And annoyed her.

“Bryan Sowle,” announced Mike.

“That’s him,” agreed Cate.

“Let me find where he lives now.” Mike continued to type.

“Missing persons from the area should also be reviewed,” added Cate, glancing at Tessa.

“I did a preliminary search for the county,” said Tessa. “There really aren’t many, but I’ve compiled a list of missing women for the last ten years.”

“Do you need to go back further?” asked Henry. “If the case was closed eight years ago, he might have been using that as a burial ground for years before the original victims.”

“Or more recently if it wasn’t Lamb who buried the body,” said Cate. She nudged Henry. “How good are you at determining how long a body has been in the ground? The one from this morning was skeletal. How long does that take to happen?”

Henry snorted. “First of all, I have no hands-on experience with that. I’ve read about it, but I don’t remember specifics other than there are a lot of variables involved. Like how deep the grave is, what kind of dirt surrounds the body, how much water it is exposed to, how cold or how hot the area gets, how big the body is, or how—”

“Okay. I get it,” said Cate. “Neither of us really knows anything.”

“You can add me to that list too,” said Tessa. “That kind of knowledge is above my pay grade. We need a forensic expert.”

“Well, now, isn’t that convenient,” muttered Mike, who’d been focused on his screen as the rest of them had debated human-decomposition influences. “I found Bryan Sowle’s current address.”

“He’s close by?” Cate asked.

“Nope. He’s in Stafford Creek. Same prison as Jeff Lamb.”

The room was silent for a long moment.

“What’s he in for?” Cate finally asked.

“Second-degree murder. He’s been there for two years.”

Cate met Mike’s gaze. “Why am I not surprised?”

“I’m not either. But if we need to interview him, we can combine the trip with the Lamb interview. Efficient.” He nodded, a pleased expression on his face, reminding Cate how much he’d stressed efficiency during the time they’d dated. To the point that it had driven her crazy.

“You mean when *you* interview him,” Cate clarified. Mike had said *we* a few times, and she suspected he didn’t mean Tessa.

“No. You and me.” He raised a finger as she opened her mouth to protest. “Lamb liked you. We both know that. He talked to you more than anyone.”

Mike was right. Lamb had believed he was irresistible to women and saw Cate’s professional demeanor as a challenge. He’d been desperate for her to like him. She and Les, the lead on the case, had agreed to milk that to their advantage. Cate had stretched her acting skills, giving Lamb subtle hints that she was weakening. He’d eaten it up.

“Is that true?” asked Tessa. “Did you have a rapport with Lamb?”

“But Sowle won’t talk to me,” she said, grasping at straws.

“I can handle Sowle if an interview is needed,” said Mike.

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Tessa stated. “There’s a lot of work to do here before anyone runs off to prison.” She made a note on her phone. “I’ll expand the missing persons search. I’ll include Vancouver Island and the northern coastal counties of Washington. Tomorrow we can get started uncovering the other graves. We need to verify that’s what they are and if they hold women and lockets.”

“Everyone on the island knows something’s going on up there,” Henry pointed out. “Before the three of you arrived, I was asked about it at the bakery. I wouldn’t be surprised if a few curious gossipers decided to go take a look.”

“I’m posting someone up there all night,” Tessa answered. “I already worked out a shift rotation so no one is there for too many hours overnight. Bruce has been up there most of the day.”

“Do you need any more manpower?” asked Henry. “I’m capable of scaring off some snoops.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” said Tessa. “But I think we’re covered.”

“I’ll get Jeff Lamb’s visitor and call list from the prison,” said Mike. “I want to know who he’s been talking with for the past eight years.”

“Are we moving too fast?” asked Tessa. “Are we wrong to push forward so hard on the Lamb murder connection?”

“No,” said Cate firmly. “I’m positive this is related.”

She felt it in her gut.

5

Cate was distracted.

As she started to wipe down a table at the bakery, she realized she'd already cleaned it twice. Yet the next table over still had the flaky crumbs of a croissant spread across its top and under the high chair. The customer and her toddler had left more than ten minutes ago.

She gave herself a shake and tackled the crumbs.

Her focus was nonexistent, her mind constantly wondering what was happening at the burial site. Mike, Tessa, and the newly arrived forensic anthropologist had left for the location nearly six hours ago. She checked the clock behind the bakery counter. It was nearly three o'clock, and she hadn't heard a word from anyone. She was being left out, and she didn't like it.

Not my business anymore.

Then why am I on pins and needles?

Jane bustled out of the kitchen, a large tray of assorted pastries in her hands. She set it near the case and restocked. There was always a midafternoon rush on iced-coffee drinks and snacks. Cate wasn't going to get rich running the bakery and bookstore, but she supported several employees and enjoyed the relaxing work.

And no one would shoot at her.

Hopefully.

The bells on the door jingled, and an older woman with a lovely genuine smile stepped in. Cate couldn't help but smile in return. Behind the woman, Bruce pulled the door shut. He was in uniform.

Aha. This must be his visiting mother.

Cate wiped her hands on her apron. "Afternoon, Bruce." He had dark circles under his brown eyes. No doubt a result of the long dull hours

watching over the crime scene. He'd started to return her greeting when his mother stepped over to Cate and took her hand.

"I'm Patsy. Bruce's mom. He told me about you, Cate. You have a darling little bakery." She was a petite woman with long curly brown hair, beautifully streaked with natural gray and blonde.

Cate sensed a lot of strength in the small woman.

"Thank you."

Patsy looked pleased, patted Cate's hand, and turned to the bakery counter, where Jane stood watching the encounter, an amused look on her face.

"Oh my," said Patsy, looking from Jane back to Cate. "The genes are strong, aren't they? Clearly you two are related."

"Jane is my grandmother."

"So nice to meet you. Please call me Patsy." Bruce's mother took Jane's hand the same way she'd taken Cate's. "Oh! We're going to get along wonderfully, Jane. I can tell already. There's nothing better than being around other women with similar souls." Her gaze went to the pastry case. "Tell me about that amazing-looking bun with the caramel."

"She can be a bit much at first," Bruce said softly as he stepped next to Cate. Jane and Patsy started to chat as if they'd known each other for decades. "I'm not surprised those two have hit it off. Jane's reminded me of my mother since I first met her."

"Patsy is wonderful," said Cate. She was one of those people who emitted positive energy. It was palpable.

"We're supposed to meet Chris here. He has the rental keys," Bruce said. "I love my mother, but she and Julie are both strong personalities, and our home is too small for both of them. She's only been here a few hours, and I swear my place has shrunk to half its size."

Cate grinned at the exasperation in his voice, watching as Patsy whipped out a cell phone and showed pictures to Jane.

"Two grandbabies. Aren't they beautiful!"

Jane enthusiastically agreed as Patsy shot a side-eye at Bruce.

"Stop it, Mom," he ordered. "We're not even married yet." He snorted and turned to Cate. "Ever since both my sisters had babies, she won't let up on me and Julie. Another reason to put some space between those two."

The doorbells jingled as a tall bald man with a goatee came in.

“Hey, Chris,” Bruce greeted the real estate agent. He shook the man’s hand and led him to meet his mother.

Chris lifted a hand at Cate, and she returned the gesture, wondering how the mellow and reserved man would get along with Patsy Taylor. Cate suspected Patsy would overwhelm him within two minutes. Bruce excused himself, and Patsy immediately started chatting with Chris, whose eyes went wide at the ambush of her friendly energy.

He can handle it.

Cate’s phone vibrated in her apron’s pocket, and Mike’s name popped up on her screen. Cate strode behind the counter, through the kitchen, and out the back door, her phone clenched in her hand, subtle excitement vibrating in her bones.

“Mike?” she answered as she stepped into the quiet alley behind the bakery. “What’d you find out?”

“Good afternoon to you too,” he said.

Cate rolled her eyes.

“I knew you were invested in this case,” Mike told her. “You can’t resist a puzzle.”

“Just tell me what’s going on.”

“You were right about there being three graves. We’ve looked extensively, and I’m sure there’s no more . . . at least not at this exact site. Those three were in a perfect line—like we found at the original site—and we can’t see a hint of others beyond those.”

“Do we—do you need to bring in GPR?” she asked, referring to ground-penetrating radar.

“Not right now. Maybe later.”

“What was in them?”

Mike cleared his throat. “All three victims are female, and their remains are fully skeletal. The forensic anthropologist says they’re younger adults. Probably twenties and thirties. He’ll tighten up an age range later.”

“Any indication of cause of death?”

“Not yet, but he did notice knife marks on the ribs of one and a cracked skull on another.”

Cate nodded as Mike spoke. Jeff Lamb had done a variety of things to kill his victims on the stone altar. Cut throats, stabbings, blows to the head, asphyxiation.

“Locketts?”

“Yep. Two more. The faces are blurry as usual, but they’re clearly young women. Tessa is trying to compare them to some missing person photos, but it will take dental records to identify them.”

“Lamb did this, didn’t he?” asked Cate.

“No, I don’t think he did.”

“What? Why not?” It sounded exactly like Jeff Lamb to her.

“I saved the best for last. We found two quarters in one of the graves near the hip bones.”

“Where a pocket might have been . . .” Cate held her breath.

“The year on one of them is from five years ago.”

“And Jeff has been locked up for eight. We have an accomplice . . . or a fan,” said Cate. Her mind raced. Bryan Sowle was an option they needed to investigate.

No. Mike needs to investigate. Not me.

“We do. And I think while Tessa and our forensics expert work with the remains, you and I need to go to the Stafford Creek prison and talk with both Lamb and Sowle.”

Cate leaned against the rear wall of the bakery and looked up at the blue sky. At that very second she wanted more than anything to dive headfirst into the case. She wanted to match wits again with Lamb. Bounce ideas and theories off Mike.

A scent of chocolate and espresso wafted through the air, and her mind cleared.

That’s not my life anymore.

“I can’t, Mike. I’m done with that. And the FBI would nev—”

“I’ve already cleared it with Phillip.”

She blinked. “Like right now? You called him before you called me?”

“Correct.”

She wanted to fume about his high-handedness, but her pulse was beating too fast, her emotions building, torn between wanting to join and being scared of the consequences. “I can’t do the job anymore. I walked away for a reason.”

“I know why you left, Cate,” he said in a softer tone. “And I know the trauma has stuck with you. I don’t blame you one bit for stepping away. No one does. I probably would have done the same.”

“My edge is gone.” *My confidence.*

“This is just an interview. Nothing else. You don’t need an edge to talk to an imprisoned man. You know the case best, and you *know* him; you know how he thinks.”

True.

She’d worked many cases at the FBI, and some had stuck more deeply in her brain than others. Jeff Lamb had stuck. He was the killer journalists loved to write about. A popular man who seemingly had his life together. The guy who always got the girl, with his sincere smile and kind eyes.

Until someone pissed him off. Then the eyes went cold.

His eyes had also stuck in Cate’s brain. Icy blue. Unique. Startling.

“You can do this, Cate. I need you on this.”

“When do you want to go?” The words had rolled off her tongue before they’d formed in her mind. Her body was making decisions without her.

“Tomorrow. I’ll make the calls.”

“I want Henry to come with me.”

Mike paused. “Shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll get him clearance.”

“Thank you.” She ended the call, exhaled heavily, and continued to study the sky. Her emotions were a confusing jumble. Elation, anxiety, regret.

Why did I ask for Henry?

She didn’t need him to hold her hand.

Do I?

She hadn’t left the island since they had brought back Sam last winter. It’d been an unpleasant trip, with Cate feeling nauseated and off balance a lot of the time. Henry too.

If she had to leave the island, she wanted him with her. The feeling was visceral.

An icy breeze touched her neck, and she straightened, scouring her surroundings.

She saw nothing.

“Did I make the right choice?” she asked the empty air.

Silence.

But her conflicting emotions vanished and left her with confidence. She’d done the right thing.

“Thanks, Ruby,” she whispered.

6

“Room three,” Julie told Henry. “Sore throat.”

“Thanks.” Henry strode down the hallway of his clinic. Business had cranked up since the tourist season had started. More business was always good, but it made him feel rushed. He’d grown used to talking with his local patients for longer periods of time, catching up on what was going on with their families and businesses.

Oddly, all the locals seemed to have stayed healthy as tourist season kicked in. Now he’d go a few days without seeing a familiar face in his waiting room. The tourists brought him mostly sore throats, earaches, upset stomachs, and the occasional broken bone. His nurse, Julie, was an organizational queen. She thrived on the increased pace and kept him on track.

He’d expanded the clinic, bought new equipment, and was in the process of setting up virtual visits so he’d be accessible to the surrounding islands that didn’t have medical care.

It felt good. He was making a difference, and he was happy. Not stressed out of his mind and crushed by the depth of the unmet medical needs he’d seen every day in LA.

His tiny laptop open and balanced on one hand, he knocked on room three’s door, paused for two seconds, and then opened it. A woman sat on the exam table, looking at him expectantly.

Tourist.

He’d glanced at her name, vitals, and complaint, which Julie had typed in her digital chart. “Afternoon, Wendy. Julie tells me you’ve been exposed to strep, and now your throat is sore?”

“That’s right.” Wendy nodded emphatically. “Hurts pretty bad.”

Henry set his computer on the counter and washed his hands, taking a quick visual survey of his patient. Her chart said she was twenty-eight, but in person she seemed ten years older. Her dishwater-blond hair was straight and stringy. She seemed very thin and had dark shadows under her eyes. Her jeans were stained, and her tank top seemed too big.

Not the usual tourist.

Widow's Island could be an expensive place to vacation. Most of the visitors were upper-middle class. But the island also attracted a small less affluent group that came to live simply and be as close to nature as possible. Wendy appeared to be the latter.

Henry did a quick exam as he questioned her about her symptoms and asked a few polite small talk questions.

"I like the island," she told him. "I've been meaning to come for years." She lowered her voice. "But I hear you've got a crime problem." Her green eyes grew wide.

"Crime?"

"Yeah. Heard there's been some murders."

Henry frowned as he typed notes in her chart. "I don't think so. I would know about that."

"I guess they're old, though."

"The victims were old?"

"No, the murders."

He paused and looked her full in the face. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

Disappointment flashed in her gaze. "I heard there were some bodies buried in the forest. Someone said you were there as the coroner."

"Oh." *The gossip has reached the tourists.* "That's not quite accurate. And definitely not something to be worried about during your stay on the island."

"What did they find?"

"It's a police matter right now. I don't want to give any incorrect information. I really don't know much anyway."

"Do they have any leads? Do they know how many victims there are?"

He held her gaze. "I don't know much," he said slowly, emphasizing each word.

"Don't you think the public should know what's going on?" Wendy asked. "It's important to feel safe. It'd be nice to know if they have a

suspect.”

He ignored her question. “I’m going to do a quick strep test,” Henry told her. “I’ll also send it to the lab for a culture. It’s more accurate.”

He swabbed the back of her perfectly healthy-looking throat. “Sit tight, and I’ll have the results for you soon.” He picked up his computer and left, deciding he would have Julie deliver the results of what he suspected would be a negative test. In the hall he eyed her chart again. Wendy Ruell.

How do I know that name?

Luke Ruell. The kayak-rental-shop owner who had shown up as they’d investigated the grave in the state park. The one Tessa had said had been weird with the ice cream. The man flashed in Henry’s memory. Skinny. Rough around the edges. “Wendy has to be a sister or something,” Henry muttered. “He must have told her, and now she’s curious.”

But how did she know there was more than one victim?

Henry froze, certain Luke had left before the discussion about more graves and that the news that more had been found had been kept silent.

Someone could have talked.

Mike had emphasized that he wanted the body count kept quiet for now. No doubt the news of the first grave had spread, but Henry didn’t think the findings of multiple graves had. He needed to call Tessa to ask if other details had been released.

He strode down the hall to the front-desk area and found Bruce leaning over the counter, ogling his girlfriend. Both straightened and gave Henry sheepish looks.

“Bruce, you’re just who I need to see. Can I talk to you in back? Julie, can you process Wendy’s strep test while we talk?”

“Yep.” Bruce winked at Julie and followed Henry to an exam room. “What’s up?”

“Do you know if the news of the second and third graves has been made public?”

“It hasn’t. Mike was clear about keeping everything quiet for now, and Tessa agreed. Made us all swear to silence.”

“Does Julie know?”

Bruce pinkened. “Yeah. She doesn’t count. I’m sure Tessa told her guy.”

“So it’s possible word got around.”

“I seriously doubt it. We know who we can trust.” Bruce scowled. “What happened?”

“Remember Luke Ruell?”

“Yeah. Ice cream man.”

“His sister—or some sort of relative named Wendy Ruell—just asked me about ‘some bodies’ buried in the state park. She also pressed to know if you had a suspect or not.” Henry thought for a moment. “She came in with a sore throat, wanting a strep test, but I suspect she was fishing for information.”

Bruce pressed his lips together. “I’ve never cared for Luke. He just slinks around the island. Always see him in weird places. Tessa might believe he’s harmless, but he *was* there yesterday morning.”

“Could be a coincidence.”

“I know. But he rubs me the wrong way, you know?”

“Do you think he stayed and watched instead of leaving yesterday morning like he was told to do?”

“Or he could have been watching today,” said Bruce. “I stayed in the area for several hours yesterday after you and Tessa left. No one wandered in. But I swear I saw color in the woods at one point. Heard footsteps too. But that could have been an animal.”

“The color wouldn’t be an animal.”

“Kurt had part of the night watch. He told me he thought he heard someone, so he just yelled for them to get out of the area.”

“I’d leave if Kurt yelled at me,” said Henry, thinking of the tough older deputy.

Bruce laughed. “Me too. He’s old enough to be my grandfather, but I wouldn’t mess with him. Anyway, my point is that *someone* wanted to snoop.”

“Wendy really wanted to know if we had a suspect. Asked twice.”

“Like she was worried for Luke?”

“Or he sent her to see which direction the investigation was heading.”

The two men were silent for a long moment.

“Nah,” Bruce said. “Luke can’t be involved. The dude can barely rent out a kayak without screwing up something. There’s no way he killed and buried three bodies with no one knowing. But I’ll tell Tessa. Maybe she needs to have a talk with Luke.”

Julie knocked and opened the door. “The strep test is negative.”

“Let her know, and tell her we’ll call if the culture comes back positive.” Henry looked at Bruce. “Which it won’t.” Julie nodded and vanished.

“I feel like I’m making a big deal out of nothing,” Henry said. “We can’t know what gossip is out there.”

“Trust me,” said Bruce. “I’d be hearing right and left that there were multiple graves if the word was out. I’ve had several questions about the first grave, but no one has asked if there are more. I think it was worth mentioning to me. Always better to say something than ignore that gut feeling.”

“I agree,” said Henry. He walked Bruce out front. There was no sign of Wendy Ruell. “Wendy leave already?” he asked Julie.

“Yep. As soon as I told her the results, she was out of here.”

Henry exchanged a glance with Bruce, who shrugged.

The deputy gave Julie a quick kiss. “My mom will be in her new place by evening.”

“Thank you,” said Julie. “You know I love your mother, but . . .”

“Of course you do. Everybody loves her.” Bruce grinned. “I understand.”

Henry was glad he and Cate had their own space. He loved Jane, but if he and Cate and her grandmother had to live in a place as small as Bruce’s, he’d be searching for a solution too.

Bruce winked at Julie as he left.

Henry liked the young couple. Even though they’d been together over a year, they were still starry eyed when they saw each other.

I’m pretty sure I look like that around Cate.

“I’ve got two patients waiting for you in exam rooms,” Julie said, pulling him out of his thoughts.

Henry sighed, wishing the day were over. “On it.”

The FBI had arranged for a small plane from Widow's Island to Aberdeen, Washington. From there it had been a quick car ride to the prison. During the hour-long flight, Cate had enjoyed the bird's-eye view of the snowy Olympic Mountains and the deep greens of its forests.

There'd been a small knot in the pit of her stomach from the moment the plane had taken off, and now as she waited to enter the prison, it felt as though she'd stepped off a boat. The subtle rocking made her breathe deep to stay focused.

Why did I agree to this?

She rubbed a damp palm against the hip of her pantsuit. When she'd put it on this morning, it'd felt foreign. She'd straightened her long black hair and parted it directly in the center. It was more severe than her usual casual waves and side part. After eyeing the severe hairstyle, she'd added a dark-red lipstick, and an unfamiliar woman had been reflected in the mirror.

The hairstyle was a piece of armor. Like the pantsuit.

Am I nervous?

A little.

She and Mike had discussed using Lamb's old interest in her to their advantage. Jeff Lamb might no longer be attracted to her, but it was worth a try.

Henry had done a double take when he'd first seen her. Surprise had lit his eyes—and then amusement. “You look great, Cate. Sort of a sexy-librarian vibe going on. Got any reading glasses?”

He'd laughed at her withering look. “Yep. Definitely librarian.”

As they walked toward the prison, Henry gave her hand a squeeze and promptly dropped it. She'd told him not to show any affection inside the

prison. Their private life needed to remain private. Especially in front of Lamb.

They met Mike at the prison. She followed him in and watched as he checked his weapon. She started to reach for the weapon she'd once carried at her side and had a flash of panic at its missing weight. When she'd first returned to Widow's, she'd had the same reaction a number of times. But now it'd been months since she'd reached for it.

The three of them were led to a small interview room. Two chairs on one side of a table and a single chair on the other. "Need another chair?" asked the guard.

"I'll stand," said Henry.

They'd discussed strategy that morning. Henry was to stay silent, and Mike wanted him to stand against a wall. "Just look focused. Don't let your gaze stray from Lamb. I want him to feel that third set of eyes studying him. Don't let anything he says get to you." Mike had paused. "And especially don't let anything he says to Cate get to you. Be ready for him to be an asshole to her."

Henry's lips had quirked. "Got it. I'm looking forward to the show."

In the room, Cate wrinkled her nose. It smelled like a locker room. Old sweat and industrial cleaning agents. She took a seat and waited, ignoring that her heart was trying to pound its way out of her chest.

I've done this dozens of times. No big deal.

Mike sat beside her, his metal chair scraping the tile floor. "How do you think Lamb will be?" he asked Cate in a low voice.

"Curious. Cocky. His usual asshole self. Just eight years older."

"Agreed."

A guard opened the door and brought Lamb in.

He looks fifteen years older, not eight.

Lamb had been a tall muscular man. He still was tall, but he'd thinned down. He looked more wiry than muscular. No excess fat. More lines in his face. More gray in his hair.

Same damned ice-blue eyes.

His gaze shot straight to her, and Cate physically felt his pleasure at seeing her. He'd always commanded a room with his presence; he still did. The orange jumpsuit and manacles made no difference. He held her gaze as he sat and waited for the guard to fasten him to the table. His lips curved up

as the guard stepped back. “Good to see you, Cate. I’m very surprised. It’s been a long time since I’ve had the pleasure.”

“You weren’t told that it would be Agent Scarn and myself?”

“No. All I was told was it was an FBI visit. You’ve made my day . . . my week.” His gaze went to Henry and he looked him up and down, dismissing him. He looked back to Cate. “You’ve changed your hair. And it’s longer.”

“So is yours.”

“What can I do for you today?” Lamb asked, as if he were taking their drink order.

“I thought it’d be good to catch up,” said Mike. “Maybe there’s something you’d like to share with us.”

“Like what?”

“Anything to do with your case. Think of anything new that we should know about?”

Lamb raised his chin a fraction. “You’re being very vague. If there’s something you want to ask me, ask it. Don’t dick around.”

Good. Let him think he has control of the interview.

“We found something on Widow’s Island that you might know about,” said Mike.

Lamb’s brows rose. “Cate’s hometown? Surely she would know more about something there than I would.”

Of course he’s figured out where I’m from.

Still creepy.

“Ever spend any time there?” asked Mike.

“I never have.”

“Know anyone that has?”

“Besides our Cate?” Lamb asked.

Our Cate?

Cate was proud she didn’t flinch.

“I’m sure I know lots of people who’ve been there. You’re being vague again, Special Agent Scarn.” He turned to Cate. “Maybe you should ask the questions.”

“We found three graves: three women, three lockets. All in a straight line.”

Lamb was motionless. But Cate saw the surprise in his eyes. A faint dilation of his pupils.

But is he surprised by the news or surprised that we know?

“I don’t know anything about those graves,” Lamb stated. “Maybe we could talk about politics? I know lots about that . . . have a lot of opinions that I’d be happy to share with you.”

“No,” said Cate and Mike together.

“You found all my women,” Lamb told them. “There are no more.”

My women.

She wanted to vomit.

“It seems like a very big coincidence, then,” Cate said. “Surely you have an opinion to share on that.”

His eyes seemed to brighten in intensity. “The reason I was surprised to see you, Cate, is because I heard you quit the bureau.”

He’s attempting to rattle me.

“Sounds like your sources aren’t very accurate,” said Cate, wondering how that news had reached his ears.

“Hmm.” His gaze went to Henry again. “Silent fellow, isn’t he?”

“If you know nothing about these graves, then who would?” Cate asked, pulling his attention back to her.

Lamb shrugged. “I have fans. I get mail.”

“So you’ve shared that the photos were in lockets left with the bodies. We kept that out of the press, and as far as my research shows, it never was mentioned. Did you tell one of your *fans*?”

“No.”

“Try again,” said Cate.

“The public knows I left photos.”

“They didn’t know about the lockets,” Cate repeated.

Lamb held her gaze. “Is that your doctor friend holding up the wall?”

What the fuck?

Her hands grew icy. “Don’t change the topic. These women we found belong to you.” She fought to hide that Lamb had gotten to her, just as he’d planned. Somehow he’d kept tabs on her. And she did not like it one bit.

I’m on a fucking island two hundred miles away, while he is behind bars. How?

“Are you saying you want to tack three more life sentences on top of my six?” asked Lamb. “That seems like a waste of time. Beating a dead horse, so to speak. I have enough convictions. Give them to the guy who killed those three.”

“Then you need to help us understand who could do this. I have to tell you, Jeff. The scenes are pretty darn perfect. The minute I saw the first, I knew it had been you.”

“It’s *not* me.” Sullen, he targeted Henry again. “I pictured you with someone taller, Cate.”

Enough.

“What is your obsession with me?” she asked. “Is it because a woman helped put you behind bars? Or do you do that with every person who bests you?” She nudged Mike. “Do you follow Agent Scarn too? What color is his cat?”

Silence. Icy-blue silence.

“So it is just me.” She nodded at him. “You need a new hobby, Jeff. This one is rather pathetic.”

Disappointment rolled off Mike. Cate had blown the interview, and it hurt. She’d let him get to her and divert the focus of the conversation.

Lamb gave a thin smile. “I’m glad you don’t work for the FBI anymore, Cate. I think you would have just lost your job.” He leaned forward, his chains clanking on the table, as he held her gaze. “I know nothing about those bodies. I don’t know who or why.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then we’re at an impasse. I’ve got nothing more for you.” He glanced over his shoulder at the guard. “I’m done. We’re all finished here.”

“Bryan Sowle.” Cate was grasping at straws.

“Seriously?” Lamb asked. “That idiot couldn’t pull off something like that. I’m insulted you’d even group us together.” The guard unhooked him, and he stood.

“You didn’t pull it off,” Cate pointed out. “We caught you.”

Now I’ve been reduced to throwing potshots.

“Then I’m sure you can find the next guy.” He shuffled to the door. “Good seeing you again, Cate. You really shouldn’t wear such a dark lipstick. Makes you look old.” The door slammed behind him.

Mike turned to her, annoyance on his face. “Did you have fun insulting each other?”

“I’m sorry.” Tension seeped out of her. “I knew I shouldn’t have come. I’m out of practice.”

“Clearly.” He stood up and strode to the door. “I guess I was smart to plan to see Sowle on my own.”

Henry touched her shoulder. “Lamb had it coming. Let’s go home.”
She covered his hand with hers and inhaled deeply, trying to settle her nerves.

Why did I let him get to me?

8

That evening Henry, Mike, and Cate had burgers and beers at Widower Brewery on the island. Henry held back a laugh at Mike's expression when the server delivered his burger. Amused by the name, Mike had ordered the Big Heart Attack. The triple-patty burger was six inches high and stacked with bacon, sautéed onions, and tartar sauce. A fried egg dripped runny yolk down one side. Mike stared and then shrugged and attempted to take a bite, wincing at the heavy flow of tartar sauce.

Henry had ordered it one time, and once was more than enough.

After the Lamb interview debacle, Cate and Henry had waited outside the prison while Mike had interviewed Bryan Sowle. Cate had been quiet at first as they'd waited, so Henry hadn't brought up her train wreck of an interview with Jeff Lamb. Then she'd gotten mad, furious that Lamb had spied on her and possibly her family.

Henry was disturbed by the man's knowledge too.

He'd let Cate rant until she'd run out of steam, and then they'd both relaxed in the sun until Mike had reappeared. They'd left immediately for the airport, and the plane ride had been too noisy to discuss what Sowle had had to say. Back at the island, Mike had suggested dinner, which had brought them to the brewery. After the first messy bite of his burger had left egg covering one hand, Mike switched to a knife and fork and chopped the impressive stack into what looked like a breakfast scramble. He squirted ketchup all over the heap of food and eagerly dived in.

"What was Sowle's second-degree-murder charge for?" Henry asked, focusing on his less impressive barbecue burger.

"Started as a bar fight," Mike said around bites. "They took it outside, and Sowle deliberately slammed the guy's head against a concrete block.

The victim never regained consciousness, and at least twenty witnesses were willing to talk.”

Henry could easily imagine the damage to the victim’s skull.

“What was the fight about?” asked Cate. Her burger was stuffed with blue cheese. Henry wasn’t a fan.

“A woman.”

Cate snorted.

“He asked about you,” Mike told her.

“Me? Why? He never said two words to me. Could barely look me in the eye during our interviews.”

Henry grinned. “Sounds like you made an impression anyway. What’s your feeling about him?” he asked Mike.

Mike grabbed a fresh napkin and wiped his lips. “I don’t think he has anything to do with the new graves. He’s not the brightest bulb. When I asked him about Widow’s Island, he said he’d never been to Canada.”

“Ha ha!” Cate covered her mouth, her eyes sparkling.

“He was also living in Montana during the time period we’re looking at. He’d only returned to Washington six months before he was arrested. Doesn’t rule anything out—he could have made trips. But it does move him down the list a bit.” He took another bite. “So I’m not feeling him for the murders. Even the guard commented that Sowle was a little thick in the brain. He hits first . . . asks questions later. I don’t believe he has the planning element needed to do the setup we saw in the state park.”

“That’s how I remember him too,” said Cate.

“When he asked where you were, I told him you no longer worked for the FBI,” Mike told her.

“Good,” said Henry. “Don’t need someone else looking for you.”

“I told him you moved to Canada,” said Mike, popping a fry in his mouth.

Cate nearly spit out the beer she’d just sipped and laughed. “I guess that’s true, by his definition.” She slid off her barstool and kissed Henry on the cheek. “I’ll be back in a minute.” She headed toward the restrooms.

Henry watched her walk away, pleased to see her happy.

“She surprised me today,” said Mike in a lower voice. “I didn’t expect her to let Lamb push her buttons. I don’t think that would have happened a year ago.”

Henry held up his hands. “Has a murderer ever proved they had accurate knowledge of what was going on in your life? Brought up your family? She handled it just fine when he first tried to rattle her, but when he brought up me, that was too close to home for her. He might have just as well mentioned her grandmother or brother. Cate’s very protective of her family.”

“I can’t have her reacting like that. Blew the interview.”

“Well, she feels bad about it, but she doesn’t work for you,” Henry reminded him. “You took that risk when you yanked her back in against her wishes.”

“She wanted it.”

She did.

“She might miss it sometimes, but I think this showed her she’s no longer the person she used to be. It’s not a good fit for her anymore.” He studied Mike’s disappointed face and didn’t care that Cate had let the agent down. She’d stood up for herself. And Henry.

She had new priorities.

“How did he get information about me? About Cate and me?”

“Obviously he’s in contact with someone on Widow’s,” said Mike, taking a long drink of his beer. He’d been eating nonstop but had barely dented the heap of destroyed burger on his plate. “Might even be the person we’re looking for.”

Henry pondered this. “You think Lamb keeps in touch with someone here who might be his protégé? Or someone suggested it could be a fan. I could see Lamb offering to chat with someone in exchange for information on Cate.”

“I struggle with the idea that Lamb taught someone to do what he did. The guy is a narcissist. He wouldn’t waste the time of day on someone like that. He does it best, and no one else could match. You saw his face when Cate pointed out that he’d been caught. In his mind he’s still leading the game, even though he’s sitting in jail.”

“I had an odd encounter with the sister of Luke Ruell yesterday,” Henry said, trying to imagine the odd kayak-business owner being mentored by Jeff Lamb.

It didn’t add up.

“Ice cream guy?”

Henry told him about the incident. “I passed it on to Bruce. He or Tessa was going to pay Luke a visit.”

“Good.” Mike eyed Henry over the rim of his beer glass. “You and Cate are good together.”

“I know.” Henry didn’t need someone to tell him the obvious—especially not an old boyfriend of Cate’s. But he figured it was Mike’s way of apologizing about getting steamed over Cate’s interview mess up.

“She seems happy.”

“We both are.”

An awkward silence stretched as they both focused on their food. A long minute later, Cate approached along with her brother and Tessa. Each had a pint of beer in one hand. “Look who I found at the bar,” Cate announced. She introduced Logan to Mike, and the men shook hands. “Tessa has an update.”

“I went to Luke Ruell’s home. Bruce told me about your encounter with his sister at your clinic,” Tessa told Henry. “Wendy is an odd one.”

“They’re both odd,” said Henry.

“Turns out Luke had no idea Wendy had gone to press you for information. She made up the sore throat, by the way.”

“I figured.”

“Luke admitted he’d hung around and watched from the woods after we told him to leave that morning. He saw us looking at the other possible grave spots. When he got home, he told his sister about it.” Tessa sighed. “Wendy has a fascination with crime stories. You should have seen her eyes light up when she saw me in my uniform at their front door. She looked like a junkie staring at her next fix. Back home she keeps a police scanner and listens nonstop. She runs a local Facebook page where she posts a lot of the calls from the scanner.”

“Like a crime gossip page,” said Henry, wondering why people had nothing better to do.

“Anyway, I think Luke is just nosy,” said Tessa. “And his sister even more nosy.”

“Did you expand your list of missing persons?” asked Mike.

“I did. I got a tighter age range from the anthropologist and used the years after the date on the quarter, but I broadened the search area. Did the whole state of Washington. Added Vancouver Island and some of the Canadian mainland. The medical examiner says tomorrow his odontologist

will have dental workups from the remains and can compare them to my list of women.”

“Do you have old dental records for all the missing?” asked Henry, knowing the dental workups were ineffective on their own unless directly compared to a victim’s dental records.

“I do for nineteen of them. Five I don’t.”

“There’s that many missing women in the area?” Henry was surprised.

Tessa nodded. “I suspect some left deliberately, but with any luck we’ll have some identifications tomorrow. Then we might find some leads on who did this.”

Hopeful, Henry raised his beer. “Here’s to bringing some closure to three families,” he said in a somber tone.

The five of them clinked glasses, determination on their faces.

9

Around lunchtime the next day, Cate was talking to Mike in the bookstore. He'd continued to use the back room to work in, stating that his hotel had weak Wi-Fi and no private work areas. Cate was a fan of powerful Wi-Fi and had installed it in both the bakery and bookstore.

Her phone chimed with a text.

"Tessa wants to know if you're in the bookstore," she told him.

"Why didn't she text me?"

"Good question." Cate typed an affirmative reply. "She says she's headed our way." Minutes later there was an enthusiastic knocking on the bookstore's back door, and Cate let in her friend.

"We've got two positive identifications," Tessa announced in an excited voice. "The ME is absolutely certain—well, the odontologist is absolutely certain." She set down her laptop on the worktable, took a seat, and opened the lid. Cate and Mike moved behind her shoulders to see her screen.

"I'll take two out of three," said Mike. "Honestly I was afraid they wouldn't identify any of them. Two is great. We can start to look for connections between the two."

"I want that third identification," said Tessa. "It's possible it's one of the missing women without dental records. I've got Kurt searching for more info that can show up in the skeletal remains . . . old broken bones, et cetera. If that doesn't turn up anything, I'll expand the search area again."

She typed on her keyboard. "Here's the official medical examiner's report on the first set of remains. He's identified her as Nayla Reynolds from Wenatchee, Washington. Twenty-eight. She vanished while taking her five-year-old to the park. The child was yelling for her mother when other

parents stepped in to calm her down and help.” Tessa shook her head. “That’s probably going to stick with that little girl for the rest of her life.”

“That’s a farther distance than I expected,” said Cate. “That’s got to be two hundred miles away. He had to be motivated to bring her that far.”

“Jeff drugged his victims to make it easier, remember?” Mike asked.

“That’s right. Did the tox screen turn up anything?” she asked Tessa.

“No. He’s running some additional screenings that look for other compounds, but they take a few days.”

“Was she married?” asked Cate.

“Divorced. The ex was the first person they investigated when Nayla didn’t turn up. Solid alibi. He was getting a three-hour root canal.”

“Not fun,” said Cate. “But excellent alibi.” Mike nodded in agreement.

“They investigated some old boyfriends and old coworkers—she hadn’t worked since she had her daughter. But no solid leads. This happened on September fifth, three years ago.”

“Is Kurt searching by disappearance date too?” Cate asked. “Is he looking for people who vanished on the fifth?”

“He is.”

“Here are her dental records. Top ones are recent; bottom ones are from her dentist. The dentist took these films three months before she disappeared. The ME pointed out how the three fillings in her molars are identical. You can lay one image on top of the other, and even the shape of the teeth will be identical.”

“Okay,” said Cate. “Who’s next?”

Tessa clicked her keys. “Tianna DeLeon. Age thirty-two, from Everett.”

“That’s quite a bit closer to us than Wenatchee.”

“Her car was found at Sea-Tac six days after she disappeared. She went missing on March fifth of the same year.”

“How?” asked Mike.

“Not sure. Her husband came home from work and found their twins crying in their cribs. Dirty diapers. Hungry.”

“Security-system cameras? Neighbors?” asked Cate.

“No cameras. Neighbors’ cameras caught nothing.”

“Vanished into thin air,” said Cate. “Theories?”

“Nothing with any meat to it. Someone could have knocked on the door or grabbed her when she was outside. They’d speculated for a long

time that she'd left. She had postpartum depression, and the twins were hard for her."

"Husband cleared, of course," said Mike.

"Yes. At work all day among a dozen other people. His work computer shows he was actively on it for a good portion of every hour."

"Big brother is watching," Cate commented. "What about cell phones for both women?"

"Left behind," answered Tessa. "Again this woman seemed to vanish into the mist. Few leads. No suspects."

Cate thought about the mist that often hovered in Bishop State Park.

She did end up in the mist.

"And the dental records?" she asked.

"Tianna's x-rays were five years old," said Tessa as she opened new images. "Look here." She pointed at a tooth that was practically lying on its side in the rear of the mouth. "It's a wisdom tooth, and it matches the position of this one from the medical examiner films."

"But there's a filling here that doesn't match the old films," Cate said, eyeing a white blob on an upper tooth.

"That's a crown. The odontologist explained that it likely replaced this silver filling on the old x-rays."

"But he's not certain?" asked Mike.

"Correct. But he *is* certain that these three other fillings are identical, and he specifically pointed out the shape of this premolar. He says it's very unusual. I'm sure there are other things, but these were the clinchers for him."

"Do you have the medical examiner films for the unidentified vic?" asked Cate, not sure why she'd asked, since she was no tooth expert.

"I do." A new image appeared.

"Is she missing teeth?" Mike asked. "Is that what all the gaps are?"

"Yes. The odontologist said she would be easy to match up to her dental records, and he wonders if she rarely got dental care . . . hence the missing teeth."

"Is she older?" Cate asked.

"No. He's estimating twenty to thirty-five at the most."

"Okay," said Mike. "We've got something to work with here. Time to find some commonalities between the women. Do you have photos of them?"

Tessa pulled up several photos. “Nayla on the left, and Tianna on the right.”

“Both blonde and attractive,” said Tessa. “I wonder if the hair color is important. Jeff Lamb liked blondes too.”

“Is Kurt searching specifically for missing blondes?” Mike asked Tessa. “It could steer us toward the third victim.”

“He knows about it, but he also knows it’s not conclusive.”

“Did the investigators from the different cities connect these two women’s disappearances?” questioned Cate.

“They didn’t,” said Tessa. “Yes, they both show up on a list of missing women in Washington, but no one looked closely at the two cases side by side.”

“I guess I know what we’re doing the rest of the day,” Mike said. He held Cate’s gaze. “I could use another pair of eyes. You’re still cleared for temporary duty.”

It’s just computer work.

“Yes, I’ll help.”

* * *

Five hours later, Cate’s eyes hurt. And they were no closer to finding a link between the two women than when they’d started. Her back room looked like a command headquarters—of a very small command. Papers were in stacks on the table and on the floor. Her printer had been going nonstop.

Three laptops and several yellow pads took up the rest of the space. “Should we have set up at your county sheriff’s office instead?” Mike asked.

Cate grinned. “This room is bigger than the office. They’ve got a holding cell and a desk. That’s about it.”

“A few chairs,” Tessa added. “And a TV. It’s too crowded if all three of us are there.”

Mike raised his brows but didn’t comment; instead he made a notation on a whiteboard Cate had hung on the wall.

Tessa had dashed to the hardware store and bought the four small whiteboards the place had in stock, causing people to stare as she’d emptied the shelf. “I’m curious to hear what the gossip says I’m doing with all these boards.”

“It’s office supplies. Four whiteboards,” said Mike. “That’s gossip worthy?”

“Yes,” Tessa and Cate replied in unison.

“Your gossips are hard up,” he said. “What do they have to say when crime actually happens?”

“Oh, that makes the gossip mill too,” said Tessa. “I post all our arrests on our Facebook page—it’s easier to maintain than a website. We can’t afford a web developer anyway, and people love to read about who got in trouble that week. It’s in the weekly paper too.”

“What kind of crime do you have on an island?” Mike asked. “Besides this case.”

“We have a lot of domestics,” Tessa told him. “Fights. Burglaries. There’s a drug problem here, which feeds all three of those.”

“Tourist season is different, though,” added Cate.

“Yes, that’s when we get the complaints about tourists clogging the streets and blocking traffic. A lot of trespassing calls, because tourists will cross private property trying to get the best view and selfie. The most interesting call last week was that someone stole a Slip ’N Slide.”

Mike stared at Tessa. “Didn’t you use to work for the Seattle PD? How did you handle the change of pace? You’ve got to be bored.”

“Priorities change.” Tessa pressed her lips together, and Cate knew she didn’t want to discuss her mother’s Alzheimer’s.

“I didn’t hear about the Slip ’N Slide,” Cate said quickly to change the topic. “Who took it?”

“The next-door neighbor. She was tired of hearing the kids screaming nonstop as they used it.”

“I thought you small-town islanders all get along, like in Mayberry,” said Mike. “I’m growing disenchanted.”

“And we’re getting off topic,” said Cate. “Focus, people.”

“I’m beginning to think our recent victims were totally random,” said Tessa in frustration. “We’re simply not finding a link between these two women.”

Cate leaned back in her chair and stretched her arms over her head. Tessa was right. “Okay. Let’s try a different approach for a while and refocus on Jeff Lamb. He obviously has a contact on the island. Who is it?”

“Where’s his prison visitor-and-phone-call list?” asked Tessa.

“I’ve got it here somewhere,” said Mike, reading his screen. “Sending it to the printer.”

Cate went to take the pages from the printer behind the bookstore’s counter. Her teenage employee sat on a stool at the counter, reading a novel, and didn’t look up as his boss took sheets from the printer for the tenth time that day. Cate didn’t care if her staff read on the job. Business was often slow—there wasn’t a lot to do—and if they discovered a book they loved, they could recommend and sell it to customers.

It was a good idea in theory, but she didn’t think it had actually happened yet.

She grabbed five sheets of paper and squinted at the tiny print. “So many phone calls,” she muttered. The last page was personal visits. She felt smug, looking at the short list, recognizing that most of the visits were from his attorney. She hoped it bugged the hell out of Lamb that he was alone for the most part. His family had hightailed it out of Washington and cut all ties when he’d become one of the state’s most notorious killers.

She went back to her chair and handed two of the pages to Tessa. “It’s mostly phone calls. No one can call him. He has to either make the call collect or with a prepaid card. And the phone number he calls has to be on an approved list.”

“Which we don’t have,” said Tessa.

“Sorry,” said Mike. “They wouldn’t give it to me. Something about inmate privacy.”

“But they’ll give you the numbers.” Tessa rolled her eyes. “So we have to look up all these numbers to see who they belong to?”

“Do you want to go back to searching for connections between the two identified victims?” asked Cate.

“No.” Tessa organized her pages on the table and got started.

Cate went through the visitor list first. There wasn’t much to research. A couple of reporters and a local true-crime author had visited. She knew Lamb wasn’t allowed to profit from his story and had a sour attitude about letting anyone else profit from it—even the families of his victims. She wondered why he had agreed to see the author.

He was bored.

She imagined he enjoyed teasing the author, letting him think he might get permission to write his story. He’d probably stretched out the entertainment for weeks.

Cate started to research the phone numbers and discovered many of them were Google numbers, leaving her no way to track the owner's identity. "Mike, there has to be a way to get the approved-name list from the prison. Most of these numbers are unsearchable."

"I'm finding the same," said Tessa.

"So that's why they let me have those lists. I'll see what I can do." He picked up his cell phone and stepped outside.

"Mike doesn't want us to know who he's going to call," said Tessa with a grin. "Why didn't he contact *that* person for the list in the first place?"

"Because he needs to leave an appropriate trail of inquiry." Cate had done the same a number of times. Gone through all the accepted channels and then quietly jumped a fence when she hadn't found what she'd wanted. "We might as well wait on searching these numbers until he gets a list." She had no doubt that Mike knew someone who would get it.

Cate scanned the women's social media accounts, which were still up, and looked for friends in common but found nothing. It was disturbing to see photos of the happy women, knowing they had been murdered. Especially the images with their kids. Cate stopped on one that showed Tianna hugely pregnant with her twins. She stood on a beach, the ocean behind her, her hand on her stomach and a beaming grin on her face.

So horrible for those babies to lose their mother.

As she looked at the photo, the hairs on Cate's arms rose.

She knew exactly where Tianna had stood in the photo. Even though only a few yards of rocky sand was visible in the picture, Cate saw far in the background—nearly cut out of the photo—the distinctive profile of Ruby's Island. The tiny island stood in the middle of Widow's Bay. Tianna had been photographed on the beach just north of Harlot Harbor.

Cate's brain spun with questions and possibilities.

Does this mean anything?

"Tessa, look at this photo." She turned her laptop toward the deputy, who leaned closer.

"Wow. She was really pregnant there."

"Can you tell where she is?"

"No—wait a second. That's Ruby's Island in the background!" Her excited gaze met Cate's. "Tianna has been to Widow's!"

“But she hasn’t even had the twins in this picture. They were nearly a year old when she died, and we know she wasn’t on the island when she vanished.”

“Let’s see if Nayla Reynolds has also visited the island. Wouldn’t it be odd if they’d been here on the same date?”

Cate switched to Nayla’s Facebook account, but the photos were hidden by her privacy settings. “Damn privacy options.” Noticing that Nayla also had an Instagram account, she pulled it up, crossing her fingers that it wasn’t locked down.

It wasn’t.

Cate started to scroll. “If I don’t find any pictures, we should try to get her old credit card records. Perhaps there are some charges that place her on the island.”

“On it,” said Tessa.

Cate scrolled and scrolled, noting that Nayla had consistently labeled her posts with her location. The woman had taken over two thousand photos, mostly of her daughter. Cate paused every time she saw something that could be on the island. She slowly searched through the dates around the time of when Tianna’s photo had been taken.

Nothing. Disappointed, Cate continued to look.

Two minutes later she saw it.

She opened the post. Nayla’s husband held their toddler daughter and an ice cream cone in front of Widow’s Ice Creamery. She checked the date. It was nearly two years earlier than Tianna’s photo. She showed Tessa her results.

“Well, they weren’t here on the same day, but they did both visit Widow’s. I think it’s something . . . they must have caught someone’s attention.”

“You think it’s a local we’re looking for,” said Cate.

“It has to be someone who knows the area well enough to get three women onto the island and into the state park without anyone seeing something suspicious.”

“True.”

Mike reappeared. “The list is being texted to me in a photo.”

Someone doesn’t want to use their email.

“We discovered that Nayla and Tianna have both visited the island,” Cate told him. “But at different times.”

Mike considered that. “It’s something, right?”

“Yes, but we aren’t sure what.”

His phone dinged, and he opened the text. He read it quickly. “There’s about twenty names. Nothing immediately jumps out at me, but maybe it will to one of you.” He handed his phone to Tessa, and Cate looked over her shoulder.

Tessa flinched at the same moment Cate caught her breath.

Cate scanned the rest of the names and came back to the only one she knew.

Chris Corbin. The island’s real estate agent.

10

“What do you know about Corbin?” asked Mike as they walked down the street to the real estate office. They had checked the other names on the list, and no one lived on Widow’s Island. The link between Jeff Lamb and Chris was too big to ignore.

Cate and Tessa exchanged a glance. “I don’t know much except that he’s rather quiet,” said Cate. “Seems to be good at his job. Clients say positive things.”

“Same here,” agreed Tessa. “I don’t know him personally at all.”

“If you want more information, Mike, I could call Jane,” suggested Cate. “She knows everything about everybody.”

“I’d like to know who I’m dealing with. Call her.”

Cate dialed. Jane picked up immediately, and she put her grandmother on speaker. “Jane, what can you quickly tell me about Chris Corbin?”

“The real estate agent? I think he’s been here for about ten years. I remember Leslie was done with the real estate business about that time, and Chris took it over then. Let’s see . . . he dated Molly Kramer for a bit. Didn’t last. Lots of ladies around here have their eye on him, you know. Single men are rare on the island—although most of the single women are older than him. He’s always polite. Umm . . . seems like he leaves the island for a few weeks after the holidays. Goes somewhere warm, I believe. Maybe Arizona? What else do you want to know?”

Mike shrugged at the question, and Cate understood. Chris Corbin seemed to lead an unobtrusive life.

“I think that’s good enough for now.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you later. I need to go—and please don’t tell anyone I asked you.” Cate mulled over the information as she ended the call. “Where do

you think he goes in the winter?” she asked Tessa.

“Who knows?” said Tessa. “Right now I’d like to talk to him, but I don’t want to tip our hand. I think asking why Jeff Lamb calls him would definitely do that.”

“She’s right,” said Mike.

“His car isn’t there,” Cate said, pointing at a spot next to the real estate office. “Chris always parks between those rocks.”

“Whose car is that?” asked Mike.

“Emma’s,” said Tessa.

“She’s Chris’s assistant. You might have briefly seen her when we arrived at the bakery yesterday. Henry had been talking to her. I’ll call and ask her if Chris is in the office.” Cate dialed, and Emma promptly answered. “Hi, Emma, it’s Cate Wilde. Is Chris in?”

“I’m sorry, Cate. He took the day off today. Do you need his cell number?”

“I have it.” She looked at Tessa, an idea forming in her mind. “I might stop by with Tessa for a few minutes. You’ll be around?”

“Yes, I’m here until five.”

“Okay. See you in a few.” Cate ended the call.

“What are you doing?” Mike asked, concerned lines between his brows.

“Since he’s gone for the day, let’s ask Emma if the Reynolds and DeLeon families found their vacation rentals through Chris.” She looked from Mike to Tessa. “Chris’s name on that call list is definitely a lead we need to follow, but we don’t have any connection from him to the women—only a connection to Jeff Lamb. I think if we find that those families are past clients, that’s some hard evidence that could get us a warrant.”

“I don’t know if Emma will feel comfortable giving out that information,” said Tessa.

“I’ve found that asking nicely gets me a lot of facts that I didn’t expect,” said Cate. “Most people like to be helpful. The worst that could happen is she says no, so we’ve got nothing to lose.”

Tessa eyed Mike. “Maybe you should wait outside since you’re not a familiar face.”

He agreed and stepped off the sidewalk to head to the other side of the street.

“I’ll ask Bruce to drive by Chris’s house and see if his car is there,” said Tessa, pulling out her phone. She swiftly sent a text and then followed as Cate opened the office door and entered.

“Hi, Cate, Tessa,” Emma said cheerily from behind the reception desk. “Abby, say hello.”

Her daughter was on her knees at the waiting room’s coffee table, coloring in a book. She looked up and nodded gravely at the two women. “Hello.” And she went right back to coloring.

“What can I do for you two?” Emma asked.

“A friend of mine used Chris to find a vacation rental about four years ago, but she doesn’t remember the address,” said Cate. “She wanted to recommend it to someone else. Do you think you could find the rental record?”

“I think so,” said Emma as she pulled her keyboard close. “What’s her name?”

“Nayla Reynolds.”

Emma hummed softly as she typed and studied the screen. Cate was pleased that the young woman had landed on her feet in a job she seemed to like.

“Here we go. Nayla and Tim Reynolds. I’ll write down the address for you.”

Cate glanced at Tessa, who widened her eyes. Her idea had paid off.

Chris Corbin worked with one of them.

“Can you check one more name?” Cate wanted to hold her breath. “Tianna DeLeon.”

Emma input the name and scrolled several times. “I’m not seeing that name . . . could it be under something else?”

“Maybe her husband’s name? Is there a DeLeon at all?”

Emma shook her head. “Nothing’s coming up.”

Disappointment rocked Cate.

At least we have one. He could have crossed paths with Tianna in a different way.

“Thanks, Emma,” said Tessa. “See you later, Abby.”

“Later, alligator,” the little girl said without looking up from her coloring book.

“After a while, crocodile,” Cate added as she followed Tessa out the door.

They crossed the street to Mike and told them what they'd found. Tessa's phone beeped.

"Bruce says there's no car at Chris's house. He's asking if we want him to knock."

"No," said Mike. "Again, I don't want to give anything away, especially now that we have a connection between him and Nayla Reynolds." He looked to Tessa. "Can you put together a team to approach the home with me? If he's there, all the better."

"Kurt and I can be ready in a half hour," Tessa said.

"Perfect. I appreciate the support. We'll just ask him some questions." He looked to Cate. "You coming?"

"Yes."

I wouldn't miss it.

* * *

Henry stood beside Cate as they hung back at the road behind the police vehicles, watching as the three deputies and Mike walked up to Chris's front door. Henry had texted Cate a half hour ago, hoping to meet at home for dinner, but Cate had said she was going with the police. He pressed for details and was shocked.

Chris Corbin.

That can't be right.

He didn't see a killer in the quiet man. Chris had been to Henry's clinic a number of times, trying to get his high blood pressure under control. Henry had adjusted his medications until they'd found the right drug and dose. He'd found the real estate agent intelligent, and they'd had several discussions about football, fishing, and Los Angeles, where Henry had lived and where Chris had spent a few years during college.

They're looking at the wrong man.

A shudder went through Cate, and Henry felt it against his arm. Her gaze was locked on the officers. Kurt and Bruce had split away from Mike and Tessa, and they went to each side of the house. Kurt took a position where he could see one side and the front of the home, while Bruce went farther down the other side until he had a view of the rear of the home.

If someone tried to leave the house, they'd be seen.

Cate's breathing sped up as Tessa rang the doorbell.

“I can’t watch.” Cate spun around to leave, and Henry caught her, making her look him in the eyes.

How could I forget her attack?

The setup had been similar. A closed door. Two agents. It was to be a simple interview. No one had expected the shots through the door that had injured Cate and killed her partner.

“You’re okay. And *nothing* is going to happen.”

“You don’t know that!”

She pushed his hands off her arms, but he enveloped her in a hug, holding her tight to him. “No one knows!” she whispered. “No one can see what’s waiting behind that door!” Continuous shudders racked her body.

She leaned her head against Henry’s shoulder, and he watched the officers.

Tessa rang the bell again. And waited. Then she knocked, and the door swung open under her knuckles. She and Mike stepped farther to the side, but the door stopped. Her knock had pushed it open.

“Chris!” Tessa yelled into the house. “It’s Deputy Black. Is everything okay?”

Cate lifted her head and turned to see. Tessa yelled again.

After a moment, Mike and Tessa conferred, and then Tessa gestured for Kurt to come to the front of the house and radioed Bruce to continue watching the back.

“They’re going in,” said Cate. Her lips were pressed into a tight line.

“It doesn’t appear anyone is home,” Henry said. “The door swung open when Tessa knocked. Can they simply go in?”

“Yes, if they think something has happened inside.”

Kurt and Tessa went in to clear the house as Mike waited outside. Shouts of “Clear!” sounded as they checked each room. The house was small. They finished rapidly and reconvened on the front porch with Mike and called Bruce to join them.

Tessa seemed agitated. She spoke pointedly with Mike for a few moments and kept looking over at Henry and Cate. Mike appeared to relent, and Tessa pulled out her phone and then waved the two of them over.

“What did she find?” Cate murmured to Henry. “There’s something she’s unhappy about.”

“Let’s find out.” He took Cate’s cold hand and led her toward the house.

Tessa looked grim as she stepped aside to make her phone call. All three men on the porch wore serious expressions.

“What happened?” asked Cate.

“Tessa and I found something inside I think you should look at,” said Kurt.

Cate caught her breath.

“Don’t worry—nothing gruesome,” the older deputy said kindly. He gestured for her and Henry to follow him. The inside of the ranch-style house was well lit, and Kurt led her down a narrow hallway to a bedroom. Inside was a large desk with a desktop and printer along with several tall metal file cabinets. Photos were scattered across the desk. One caught Cate’s eye, and she stepped closer.

It was a photo of her and Samantha standing behind the bakery. Both of them were laughing. Sam’s head tipped back as she cracked up, and her long red ponytail stretched down her back. Cate had a hand slapped to her forehead, her mouth open in laughter.

Cate remembered the moment. She’d been telling Sam about a customer, but she couldn’t—

“What in the world?” The other photos caught her attention. There were a dozen more of Samantha. Her son, Mickey, was in some. Cate lost her breath, and Henry squeezed her hand.

Today is the fifth.

“He’s targeted Samantha. She’s his next victim.”

“Tessa is calling her right now,” said Kurt. “And we’re sending Bruce straight to her home. We’ll move her somewhere safe.”

After arriving at Sam's house, Cate squeezed her friend in a big hug. "I'm so sorry. We'll get the guy."

"I know you will," said Sam. "You two have already proved you can do anything." She included Tessa with a nod.

Bruce had watched over Sam and her mother and Mickey as they'd packed. They wanted out of the home as quickly as possible. At first Tessa had suggested the three of them go to a hotel, but Cate—and Jane—had felt Jane's home would be the most secure. "Logan has already offered to keep watch," Cate had said. "And you know how protective my grandmother is. The two of them won't let anything near Sam and her family."

"Logan talked to me about it," Tessa had said. "I agreed because we're stretched thin. I think it's a solid plan."

Henry and Bruce loaded the family's things into Logan's vehicle, and the park ranger drove off as Mickey waved goodbye from his seat. Cate breathed a sigh of relief as she watched them leave and heard Tessa do the same.

She had no doubt they'd be safe with her brother.

"Okay," said Tessa. "Now to find Chris." She looked at Kurt and Bruce. "Kurt, I want you to check the ferry video from this morning. See if he left the island. Bruce, check the marina and see if his boat is still there. If it is, check with the rental companies to see if he rented a boat. Ask the water taxi too. Everyone keep an eye out for his vehicle."

"It's going to happen today," Cate murmured. "I can feel it."

"I'll stay here to watch the house and make some calls," said Mike. "There's a good chance he'll show up here this evening."

"I'll stay too," said Cate as an idea struck her. "I'll be the bait."

Tessa and Mike stared.

“Explain,” said Mike as Tessa’s face cleared, and she slowly nodded.
Tessa knows what I’m thinking.

“With both Samantha’s and Marsha’s cars in the drive, it looks like they’re home,” said Cate. “I’ll stay in the house and try to remain in view from a window. I want him to believe Sam is still here.”

“You don’t look like her,” Mike pointed out. “Especially your hair. You can’t change your hair to red unless you’ve got a wig stashed somewhere.”

“I’ll wear a bathrobe,” Cate said. “And put my hair up in a towel, as if I’ve just showered. Sam’s always wearing reading glasses with thick frames. I’ll borrow them and try to keep my back to any windows. From a distance, it should work. We’re the same height and build.”

Mike exchanged a look with Tessa, who shrugged. “I’ll stay in the house with her. It’s not a bad idea.”

“All right. I’ll join you inside,” said Mike.

“Great. It’s settled,” said Cate. She’d worried they’d refuse her plan.
We’ll get him.

* * *

Two hours later the sun had set, and Cate had been pretending to read a book at the table in the kitchen. Her senses were on high alert, but she was bored. She’d made five cups of tea and rewrapped the towel around her hair at least a dozen times.

She’d talked to Henry, who was in his car down the street, watching the comings and goings of the neighborhood. The review of the ferry tapes hadn’t shown Chris’s vehicle, and no one on the island had rented a boat to him. His personal boat was still tied up at the marina. Bruce had boarded and found it empty. So now Kurt sat in his own truck at the end of the street, the county vehicles too noticeable for surveillance. Bruce sat with Henry, because his own orange muscle car was highly recognizable on the island. Henry’s silver Explorer was not.

The wait was excruciating.

Tessa and Mike continued to research and make work calls from inside Samantha’s home, staying out of sight.

Cate’s phone beeped. Tessa was calling from a back bedroom. Cate answered and found herself on a three-way call with Mike.

“Hey, guys,” said Tessa. “Did you know that Chris’s mother died when he was seven?”

“No,” Mike and Cate said in unison.

“Yeah. She was found murdered in a park not far from their home. Death was from a ligature.”

“Where was Chris that day?”

“In school.”

“Was the murder solved?” asked Mike.

“No. Still open,” said Tessa. “I don’t like this.”

“A seven-year-old isn’t going to murder his mother,” said Cate.

“True, but it will leave a lasting effect on the child.”

“Are you saying Chris might kill mothers because his own mother was murdered?” asked Cate. “I don’t quite see the logic there . . . and besides, it’s Jeff Lamb who started all this. His victims were the young women with children—oh, my god.” Cate’s mind shot down a tangent. “Tessa, how old was Jeff Lamb the year Chris’s mother was killed?”

“He would have been twenty-three.”

“Where did both of them live when this happened?” Cate asked, struggling to breathe normally.

“Give me a minute,” said Tessa. Sounds of typing came through the phone.

“Is it possible?” Mike muttered.

“They both lived in Kent,” said Tessa. “I’m looking up the location of their addresses—holy shit. Their homes were one street apart.”

“They were neighbors,” breathed Cate. “I don’t know what a twenty-three-year-old man would have to do with a child, but I think there’s a good chance that’s where their relationship started.”

“And Lamb may have killed Chris’s mother,” said Mike. “It fits with his other victims. Mothers with young children. But for some reason he didn’t do the burial part of his routine.”

“Maybe he hadn’t added it yet,” said Cate. “I wonder if he’d done the surveillance part. Was she married?”

“Divorced for four years when she died,” said Tessa. “Her ex was a primary suspect for a long time. Chris lived with her parents after the murder, not his father. Oh . . . looks like his mother’s parents lived in the same house. So that means he didn’t move after her death.”

“That means Jeff Lamb was still in his neighborhood,” added Cate. “I wonder if they had much contact.”

“This is an odd twist,” said Tessa. “But it does give us a logical connection between the men. It can’t be a coincidence.”

Cate checked the time. It was nearly eleven. “I’m going to give Sam a quick call. See how she’s doing.” Logan or Jane would have called immediately if there’d been a problem, but Cate still wanted to hear Sam’s voice.

Cate’s phone rang and rang as her grip grew tighter on her cell.

Dammit, Sam. Answer.

“Hello.” Sam was out of breath.

“Is everything okay?” Cate asked as her heart pounded in her chest.

“Yes. I was putting Mickey to bed, and my phone was in the other room. Has anything happened yet?”

“No. I’m just checking in.” Cate paused. “Logan’s still awake, right?”

“Is that a serious question? I think he’d stay awake for three days if needed.”

“Sorry. The responsible Logan of today doesn’t line up with the teenage brother I remember.”

Sam laughed. “I get it. I knew him then too.”

“I’ll let you go. Stay safe,” said Cate.

“You too,” Sam answered in a serious voice.

Cate returned to her book, fully aware that there was only one hour left until midnight.

Maybe he is waiting until next month.

She would be okay with that. It would give Mike and Tessa more time to investigate and build a case. And it would mean she wouldn’t have to immediately worry for Sam.

Time slowly ticked by. Kurt and Bruce checked in every fifteen minutes, and Cate chatted with Henry occasionally.

“What will you do if nothing happens by midnight?” asked Henry.

“Breathe easier? Actually I won’t until we—they—make an arrest.”

“Are you having doubts about Chris?” he asked.

She’d been thinking of nothing else for the past several hours. “After everything we’ve learned and seeing those photos of Sam on his desk, I’m positive we have the right person.”

“Agreed.”

Tessa's voice sounded from the bedroom and then grew louder as she walked toward the kitchen, talking on her cell.

"I'll call you back in a bit," Cate told Henry and then ended the call, wondering what was up. Tessa hadn't stepped out of the bedroom all evening.

A new female voice sounded in the kitchen as Tessa entered and switched over to speaker. Mike was right behind her. "I can connect the call," the female voice said.

"Please do," said Tessa.

"What's going on?" asked Cate.

"It's county dispatch. They got a call from a child that her mother is missing."

Cate froze. "What? Who?"

"I have the police on the phone with us now, honey," said the female voice. "Tell them what you told me."

"He made Mommy leave," said a child's voice. "She didn't want to go."

We're watching the wrong house.

"What's your name?" asked Cate, with her heart in her throat.

"Abby."

"Abby Dean?" Cate exclaimed. *Emma's daughter?* She stared at Tessa with wide eyes.

"Yes."

"This is Cate Wilde, Abby," she said in a shaking voice. "Tessa is here too. We saw you today at your mom's work."

"I remember."

"Did Chris take your mom? Was it her boss?" Cate held her breath.

"Yes. She argued with him, but he made her go, and then I think I fell asleep, but I just went in her room, and she's not there." Her little voice cracked. "She's not anywhere in the house."

"Hang on a minute, Abby." Tessa muted her phone. "He wasn't planning to take Samantha. He wanted Emma."

"Or he was planning on Samantha but realized we were with her," said Cate. "*Dammit.*"

"Call Kurt for me," said Tessa, her phone still connected to Abby and dispatch. "Tell him to get to the Dean house and get Abby."

"He can take her to Jane's," said Cate as she dialed Kurt's number.

“I’ll send Bruce to Chris’s home,” said Mike. “We’ll meet him there.”
Cate pulled the towel off her head, her phone to her ear. “Let’s move.
Now. We’ve got to find Emma.”

I hope we’re not too late.

* * *

“The house is still empty,” said Bruce as Cate, Mike, and Tessa arrived at Chris’s home.

“It appears no one has been here since we found those photos,” added Henry, who’d driven Bruce to the home.

The group looked at one another.

Where would he go?

“The rock,” breathed Cate. “Why didn’t I think of that first? He’s taken her to the rock.”

“Let’s go,” ordered Tessa.

The five of them tracked into Bishop State Park at a jog. It would take forty-five minutes to walk to the clearing, and Cate hoped to cut that time in half. At first they'd had light from the nearly full moon, but as they entered the trees, it was little help. They rotated three flashlights, keeping an eye on the rocky trail.

Cate felt as if they were running in a spotlight, creating perfect targets.

Kurt had stayed with Abby at Jane's home, keeping watch with Logan. Trekking through the woods, Mike, Bruce, and Tessa were armed; Henry and Cate were not. At least they had ballistic vests, but the extra weight made the jogging all the more difficult.

"There's a tire mark." Tessa stopped and pointed with her flashlight. It was narrow like a bicycle tire and weaved between the rocks. "He pulled her in on something."

Cate wished they could have used ATVs, but the trail in was cramped and rocky. Somehow Chris had found something to make his journey a little easier. "He probably crafted something to get around the rocks. I've wondered how he physically got the women in. I've assumed they were drugged and needed to be carried somehow."

They kept moving, their breath showing in the cold air.

Don't let us be too late.

"What's the plan?" Bruce asked Tessa as they jogged around a boulder.

"Get Emma."

"No. Really."

"Really," panted Tessa. "I'll figure out a plan when I get there."

None of them knew what they were running into. Cate forced the thought out of her mind.

Keep moving forward.

“Almost there,” said Mike, after what felt like hours of running. “Let’s regroup.”

They slowed, breathing heavily. Ahead between the firs, glimpses of the clearing gleamed in the moonlight.

Something flashed, lighting up the meadow.

“He’s taking pictures,” whispered Cate. “He’s definitely here.”

“And Emma must still be alive,” said Tessa. “All the women were alive in his photos.”

“He’s only a few hours ahead of us,” said Bruce. “That’s not enough time to dig a grave.”

“We finished up here two days ago,” Tessa pointed out. “He could have done it at any point during that time.”

Mike crouched and picked up a stick. “The rock and graves were close to the edge of the clearing.” He drew a square and placed an *X* close to one edge. “We’ll assume he’s here. Half of us can come straight across the clearing, get his attention, while the rest of us circle through the woods and come in behind him, right by the graves.”

Tessa nodded. “Bruce and I will come across and confront him. The three of you go behind. We won’t be able to see you, so stay out of the way at two or ten.”

So they can shoot if needed.

She looked at Cate. “You should be armed.” She removed a handgun at her ankle. “My backup.”

She’s right.

Cate silently accepted it; the weapon felt both foreign and familiar. She hadn’t held a gun in months.

They turned off the flashlights and split up, relying on the moonlight to not trip. Cate, Mike, and Henry edged through the trees, trying to use the dim light to see yet stay out of sight.

Flashes continued near the rock. Each one gave Cate hope that Emma was still breathing. A few tense minutes later, she finally saw Emma. Chris had propped a flashlight that shone on her body. She was on her side on the rock, a gag in her mouth and her hands tied in front of her. Chris was talking to her, but Cate couldn’t make out his words. Emma’s head moved, and her eyes opened but then fell immediately shut. She gave a soft moan.

She must be drugged.

No blood.

The three of them crouched at the two o'clock position. Their view showed Chris from the hips up, blocked by the rock.

"This isn't good enough," muttered Cate. "I'm moving to ten o'clock."

"I'm coming with you," said Henry.

She glanced at Mike, who nodded. He'd stay.

Henry and Cate continued along the edge of the wood until she estimated they were in a safe position. She couldn't see Tessa and Bruce. Or Mike.

I think we're in the right place.

She gestured for Henry to step behind a tree, and she did the same, keeping an eye on Chris. Now she could see all of him.

Chris set his camera on the rock and picked up something.

Cate squinted, trying to make out the shape in the poor light.

"It's a ligature," Henry whispered. "He's going to choke her."

No.

Cate took an instinctive step toward the rock, and Henry caught her arm. "Wait!" he whispered.

"We've got to do something!" she hissed.

"Chris!" shouted Tessa. "It's Deputies Black and Taylor! Step away from the rock!"

Shock registered on his face, and he dipped down behind the rock, scanning the dark for where the voice had come from.

"Stay back, or she's dead!" His voice cracked on the last word.

"There's no reason to hurt her, Chris," Tessa said calmly. "Step away so we can talk about this."

Cate swore in the poor light. "Can you see Tessa?" she whispered to Henry as she shifted into a firing stance, her feet spread apart, her right foot slightly back.

"No," said Henry. "And I think the rock blocks her view of him."

Don't make us do anything, Chris.

The weapon had warmed in her hand, matching her body temperature where she touched it. Her breathing slowed as she concentrated on the figure in her sights as he huddled by the rock.

"Just move back," said Tessa. "You haven't done anything you can't undo yet. Don't make it worse."

Not quite accurate but should make him pause.

“But she has to go!” shouted Chris.

What?

Cate exchanged a look with Henry, who shook his head.

“Go where?” asked Tessa.

“Just gone. Her daughter needs to be safe.” His voice had changed. He spoke in a higher, more childlike tone.

“Abby is safe. Is that why your mother died?” Tessa asked. “To make you safe?”

“Shut up! Do not speak of her!”

“Abby loves her mother,” said Tessa. “She was very upset when you took her away. She doesn’t have anyone else to take care of her.”

Cate finally spotted Tessa, a shadowy outline slowly coming across the meadow, with the taller Bruce a dozen feet to her right.

Chris was silent.

“I know you don’t want to hurt Emma,” said Tessa. “No one is making you do that. You can stop.”

“I have to.”

“Why? Who does it help?”

“It’s the right thing to do,” he said, looking down at Emma. “But it has to be done correctly. If it’s not done right, things will fall apart.”

His tone still sounded like a ten-year-old’s. Cate had never heard him speak like that, and it was like nails on a chalkboard to her, making the hair lift on her neck.

He’s cracked. At least he can’t choke her quickly with the rope. I can take him down if he tries.

“Who told you that?” asked Tessa. “Was it Jeff?”

Chris jerked, turning in her direction. *“Do not talk about him!”*

“Okay. But can you tell me why his name upsets you?”

He lowered his eyes, staring at the rope gripped in his hand. “You know nothing about him. He’s a good man.”

“He’s in prison, Chris. Maybe he’s not the right person to look up to.”

“He helped me.” An even younger voice. “He made her stop hurting me.”

Cate closed her eyes, positive that Jeff had been responsible for Chris’s mother’s death.

“I wanted to stop doing what he showed me to do. I *tried* to stop. I fought it off for a couple years—until now.” Chris touched Emma’s cheek,

the ligature dangling from his other hand. “But I don’t think the urge will ever go away.” His voice had almost returned to normal, but he spoke the last line so softly Cate knew Tessa couldn’t hear him.

What is he planning?

“Drop the rope, and take five steps toward me,” said Tessa. “We’ll work this out.”

Good job, Tessa. Make him feel there is hope. That he hasn’t gone too far.

Chris threw down the rope and took three steps away from the rock, his gaze still on Emma.

Cate held her breath. *He’s not done.* She shifted her weight onto her toes, Chris still lined up in her sights. He turned his head in Tessa’s direction, and Cate wondered if he could see her yet.

“Kneel, and then lie on your stomach,” ordered Tessa.

Chris didn’t move.

He’s going to do something.

He glanced over at Emma on the rock and then back to Tessa, his hands in fists at his sides.

Don’t do it.

He lunged toward the rock and grabbed something near Emma’s feet.

Knife.

He lurched and swung the knife toward Emma’s throat as Cate fired until he dropped.

She froze, echoes of the shots ringing in her ears, and stared at the man collapsed against the rock.

Damn you, Chris.

“Cate.”

Something touched her arm, but she didn’t move, Chris’s body still in her sights.

“*Cate.*” Suddenly Henry was there, concern in his eyes as she met his gaze, his hands on her shoulders as she lowered her arms.

“I’m okay.”

“I know. I can see that.” His tone didn’t agree with his words; he was worried about her.

She looked past him. Tessa, Mike, and Bruce were at the rock. Tessa attended to Emma, and Bruce handcuffed an unmoving Chris as Mike wrapped his belt around Chris’s arm.

“Go check Emma. And Chris,” she told Henry. “My ears are ringing, but I’m fine.” She exhaled forcefully. “Holy shit. Why did he make me do that?”

“You did the right thing.”

Cate shifted her gaze to Chris’s still form on the ground.

Did I?

She numbly followed Henry to the rock, where Tessa was talking to Emma. “It’s Tessa, Emma. You’re safe. Abby is safe too. Everything is going to be fine,” she repeated over and over.

Emma’s eyes barely focused. Her lips moved but formed no words.

Henry took over. “Her pupils are huge. Pulse and respiration’s okay. I’ll need to know what he gave her.”

“Chris is out,” said Mike. “He’s breathing, and his pulse is steady, but he’s bleeding from the shots—nothing heavy, just seepage.”

Cate bent over to see. Blood soaked Chris’s shoulder and left arm.

He’d lived.

“We need to get them both to the clinic,” said Henry.

“I’m more than happy to leave this place,” muttered Cate as her ears continued to ring. Chris’s blood dotted the rock and had sprayed over Emma’s shirt. The woman opened her eyes and looked directly at Cate.

She’ll be okay.

“I’m glad Emma is fine,” Cate said to Henry two days later as they sat on a bench at Widow’s Walk, enjoying the ocean view.

The woman had mostly regained consciousness by the time they’d gotten her out of the forest and had steadily improved on the way to the clinic. Henry had kept an eye on her overnight and had reunited her with Abby the next morning.

Chris Corbin had been picked up by two more FBI agents and taken to a hospital on the mainland. He would live. Cate suspected he’d lunged at Emma at the last second in an effort to draw fire. His quiet words about the urge never going away had repeated in her mind ever since then. Suicide by cop. He had known he was finished but hadn’t wanted to live with the consequences.

Too bad. Plenty of consequences were headed his way.

Investigators were taking another look at his mother’s murder now that they had a suspect in Jeff Lamb. Mike had gone with them, after giving Cate a tight hug and Henry a firm handshake.

“What did Mike say to you when you shook hands goodbye?” Cate asked. She’d noticed he’d leaned forward and spoken quietly, making Henry grin, but she had forgotten to ask about it until now.

Henry put his arm around Cate’s shoulders. “He said for me to keep you on the island.”

She frowned. “That wasn’t nice. Did he mean that I’m better off baking scones than returning to the FBI?” The comment stung more than she was willing to admit.

“I don’t think he meant that at all.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anyway. I’m done. I called Phillip this morning and told him to put through my final paperwork. This sabbatical

nonsense has gone on long enough.”

He met her gaze. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. You saw what I went through when Tessa knocked on that front door. I was a wreck with anxiety. I could put someone at risk if that happened when I was on the job.”

Henry shifted forward and looked her full in the face. “You just saved Emma’s life. I watched you. *You* were cool and calm in a high-intensity situation. You haven’t lost your edge. And I saw how much you enjoyed working the case over the past few days. You welcomed the challenge.”

She had enjoyed it, but shooting Chris had haunted her dreams for the last two nights, and she knew it would continue. She never wanted to be in that situation again.

Cate sighed. “Why are you trying to get me to take that job back?”

“I’m not. I just want you to be absolutely positive that you’re where you want to be.”

Cate had no doubts. She smiled and lifted a hand to his cheek. “I am.” As she touched him, something tingled from her spine to her fingertips.

Henry blinked and covered her hand on his face with his. “What was that?”

A puff of icy air touched the back of Cate’s neck.

You approve, Ruby?

“I must have shocked you.”

“It didn’t feel like any shock I’ve ever experienced.” He visibly relaxed. “I’m glad you know what you want.”

“I do. I want to be right here on Widow’s with you. If I need something to solve, I’ll order a puzzle. One of those five-thousand-piece ones.”

His eyes lit up. “I love those.”

She laughed. “I didn’t know that. I’ve never seen you work on one.”

“I haven’t had time. I’ve been preoccupied with something,” he said with a grin, his eyes intent on her.

Preoccupied with me.

Cate was okay with that. “I’ve been distracted too,” she said softly. “I’ve been immersed in us . . . spending time with you, enjoying how well we mesh. I’ve loved every minute of it.”

“Me too.” He gave her a long kiss. As they parted, he held her gaze and took her hand, slipping a diamond solitaire on her finger.

Cate stared at the ring, speechless, her pulse pounding in her ears.

“Former FBI special agent Cate Wilde, would you do puzzles with me for the rest of your life?”

More electrical sparks flowed to the finger with the ring. “Yes,” she forced out. “Absolutely yes. There’s nothing I want more to do with my life than spend it with you.”

“Good. And this is what Mike meant when he told me to keep you on the island.” A satisfied gleam entered his eyes as he bent to kiss her. “But I’d already planned to.”

Icy air touched her neck.

Thanks, Ruby.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After writing ten Rogue River novellas, Melinda and I were ready to write about new characters and a new location. A trip to the beautiful San Juan Islands convinced us a Pacific Northwest island would be a fabulous setting for more mystery and murder, and the concept of Widow's Island was born. We carried over a couple of characters from Rogue River—we weren't ready to leave it completely behind. Thank you to Montlake and our editor, Anh Schluep, for their enthusiasm about this project. Thank you to Charlotte Herscher for helping us sound like we know what we're doing. Thank you to our readers who loved our first novella series and constantly begged for more. We hope you enjoy Widow's Island as much as we do.

Kendra Elliot

Melinda Leigh



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © 2016 Rebekah Jule Photography

Kendra Elliot has landed on the *Wall Street Journal* bestseller list multiple times and is the award-winning author of the Bone Secrets and Callahan & McLane series, as well as the Mercy Kilpatrick novels. She's a three-time winner of the Daphne du Maurier Award, an International Thriller Writers Award finalist, and an RT Award finalist. She has always been a voracious reader, cutting her teeth on classic female heroines such as Nancy Drew, Trixie Belden, and Laura Ingalls. She was born, raised, and still lives in the rainy Pacific Northwest with her family, but she looks forward to the day she can live in flip-flops. Visit her at www.kendraelliot.com.