

Also by Deborah Donnelly

Veiled Threats Died to Match May the Best Man Die

Death Takes a Honeymoon



## **DEBORAH DONNELLY**

A DELL BOOK

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## To Betty Sanjek, with love and gratitude

This book has been optimized for viewing at a monitor setting of 1024 x 768 pixels.

Acknowledgments

San Juan Island is a real and delightful place, and most of the locales in this story—including the Afterglow Vista Mausoleum—can be found there just as I've described them. But Lavender and Lace, the Owl's Roost, and ZZ Nickles's BBQ are imaginary, and I've taken drastic and entirely fictional liberties with the personnel of the San Juan County Sheriff's Office.

As I was writing the book, Detective Judith Eckhart of the City of Portland Bureau of Police was generous with her expertise and encouragement (thanks for that hot cartridge, Judy!), while islanders Sally and Stu Stern made admirable research associates. My gratitude to them, and also to Frederick K. Dezendorf, Patron of the Arts.

My love to Steve, always, and special thanks to my own Lily, Bridget Dacres.

You May Now Kill the Bride

Chapter One

HAPPY B-DAY 2U!!! Doing something fun today?

Physical therapy. Whoopee.

Oh, sorry. I thought maybe your sister would be taking you out?

She's got enough to do taking me to doctors.

Right. Well, tell her hi for me, would you? I don't suppose she could come with you to the wedding. You haven't RSVP'd, but you are coming, aren't you? If you feel up to it. Let me know so I can make arrangements, OK?

(No new messages . . .)
(No new messages . . .)
(No new messages . . .)

I sighed and hit SEND/RECV one last time. Nothing. Some days Aaron was his old wisecracking self, some days he was a bad-tempered stranger. It probably depended on how much his injured arm was hurting him, but I couldn't know that for sure because the son of a bitch wouldn't tell me. I swore under my breath, shoved away from the computer, and stomped over to the picture window.

The back-room office of Made in Heaven, Elegant Weddings with an Original Flair, is anything but elegant, with plain steel desks for Eddie and me and a row of secondhand file cabinets. But our location has flair to spare, because we're perched up on the second floor of my houseboat on the east shore of Lake Union. Beer furniture, champagne view.

I shielded my eyes against the mellow gold of a late-September afternoon. With a single sweep of my gaze I could take in the skyscrapers of downtown Seattle to the south, then the sparkling blue expanse of the lake, and then north to the Ireland-green of Gasworks Park. All very scenic, but my teeth were still clenched and my other hand was still balled in a furious fist.

"Let me guess," said Eddie Breen, my not-very-silent partner. "Gold's giving you crap again."

"It's not his fault," I insisted, as much to myself as to him. "Aaron has a lot to deal with."

Eddie, hale and hearty for every day of his seventy-some years, gave an impatient snort and returned to his invoices. He and my late father were in the merchant marine together, back in the day, but while Dad stayed at sea Eddie left the briny deep for a long career in public accounting. Now he was semiretired, working part-time as Made in Heaven's business manager and full-time as a commentator on my personal life.

What was left of my personal life, now that my guy had fled the scene. But I kept trying not to be angry with Aaron. I kept telling myself that he deserved patience and yet more patience. After all, the man had taken his own personal selfguided tour of hell. Back in June, Aaron had been airlifted from a car crash in the midst of a forest fire on an Idaho mountainside. He'd suffered third-degree burns on his chest and face, and a right forearm whose bones had made a break for the open air. Now he was recuperating at his sister Gail's apartment in Boston and being very guarded—as in stone walls, spiked battlements, and moatful of crocodiles guarded—about when he was coming back to Seattle. Or even if.

I'm not a nearly six-foot redhead for nothing, and patience has never been my strong suit. When I want something I want it. And just now I wanted Aaron at my side a week from tomorrow when my best friend Lily said "I do" to Michael Graham, the world's most sensitive police detective.

And if Aaron felt like saying "I love you" while he was at my side—something he hadn't said in a very long time—that would be just fine too. Even if he didn't, Aaron was friendly with Mike and very fond of Lily, and according to Gail he was well enough to travel again. So why the hell wouldn't he come to the wedding?

Because he doesn't want to see you, said a snarky little voice in my head. It's all over and he just hasn't told you yet.

"Anybody home?" called a most unsnarky voice, as the bride herself appeared at our door. Lily was all in purple, her favorite color, from the pale lilac scarf in her hair to the burgundy leather clogs on her feet. In between, a plum-colored sweater and slacks set off her ebony skin and voluptuous curves. I'm a beanpole myself, so I envied those curves.

Eddie nodded at her. "Why aren't you at work?"

"Nice to see you too," she replied, accustomed to the notorious Breen charm. "And it's Saturday, in case you hadn't noticed, so why are you two at work?" "Just clearing up some paperwork," I said. "So what brings you here? Want to talk about the weather? Politics? Wait, don't tell me you want to discuss your wedding?"

Lily's smile, always high-wattage, gleamed even brighter. "If you're not too busy?"

"We haven't been too busy for weeks," Eddie grumped. Grumping is one of his job skills. "And she's not getting a damn thing done around here today anyway. Scoot, both of you. I'll lock up."

I have a sixty-second commute, down the outside stairs to the front door of the houseboat. So it wasn't long before I was in my kitchen pouring Lily a glass of white wine and hearing about the latest bridal crisis.

"I can't believe it!" she said. "We were all set, and then some little brat at the playground told Ethan that flowers are only for sissies."

Ethan was four, the younger of Lily's sons from her first marriage. The current plan had him carrying a basket of lavender down the aisle, followed by seven-year-old Marcus as ring bearer.

"I was afraid of that," I said. "We can certainly skip the basket, but then what would Ethan's role be? I suppose he and Marcus could carry one ring apiece..."

We plunged into the details of the wedding, which would take place in just over a week on San Juan Island. Some friends of Mike's owned an organic lavender farm there, and they'd offered it for the ceremony.

This San Juan has nothing to do with Puerto Rico, by the way. It's the second-largest island of an archipelago that lies like a handful of puzzle pieces in the deep cold waters between Washington State and British Columbia. Confusingly enough, the island and the archipelago share the same name, so "San Juan" is the single island and "the San Juans" is the whole group.

There are hundreds of islands in the San Juans, if you count all the named rocks, but only a few of them are big enough for roads and tourism and organic lavender farms. And big isn't all that big. San Juan has fewer than seven thousand year-round residents, and Friday Harbor is its sole official town.

Lily and Mike's ceremony among the lavender fields was slated for midday Sunday, with a combined rehearsal dinner, reception, and general blowout the night before at a local barbecue joint. On Sunday after the champagne and cake, the bridal couple would begin their weeklong honeymoon at a nearby bed-and-breakfast, while the guests would have plenty of time to get home before returning to work on Monday morning.

A modest affair, compared to the extravaganzas I stage for my paying clients. No squads of bridesmaids and groomsmen, just me as maid of honor and Mike's oldest friend on the force as best man. No orchestra, just solos by a policewoman with a background in opera. No ostentatious overspending, just a warmhearted celebration of two good-hearted people in love.

"That settles it," said Lily, after we'd hashed over the boys' roles in the ceremony. "Two sons, two rings, no sissies. Now, show me this dress you've been raving about."

Lily's wedding gown was deep purple, of course, long and strapless, with a cascade of ruffles down one hip and a gauzy shoulder wrap in a delicate shade of violet. Which was all very well for her, but purple and I don't get along, and the very thought of strapless makes me hyperventilate. So, with unbridelike generosity, Lily had urged me to choose any color and style I liked for my maid-of-honor ensemble. After many shopping trips and much wavering, I'd found a dress that might have been designed just for me. The delicate peach-colored silk was perfect with my coppery hair, and the sweetheart neckline and bias-cut skirt suggested the presence of curves I don't really possess. I adored it.

I modeled the gown for Lily now, slipping it on in my cramped little bedroom and coming out to the living room to pose and pirouette. I'd be working at this wedding, not just standing still for photos, but I could move in perfect freedom in the three-quarter sleeves—no Cinderella puffs for me—and I loved the feel of the skirt as it slid in fluid ripples around my legs.

"Absolutely gorgeous!" said the bride. "Three thumbs up. Aaron's going to love it."

I quit pirouetting. "Um, I need to talk to you about that."

"That doesn't sound good."

"I'll get changed," I said, "and let's take our wine out on the deck. Bring the bottle."

Chapter Two

The old wooden deck, long faded to the color of ashes, was warm from the afternoon sun. Lily sat on the edge and slipped off her clogs to dabble purple-polished toes in the water. Back in my casual clothes, I sat cross-legged with my wineglass and watched her fondly.

How many hours had my dear friend and I spent out here, listening to the hollow lapping of the waves against the dock and the creaking of the log booms that suspended my floating home? Hundreds of hours, thousands of minutes, deep in conversation on topics vast and trivial, the meaning of life and the tint of a lipstick, what shoes to wear and which man to marry.

I first met Lily at the business desk of Seattle Public Library, where she helped me with my research on starting a small business. Since then Made in Heaven had become a modest success, and the two of us had become the sisters that neither of us was born with.

This summer, four years later, we'd spent much of our deck time discussing two serious questions. First, whether I should keep on waiting for Aaron. And second, whether Lily should keep on looking for a black man to date when she really, truly wanted Mike Graham, who was white. Lily, having made her decision, was quite content with it. I wasn't so sure about mine. But it was a comfort to know that no matter how life turned out, I'd always have Lily around to talk it over with.

"I love you." The thought became words before I realized it, and I took a swallow of wine to smooth down the lump in my throat. "Even if you are obsessed with your wedding."

She ignored the joke and leaned over to pat my knee. "I love you too, girl, and I'm sorry Aaron is giving you grief."

"I've asked him about five times if he's coming to the wedding." I topped up my glass and jammed the cork back in the bottle. "He doesn't quite say no, but he never returned the RSVP card and—"

"Give the man a break! If you badger him he'll just dig in his heels. That's probably why..." She saw my expression and trailed off.

"Why what?" The sting of Aaron's nonreply sharpened my tone. "Why he went back to Boston in the first place? So now that you're engaged you're the expert on men, and you think I scared him off?"

"Don't you put words in my mouth." Lily could be sharp herself. "But you have to admit, you came on awfully strong in June about Aaron moving in with you. Look at it from his side. How would he have felt, living in your house, playing invalid to your nurse? A man needs his privacy, Carnegie. And his pride."

"I was just trying to help! What's this got to do with pride?"

But I knew the answer, even as I said it. Aaron Gold used to be a cocky guy, young and strong, confident, a little full of himself. Visiting Sun Valley with me, he'd hung out with some smoke jumpers and been smitten with the adventure and camaraderie of their work. Like soldiers without the killing, he'd said.

But then Aaron volunteered to help a smoke jumper with a dangerous task, and they wrecked their Jeep when the fire hooked around them. Instead of adventure, he found himself engulfed by flame and smoke, in peril of dying.

The two men survived, barely, but now Aaron knew he was mortal, a vulnerable being with an intimate knowledge of fear and pain. He wasn't the old Aaron Gold anymore.

"Oh, Lily," I said. "I just want him back. I miss him."

"Of course you do. And I bet he misses you too, even if he won't say so. Maybe he'll show up for the wedding after all."

"I don't believe it." I began to peel away a strip of the wine label with my thumbnail. "I've even thought about inviting Wayne Joffrey, just so I can have a date. He keeps asking me out, and I keep putting him off."

"Wayne the videographer? You told me he's a crashing bore!" "All right, he's a little self-absorbed, but—"

"'Like watching paint dry,' your exact words. You forget him, and never mind about having a date." She took the bottle from me and set it aside. "I meant to ask, are you coming on the ferry with me and the boys on Saturday, or do you have to get there even earlier? I feel guilty about all the time you're spending to organize things for me."

"Hey, enough of that. I keep telling you, this is my wedding present and I'm happy to do it." I frowned, thinking about a decision I'd been putting off. "Actually, I might go up to the island a few days early. Remember I told you about Owen Winter?"

Lily nodded. "The man your mother's been dating."

"Right. Turns out he owns a place near Roche Harbor, the little village on the north end of the island. Mom's up there with him now, and they want me to come spend some time with them."

"You don't sound too enthusiastic."

"I'm not. I can't get used to my gray-haired old mother fluttering around about a man like, I don't know, like—"

"Like we do?" She grinned. "Louise is not all that old and she has very cool silver hair. Maybe you just don't like this Owen person."

"Oh, he's all right."

To be fair, Owen Winter was more than all right. He was well read and apparently well off and more than apparently crazy about my mother. He wasn't my father, but that was hardly his fault.

And I didn't want Mom to be a single widow forever. In fact I'd once had hopes for her and Eddie, but she'd set me straight on that. Eddie was her oldest friend, but Owen was her boyfriend.

Boyfriend, indeed. Why aren't there better words for these things? Anyhow, judging from the way Eddie accepted the news about Owen, all this was fine with him. For a wedding planner, I'm not always a good judge of romance.

"He's all right, but . . . ?" demanded Lily. "Come on, what's the problem?"

"Not a problem, exactly. I've just got a funny feeling about Owen, as if he's angry inside even when he's smiling. I can't quite explain it."

"And this funny feeling is enough to keep you from visiting?"

"I guess not, but I'm kind of booked up-"

"Really?" Lily gave me The Look, and when she puts on

The Look, small boys and rude library patrons shake in their shoes. "Eddie said you weren't busy."

I didn't shake, but I shifted uncomfortably and stared out across the lake. A couple of kayakers, their paddles flashing in the sun, were gaining on a flotilla of Canada geese. Of all my women friends, Lily was the one who really pushed me. Sometimes I even appreciated it.

"Not busy at work," I waffled. "But I thought I might paint the kitchen before the rainy weather starts..."

"Oh, come off it! Your mother may have found her new partner in life, and you're going to paint?"

"All right, so I don't want to be crammed into some summer cottage for days on end with a couple of middle-aged lovebirds. Besides, he's got his two daughters there already. I'd be in the way."

"I'm sure that's why he invited you, so you could get in the way." Lily put down her glass in disgust. "Girl, you almost always do the right thing, but when you don't, you really don't."

"Can we not talk about this?" I hate feeling guilty. "Listen, there's someone at the door. I'll be right back."

I keep telling Eddie he can come in anytime, but he persists in treating the first floor of the houseboat as off-limits. Just now he was standing in my front doorway, fists on hips and chin jutting. Man on a mission.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Louise called. Said you claimed to be too busy to go visit. I told her things have changed and you've got plenty of time." *"Eddie.*"

He held up a sinewy brown hand. "Just do me a favor and go, would you? It would make her happy."

I stared at him, openmouthed. Eddie Breen didn't ask me for favors. Ever. I had a sudden sense of just how important my mother's future was to him. *Owen Winter, you had better care this much,* I thought. *You better care even more.* 

"Come on," Eddie grated, when I didn't speak. "Spend a few days up there. It won't kill you."

"OK, OK!" I knew when to surrender. "I'll dig out a ferry schedule and call her back. You're right, it won't kill me."

Chapter Shree

Ferry travel is very civilized. Especially in Washington State, home to the largest ferry fleet in the country. A fleet of big, safe, steady boats.

Unfortunately, I wasn't on the ferry to San Juan Island the next morning. Instead I was leaning into a stiff breeze at Boeing Field, wistfully picturing that big steady boat as I gazed in dismay at an orange-and-white-striped airplane barely bigger than your average mosquito.

Motion sickness is a bane of mine, and small planes are not my friends.

Adrienne Winter, the plane's owner and pilot, clearly didn't plan to be my friend either. Owen's older daughter was a short, angular woman perhaps ten years past my thirtythree, with a gravelly voice and coarse brown hair chopped into an outdated bob.

Her bangs were ruler-straight above oversize red-framed glasses that declared "I am an interesting and unconventional person." Behind the lenses, her stony gray eyes added, "But I don't find you interesting in the least."

No kidding. When we met inside the terminal, I'd explained my occupation and babbled on about the details of Lily's island wedding. Adrienne received all this with a pained and frosty expression and then a clipped statement that she was a funds manager herself and loathed weddings.

What was I thinking? I wondered, as my hair flailed around in the wind. Why didn't I just refuse?

On the phone last night, Mom had been so pleased that I was coming to visit, and Owen had been so adamant about his daughter being "more than happy to give you a lift," that I'd somehow agreed to this fiasco.

But no one told me how petite the plane would be, and clearly no one told Adrienne the bit about being happy.

"I've never ridden in a two-seater before," I ventured. "It's...cute."

She flinched. "It's a 1946 Piper J3 Cub. Owen and I restored it ourselves."

"That's nice. But it seems kind of small to fly all the way to-"

"Seventy-five air miles," she said flatly. "Ninety minutes max. Are you going to get in?"

She swapped her specs for a pair of gogglelike sunglasses and stood unhelpfully by as I jackknifed myself into the passenger seat. It was directly behind the pilot's, like a bicycle built for two. A tiny, enclosed bicycle that was going to dangle me thousands of feet in the air.

I'm not saying I'm claustrophobic, but most coffins are roomier than that cockpit. I fumbled with my seat belt and double-triple-checked the buckle, trying to think comforting thoughts.

Ninety minutes is nothing. Nothing at all. I need the time to think about Lily's ceremony, anyway. Lavender bouquets, lavender corsages—

I jumped as Adrienne slammed the door on us. She spoke cryptically into a headset, then revved the engine. The noise level was horrendous, but once the earth dropped away, my stomach started roiling and I was too scared to care. Not to mention too queasy.

A straight line from Seattle to the San Juans crosses various landmasses in Puget Sound: the Kitsap Peninsula and Whidbey Island and such. But I didn't see any of them. I was busy staring at the horizon and breathing slowly through my nose. Vomiting on the back of Adrienne Winter's neck would hold a certain satisfaction, but I was determined to refrain for my own sake.

The minutes stretched out to half an hour, then an hour, and both the plane and my stomach stayed steady. Finally I ventured a peek earthward—and gasped in delight.

I'd never seen the San Juans from the air, and the panorama ahead of us was like a scene from a fairy tale. Early explorers called Puget Sound "the sea in the forest," because of the dense trees growing down to the waterline. The San Juans looked like a forest in the sea.

Islands of all sizes, humpbacked and darkly furred with trees, crouched on the shimmering cobalt blue of the water below us. The islands' edges were scalloped by sandy coves and rocky points, and here and there a deep green hillside was sliced by a sandstone cliff that glinted gold in the September sun. On the bays and channels throughout the islands, dozens of sailboats were scattered like bright white scraps of cut-up paper.

"It's gorgeous!" I shouted, over the engine noise.

"Want a closer look?"

"No, that's all ri—eee!"

The nose of the plane rose like a rearing horse, then the right wing rose even higher and we plunged to the left like an elevator gone insane. Ignoring my shrieks, Adrienne repeated the maneuver to the right, which would have made for a marvelous view if my eyes hadn't been clamped tight shut.

"Stop it!" I hollered. "Please!?"

Finally my sadistic driver leveled us off, and I tried to calm myself and my innards by doing the horizon thing again. When I finally managed to look down, the islands were much closer, and we began to descend. I could see plowed fields like patches of corduroy, and clusters of toylike buildings stitched together with roads.

Not many roads, but then San Juan Island is only five miles across and twelve or so long. It's shaped roughly like North America, with Friday Harbor on the east coast where Boston would be, a stretch of sandy bluffs called American Camp down south in the Yucatán, and Roche Harbor, where the Winters lived, up north in the Arctic.

The Roche Harbor airstrip was minuscule, which worried me a little. Then as we banked for a landing the engine started to cough, which worried me a lot.

"What is it?" I shouted. "What's wrong?"

Adrienne shook her head and didn't answer. More coughing and sputtering, a wobble of the wings, and the hard, unforgiving ground rushing up at us faster and faster. . . . I buried my head in my arms and prayed.

Then we were down and rolling to a halt, and I was clambering out of the cockpit, shaking all over. The airstrip was cracked asphalt with weeds sprouting from the cracks, the green shoots spangled with tiny yellow flowers. I know this because I studied them closely as I bent over double, heaving in great lungfuls of air and trying not to heave out my breakfast.

"Surprise, Dree!" trilled a silvery voice. "I came to meet you. Eww, what's wrong with *her*?"

"No idea," called Adrienne at a distance. From the sound

of it she was chocking the wheels. "I did a few wingovers and she panicked."

"We ... almost ... crashed!" I gasped to the asphalt.

"Did you really, Dree?" The silvery voice came nearer.

"Don't be an idiot. Take her home, would you? I want to run into town."

I straightened up woozily to see Adrienne marching away toward a parking lot, and a curvaceous young woman in tight white capris and a well-filled bikini top coming toward me.

"Kimberly?" I said weakly. "I'm—"

"It's Kimmie." She flashed a dazzling smile and tossed long honey-blond tresses. Her eyes were gray like her sister's, but large and liquid and thickly fringed by curling lashes.

The smile didn't reach her eyes, though. They were guarded, almost calculating, as she looked me up and down.

"And you're Carrie. So, welcome!"

I tried to explain that only my mother, and now her father Owen, called me Carrie. But Kimmie swept me into a cushioned hug—her breasts were the finest money can buy—then broke off abruptly and jiggled away toward a zippy little sports car, bright yellow.

I hauled my tote bag out of the plane—Lily was bringing my gown along with her own on the ferry—and followed, puzzled by the mismatch between Kimmie's effusive behavior and her chilly eyes. *Welcome to the wonderful world of the Winters*.

Kimmie drove the way her sister flew, so I missed much of the scenery on the short drive to the house. The general impression was an uphill route of leafy trees with an occasional flash of sunbeams on water, then a dip down to a harbor and a glimpse of a street sign reading *Afterglow Drive*.

Then we pulled into a semicircle driveway and squealed to

a stop. Despite the balmy afternoon, my skin was still cold and tingling with nausea.

"Here we are! Don't you love it?"

"It's . . . amazing."

The "summer cottage" I'd imagined was a huge Victorian, painted a satisfying teal blue, with a flight of wooden steps sweeping upward to a broad white-columned porch. Stately mullioned windows ran across the second story, and a line of small dormer windows indicated a third. *And I thought we'd be crammed?* 

Kimmie's high heels rap-tapped as she scampered up the steps, leaving me behind with my luggage. I hauled it from the car and followed.

*Porch*, I could see, was too pedestrian a word. This was a veranda, with generous wicker rocking chairs, an old-fashioned porch swing, and a jungle of potted plants. Sweaters were draped here and there, evidence of the cool September evenings, and a tangle of tennis rackets and other summery paraphernalia was piled by the grand front door.

Kimmie had left the door open, giving me a glimpse into the high-ceilinged, oak-floored entrance hall. But I took a long look behind me before going in.

The front of Owen's property sloped down to the road in lawns and terraced flower beds, with a line of dense green woods on the other side. Beyond the woods, the silver-blue water glittered in the sun, and in the distance, a welter of islands overlapped each other across Haro Strait and on into the Gulf Islands of Canada.

Lots of Spanish names up here, Haro and Lopez and San Juan, from the early explorers. Even Orcas Island, the biggest of the San Juans, is named for some eighteenth-century lord and not for the orcas, the big black-and-white killer whales that delight the tourists.

Lots of history, and lots of wide-open waters and salty breezes in the tranquil afternoons.

Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea, I thought dreamily. Maybe I should have come sooner.

"Are you just going to stand there?" Kimmie called from inside.

"Sorry, I was admiring the view. I bet you can see all the way to—"

"Whatever. Come on, I'll show you around."

Differ as they might in appearance, the Winter sisters seemed to share an impatience with other people's dawdling. Or maybe just with mine. Kimmie hurried through the house, chattering nonstop, and as I trailed in her wake I was surprised, not to say stunned, by the opulence of the place. My mother's beau was wealthier than I'd realized.

The house itself was grand enough, a mansion built for some turn-of-the-century mogul with a taste for large chandeliers and dark woodwork. But beyond that, every object in every room was the most expensive version of that particular object, from the ten-foot Steinway in the parlor to the genuine Monet over the fireplace to the filigreed brass wastebaskets and the art-glass light-switch plates. Not a scrap of plastic in sight.

"There's a full bar in that cabinet, help yourself, and the Jacuzzi and tennis courts are out back...."

As Kimmie whisked me from room to room, I had a curious vision of an underground river of money flowing through the bedrock beneath the house. The river had percolated upward, lapping over the floors in the form of Persian carpets, splashing up against the walls in gilt-framed artwork and ornate sconces, jetting into the air in fountains of cut-velvet pillows and pleated silk lamp shades and goose-down duvets.

Someone had perpetrated some serious shopping here, and that someone had exquisite taste. Dutiful houseguest that I am, I oohed and aahed about everything.

"It's lovely, Kimmie. Did you decorate the house, or you and Adrienne together?"

"Mother picked everything out herself, even when she was sick." Again, that odd mismatch between her bright, mechanical smile and her guarded eyes. "She died two years ago. But I guess 'Lou' didn't tell you that."

Lou was Owen's nickname for my own mother, and Kimmie pronounced it so bitterly that the light finally dawned. *Of course!* The Winter sisters weren't any happier about this senior romance than I was, though for different reasons. Undoubtedly they still missed their mother, and they'd had Owen all to themselves since he was widowed. Mom was a rival for his affections.

I felt a sudden rush of sympathy for Kimmie, and even Adrienne. My own father was many years gone now, but my grief had been heavy and slow to lift.

"She didn't tell me," I said warmly, "but I'm so sorry about—"

"Your room's on the top floor."

Kimmie turned away and preceded me up two flights of stairs—the first one wide and carpeted, the second narrow and bare—without stopping in between. The top floor was a narrow hallway with a window at the far end, lined on both sides with plain wooden doors, all of them shut.

Kimmie yanked open the nearest, waved manicured fingertips inside, and said, "Dinner's at seven. See you!" "Wait, please. Is my mother around?"

"I thought Dree told you," she threw over her shoulder. "Owen took her to Orcas Island. Back any time now."

"But..." But Kimmie was already clattering downstairs and slamming the front door, leaving me alone in the house.

*Damn.* I was supposed to pick up a rental car this afternoon, and I'd counted on Owen to drive me into town for it. The village of Roche Harbor was just down the hill, according to the map I'd consulted last night, but Friday Harbor, the town in question, was several miles in the other direction.

I'd just have to wait, and unpack while I waited. The bedroom was small but charming, the scent of roses rising from a dish of potpourri on the night table next to a milk-glass lamp with a hobnail-patterned globe. The bed was a little swaybacked, but the bedspread was old-fashioned chenille in the same blue-green as the house, and who could argue with that?

I set my travel clock by the bed, and arranged my few clothes in a bird's-eye maple dresser with squeaky drawers. Then I went to the dormer window, which looked into the branches of a huge madrona tree. The madrona's crisp cinnamon-colored bark peeled back from the velvety palegreen skin underneath, and its leaves swayed and shuffled in the light breeze.

Which was all very pretty, but the window itself was stuck tight. I gave it a final tug and gave up, then gathered my toiletries case and a fresh shirt and stepped into the hallway. There I peered around, wishing that Kimmie's tour had included the whereabouts of a bathroom—surely there was at least one on this level. But through which door?

The room next to mine held only packing boxes and dust, and the one after that was another bedroom, obviously unused for some time. Then the hall made a short bend to the right, toward the back of the house. A doorway at the end was slightly ajar.

*Aha.* With happy thoughts of a quick shower to wake myself up, I pushed open the door—and gave a startled yelp to see a nearly naked man lounging on a sofa reading a magazine.

"Well, well, *well*," he said. A devilish grin spread across his dark and devilishly handsome face. "If it isn't the gold digger's daughter."

Chapter Four

"I'm so sorry! I didn't mean-dammit!"

As I tried to beat a retreat, the handle of my toiletries case caught on the doorknob, the case unzipped itself, and a volley of private items scattered across the floor. I kept my gaze downward as I crouched to retrieve them, my face burning.

A pair of rather small but tan and tough-looking hands came into my field of view, deftly blocking an escapee lipstick and flipping it in my direction. I caught it one-handed, then we stood up and zipped up, me securing my belongings, the room's resident slipping well-worn jeans over his bikini briefs.

Since he was looking me over rather frankly, I did the same to him, and saw a fellow in his late twenties, about my height, with a bodybuilder's physique and dark curly hair. Lots of dark curly hair. He wore the jeans low.

"Sorry," I said again.

"Not at all. Guy Price, at your service." He brought bare heels together and made a mock-formal bow. Rising from his well-muscled chest, his voice was not deep but rich and expressive, like a late-night DJ's. "At the Winters' service, actually, so that extends to you, assuming you are who I think you are. Who *I* am is the caretaker, cook, handyman, boat repairman, et cetera, et cetera. I do it all."

Guy Price had the kind of overripe good looks that play

well in soap operas and perfume ads. But I decided they weren't going to play well with me. I'd gathered my wits along with my makeup, and his opening remark had just sunk in.

"Does your service include insulting Owen's guests?" I asked, trying to keep my own voice level. "Because if that crack about my mother was supposed to be funny—"

"But of course it was! Just a joke, a tiny little joke about darling Dree and her absurd attitudes. You don't think I'd say a word against Louise, do you?" Guy cupped a hand to my elbow in a politician's I-feel-your-pain gesture. "Louise is marvelous! An absolute breath of fresh air. And I see the resemblance. Was she a redhead once?"

He lifted his other hand to my hair, but I stepped away and said curtly, "No, she wasn't."

"Oh, I really have offended you. I'm an idiot. Forgive me?" Naturally, all of this—the cascade of words, the overdone warmth, the theatrical brow-furrowing distress—set off my gaydar. And yet there was something else going on. Faintly but unmistakably, and growing by the minute, I was feeling a physical attraction to Guy Price. As Oscar Wilde said, *It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious.* Guy Price was anything but tedious.

But would that really explain it? Joe Solveto, my favorite caterer, was both gay and charming as hell, and I'd never felt the least—

"Wait a minute." I set these musings resolutely aside. "Are you saying that Adrienne Winter thinks that *my* mother is after *her* father's money? That's ridiculous!"

"Well, of course it is. But when you're talking millions, everyone gets a little edgy, don't they? Hell hath no fury and all that." He crossed to a desk in the corner. "Don't run away, I've got something for you. Now, where is it ...?" As he delved through some file drawers, I tore my gaze from his delectably bare shoulders and glanced around curiously. His room, I realized, was actually a suite built out over the back of the house. We stood in a casual but comfortable lounge-slash-office, with the bedroom through an open doorway to the left and a capacious bathroom beyond that.

Remodeling had given the space a far more modern air than my guest room, and the furniture was sleek and chic. I especially noticed a geometric teak nightstand because I'd been wanting something like it for my houseboat.

Then I noticed something even more intriguing in a pewter dish on the nightstand's top, and had to restrain my toocurious self from stepping closer to the bedroom door. *I wonder if that wristwatch is a woman's*—

"Here it is, ta-da! Everything you need to know and more about these enchanted isles."

Guy handed me a paperback guide to the islands and a dog-eared manila folder bulging with tourist brochures, annotated lists of local restaurants, and maps of all sorts. The top sheet was a rental-car confirmation—for a luxury SUV.

"But I've already reserved an economy—"

"Canceled!" He smiled charmingly. "Owen told me to get you the best, his treat. He does things for friends, you'll get used to it. And I thought you might be transporting bridesmaids or whatever, so I went large. Shall we go get it?"

"I thought I'd wait for Owen and my mother to get back." Unlike the Winter women, I'd never called my parents by their first names. "I don't want to be a nuisance."

"Nuisance, nonsense! They won't be back for hours, and anyway it's part of my job. You wouldn't want to interfere with a man's job, would you?" He donned an orchid-spattered Hawaiian shirt that had been draped over the desk chair. "It must be fascinating, what you do. You'll have to tell me all about it on the way into town. But first, the room you were looking for"—he winked—"is the last one on the left. Meet you outside."

He ambled downstairs with the insouciance of a tomcat, and I paused to enjoy the sight. I was certain that watch was a woman's. None of my business, of course, but Owen must be awfully broad-minded about his employee entertaining guests in the house...

Definitely none of my business. I changed shirts and freshened up quickly, then joined Guy on the veranda. The latesummer air smelled of cut grass and the sea, and I took a deep, delighted breath.

"What a day!"

"Isn't it, though?" He led me down the drive and into a vintage Corvette the same lurid purple as the orchids. "You must have had a fabulous flight up here."

I shuddered. "It started out fine, but we had engine trouble just as we landed. Adrienne didn't explain, but—"

"Of course she didn't!" He interrupted me with a bark of laughter. "Let me guess, strange coughing noises in the engine? That's a little trick of Dree's. She sends hot air into the carburetor to make the engine run rough, just for dramatic effect."

"Dramatic? I was scared to death!"

"Exactly." He shifted gears smoothly as we entered the stream of cars on the main road and headed south toward Friday Harbor. "She tried pulling the carb heat on me once, before she knew I'd done some flying myself, but I saw right through it. Darling Dree..."

My first thought was that darling Dree was going to get a piece of my mind at dinner. Then I reminded myself that my

first priority here was Mom. If Owen made her happy, then Owen's nasty offspring were beside the point.

I tried to change gears myself by attending to the scenery. It was quite pretty, despite the lack of a saltwater view, with lush woods and a couple of lakes. I noted signs for some interesting businesses too, including a pair of Ilama ranches. Llamas!

There was a winery as well, on a hillside to our left. The ranks of vines reminded me of a client I'd had once, who insisted on a springtime wedding at a vineyard only to be disappointed by the absence of grapes. There were grapes now, and no doubt that attractive little building housed a wine-tasting room.

So many romantic ways to enjoy this place. Maybe I should have invited Wayne to the wedding instead of Aaron....

"I can take you sightseeing if you like," Guy offered, seeing me crane around to watch the vineyard go by. "The thirtyminute tour, the three-hour tour? Your wish is my command."

I was tempted. Guy's driving was as silky as his conversation, which after Kimmie's antics was a pleasure. Sightseeing and then a nap... But no, the more I could scope out about the wedding today, the more I could report to Lily tonight. She'd never been to the San Juans—it was a long weekend trip from Seattle, too long for a busy mom—so she was a little jittery about the logistics. I take great satisfaction in reassuring my brides.

So I said, "Just the rental agency, thanks. I'd like to get some work done before dinner."

"And work means what, exactly? Taste-testing magnums of champagne? A drunken frolic in some chocolate fountain?"

I chuckled. There's too little charm in the world. "Nothing so delicious, although I do have a meeting with a chef tomorrow morning. But first I need to check in with the owners of the wedding venue and make sure I know the route between there and the ferry dock. It's a lavender farm—"

"Pelindaba Farm? That's a lovely spot."

"No, Lavender and Lace."

"Even lovelier! Dear old Sigrid and Erik."

"You know the Nyquists?"

These were Mike's friends, an elderly brother and sister from Norway. Early in his career, as a deputy sheriff for San Juan County, he had rented a room in their Roche Harbor house. Erik was a retired Lutheran minister, so they had offered not only the farm but also his services as officiant.

"Everybody knows everybody on the island," said Guy, "and nobody knows more than me. Give Sigrid a hug for me, would you? Erik too." He smiled that devilish smile. "Give Erik a big wet kiss."

*Fat chance*, I thought, considering this remark a short time later as I pulled out of Frugal Fred's in a humongous brightscarlet SUV. I'd talked to both Nyquists on the phone, and Erik struck me as a solemn, even formidable man.

Sigrid had been more forthcoming, especially when speaking of Mike. She called him Michael and said she simply couldn't wait to meet his young lady. Both siblings retained slight Norwegian accents and spoke English well but a bit formally. Big wet kisses seemed out of the question.

Of course, kisses of any size or moisture content had been out of the question for me lately. I pondered this unfortunate deficit, and what I might do to correct it, for the rest of my drive.

Chapter Five

I retraced Roche Harbor Road northward, watching for my turn to Lavender and Lace. The bed-and-breakfast Mike had booked, the Owl's Roost, was close by on a beach called Lonesome Cove—funny name for a honeymoon spot—so I could swing by there afterward.

The road names along here were descriptive, Limestone Point Road and Lonesome Cove Road, but nothing as fanciful as Afterglow Drive. Judging from the feathery clouds to the west, we were in for a lovely sunset, which meant a lovely afterglow....

As I daydreamed about watching the stars come out from Owen's porch swing, I overshot my turn and had to backtrack. I made a mental note to e-mail detailed driving directions to Lily, so she could forward them on to her guests. One advantage of intimate little weddings is that you don't have to engrave every single detail on deckle-edge stationery six weeks ahead of time. It's very relaxing.

The sign for Lavender and Lace was of beautifully carved wood, painted with a border of white lace and a spray of purple flowers. A smaller sign, with an arrow pointing up a gravel driveway, said OPEN 10 A.M-4:00 P.M. It was just after four now, but that was fine. I wouldn't be keeping Sigrid and Erik from their customers.

My car crunched to a halt in front of the shop, a singlestoried white building with deeply overhanging eaves and lace-curtained windows. The woodwork trim was freshly painted in a dark glossy green that matched the tall fir trees beyond, and the flagged path up to the glossy green front door was lined with—what else?—lavender. The upright stems bore silver-gray foliage and dark purple blooms, aromatic in the sun and buzzing gently with bees.

But lavender, as I knew from the Nyquists' Web site, comes in hundreds of varieties. Off to one side of the shop, a picketfenced display garden held what must have been two dozen beds of different lavender plants, all sizes and shapes and shades, each one with an explanatory plaque on a neat white post. A pickup truck parked beside the garden was filled with sacks and tools, evidence of the careful tending required to maintain this tidy scene.

Beyond the garden, fields of blooming lavender marched toward the woods in regimented rows, at one point curving around a pretty little pond where the ceremony would take place. As a perfect grace note, the sky blue of the pond was adorned with a single trailing willow tree and four or five preening white swans.

Oh, Lily's going to love this.

Although the green door was closed and windowless, I could hear voices inside. But when I got close enough to knock I stayed my hand. The voices, a man and a woman, were raised in argument.

"Ruined!" rumbled the man. "If this goes on we are ruined, and it is your fault, woman! All your new ideas—"

"Good ideas." I recognized Sigrid Nyquist's precise diction. "Good for the future of the land—"

"What of our future?" said Erik—it had to be him—with a

bitter laugh. Chagrined, I began to move silently away. "If this goes on we will have no—whose car is that?"

Heavy footsteps came toward the door. No help for it now, I'd just have to pretend I'd heard nothing. I rapped on the door and sang out, "Anybody home?"

An uneasy silence from inside, then the door was opened by a woman in her seventies. She was built like an oak stump and looked just as tough, despite her old-fashioned shirtwaist dress of flowered cotton. Her hairstyle was quaint as well, coiled in a circlet of graying braids above a weathered, squarejawed face.

The face was arranged in an expression of pleasant inquiry, but her hands, big and gnarled, were knotted tight together.

"Sigrid?" I said. "I'm Carnegie Kincaid, I left a phone message last night?"

She drew me inside, her voice warming with recognition and welcome. Or with relief?

"Miss Kincaid, of course. Erik, it is the friend of Michael's bride! We are so honored that he will be married here."

"How do you do," said Erik, and shook my hand stiffly, his broad blunt fingers dwarfing my long narrow ones. He was exactly Sigrid's height and build, with a steel-gray crew cut of military precision and shaggy gray eyebrows that were anything but. He peered up at me from beneath them and frowned. "But you have red hair."

"Um, yes."

"I liked you on the telephone," he blurted, if so ponderous a voice can be said to blurt. "Usually I do not care for people with red hair."

I wasn't sure how to take that, and he seemed surprised himself that he'd said it. Then Sigrid forced a little laugh, so I joined in, and the awkwardness passed while Erik busied himself with drawing up chairs to a small round table in one corner.

The shop was suffused with the camphor-sweet scent of lavender, at once soothing and invigorating. As we seated ourselves I tried to soothe things further by admiring the tablecloth. It was crisp white linen, hand-embroidered with a white-on-white pattern of eight-pointed stars.

"Hardangersom lace," said Sigrid. "We were born in Hardanger, in Norway, and now it is our specialty." She gazed around the room with shy pride. "As you see."

I did indeed. Half the wooden shelves around us held organic lavender products, from tubes of body lotion to vials of aromatherapy oil to pyramids of glass jars full of golden honey. But the others were lovingly stocked with tablecloths, pillowcases, sachets, baby clothes, and other items, all edged and embellished with snowy lace.

"Marvelous," I said, and meant it. If I had a business bent for goods instead of services, a shop like this would be just my cup of lavender-scented tea. Though I'd probably stock chocolates as well. "Lily is really looking forward to seeing this place. Now, about the wedding..."

We began to review my notes, which progressed from a general timetable for the wedding day to a list of the specific bouquets, wreaths, and corsages to be provided by Lavender and Lace. I'd never had a wedding venue act as florist, and I wanted everything clear.

Erik was tense and taciturn at first—at least I assumed it was tension, though his face was as wooden as the sign out front—but gradually he involved himself in the conversation, adding useful comments about the farm's parking and restroom facilities. In contrast, Sigrid was almost too garrulous, asking about Lily's wedding gown and digressing into fond recollections of "Michael" as a young bachelor. She continued to address me as Miss Kincaid and referred to Lily as Michael's Bride, as if it were an imperial title.

"And you are friends with them both," she said, beaming at me. I felt like I'd been adopted.

"Very much so. The boys call me Aunt Carrie."

"Oh, the children, yes! Is Michael good with the children?"

"Terrific." I glanced at my watch. "But if we could just finish up with the flower list? I can always visit again later this week. In fact I'll need to, because I'd like to walk around the pond area at the same time of day as the ceremony and see how the light's going to fall for the photographs."

This was above and beyond for my usual clients, but then, they had top-flight photographers with star-studded portfolios. Lily had only her brother Darwin and his newly bought digital camera. I was already combining the roles of wedding planner and maid of honor, but I was determined to play art director as well.

"Of course, of course." Sigrid hastily consulted her own three-ring binder. "Let me see. The Lodden Blue makes a wonderful corsage, so colorful, but it has finished for the season. But Sharon Roberts is in its second flowering now, and Fred Boutin is a late bloomer."

"Me too," I quipped. She looked blank. "Never mind. Please go on."

"Let me see. Provence is a bit pale, but very sweetsmelling; we will mix it in with the others. Lily—such a pretty name—Lily can dry her bouquet and it will keep so nicely. We are trying out a pink variety, Melissa, that might be—" She broke off as Erik rose, his fearsome eyebrows drawn together. "That one is not for harvesting yet. You will excuse me, I must give the men instructions."

I looked up from my notes. "We haven't talked about the ceremony—"

"Later."

"All right, I'll call you." Then, as he reached for the door, I said, "Oh, I had a message for you. Guy Price says hello."

Erik's massive head jerked toward me. His dark eyes were the bottomless blue of a fjord, and about the same temperature. He nodded but didn't speak, and when he left the shop he closed the door slowly and deliberately behind him.

"He does not mean to be rude," said Sigrid with an anxious smile. "The farm is a great deal of work, and he is not so young now. We must pay for helpers, which makes him..."

"Uncomfortable?" I offered. "It can be hard to delegate. I have a small business myself. I know how it goes."

This was a polite fiction. I didn't so much delegate my finances to Eddie as fling them gratefully in his direction. But I liked the Nyquists, and I felt secretly guilty about eavesdropping on their argument. Secretly curious too, of course. What "new ideas" of Sigrid's had put their future in such peril?

"Anyway," I went on, "Guy asked me to say hi. I suppose the island's like a small town, no one's a stranger except the tourists?"

Her lips thinned to a stubborn line. "There are some strangers among us. How is it you know Guy Price?"

"I don't, really. I mean, I only met him today. My mother is...a friend of Owen Winter's, and I'm visiting them. Guy's the caretaker there, but I suppose you knew that."

"Yes," she said crisply, closing her notebook. "Yes, I did know. Our house is near Mr. Winter's."

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"On Afterglow? That is such a great name." I was nattering now, made uneasy by whatever undercurrent of anxiety or anger was affecting Sigrid. I was working up to a headache, and I wanted to be gone. "Much more interesting than Sunset Boulevard or Twilight Lane or whatever."

"I don't understand."

"Afterglow, sunset? I assume the name is about the view to the west?"

"You are mistaken." She smiled more naturally this time. "The road is named for Afterglow Vista."

"Which is what?"

"A family mausoleum, there in the forest."

"In the woods? That sounds interesting."

"No, no," she said hastily. "A gloomy place, not interesting at all— Oh!" She jumped as the phone rang, and the color fled from her cheeks. Her voice wavered as she said, "I must answer."

"Of course." I rose from the table. "Thanks so much for hosting this wedding, Sigrid. I know it means a lot to Mike."

"And to us," she said distantly. She looked suddenly older, and as she reached for the phone her hand was trembling.

I opened the door to leave, but if I had any thoughts about eavesdropping again, they were banished at once. Erik Nyquist was apparently busy loading something into his truck, but he straightened up to stare at me as I came down the lavender-lined walkway. I raised a hand in greeting but he didn't move, and he didn't take his eyes from me as I climbed into the SUV and drove off.

Chapter Six

I found the Owl's Roost easily enough, at the end of a long gravel driveway, crowded with ferns, that ran through evergreen woods to the water. As I pulled carefully up to the front—the SUV felt like a tank—I hoped that my first meeting here would go more easily than the one at Lavender and Lace.

My only meeting, actually, and a quick one at that. Mike had tried for a cabin at the Lonesome Cove Resort, but they were all booked. The Owl's Roost was on the same beach and in the same price range, so he took a chance. I'd promised to check the place out and let him know ASAP if it didn't look suitable.

*Beach* suggests a broad expanse of pastel sand—at least it does to me—but *shoreline* was a better term for this part of the island. What sand there was lay in damp gray crescents between the rocky stretches pocked with tide pools. The shoreline of Lonesome Cove had both gray sand and rocky promontories, with lofty fir trees reaching almost down to the water's edge.

Set right at the tree line, the Owl's Roost was a three-story A-frame of weathered shingles, the front wall entirely glass for floor-to-ceiling views of the water. I saw a porchful of Adirondack chairs, a clambake pit, and a plank dock with several canoes and kayaks tied to it. Quite a friendly, welcoming spot on this sunny afternoon, and the proprietors were sunny and welcoming as well.

"Hello, down there!"

A balding fellow in thick eyeglasses hailed me from high up the aluminum extension ladder that was propped against the window wall. He wore shorts and a pale green polo shirt over his paunch, and gripped a rag in one hand and a squeegee in the other. He waved the squeegee gaily. "Be with ya in half a jiffy!"

As he made his way down the rungs I saw movement inside the top window, and by the time he reached me a woman had come bustling out the front door. She was fortyish, like the man, not fat but comfortably plump, like a pillow or a muffin. Her dark auburn hair waved back from a broad pale forehead and her mild brown eyes were wide and lustrous.

She too carried a rag, and her baby-blue polo shirt was spattered with darker blue water stains. Both shirts bore a logo that said *The Owl's ROOst* under a cartoonish bird whose eyes made the double *Os*.

"Sorry to interrupt your work," I began, but the man laughed merrily, his blue eyes darting behind his glasses like tropical fish in a tank.

"Nothing I like better than taking a break," he burbled, while the woman murmured, "Not at all, not at all."

Donald and Pamela Coe had been expecting me, and they showed me around their property with great pleasure and even greater solicitude.

"Mind your feet along here," said Donald, taking my arm as we crossed the little beach to the dock. "I'm always telling the missus, you never know what the tide's brought in, and we don't want to send you home with tar on your shoes."

"Would you like to borrow some shoes of mine?" asked

Pamela. "Your sandals are so pretty. I could just run back to the cabin and get them. Mr. Coe and I live in the cabin just past the main building, maybe you saw it. That's where the office is, too. It would only take me a moment to get you some—"

"Thanks anyway, but I'm fine." Helplessly helpful people get on my nerves. "As I said on the phone, I just wanted to take a quick look around."

"Can't look quick at this view!" Donald marched me to the end of the dock and swept an expansive arm. "This view takes a look and half. That's Speiden Island right across the channel there, and the big one past that is Saturna. Now, Saturna is in Canada, and if you could walk on water and you kept on going, you'd find yourself in downtown Vancouver, B.C.! Isn't that something?"

I agreed that it certainly was.

"Now, if you keep a sharp lookout at this channel, you might see killer whales—"

"Orcas, Mr. Coe," said Pamela mildly, tucking a stray curl behind one ear. She wore large ceramic earrings shaped like owls. "They call them orcas now."

"---or a sea lion or even a bald eagle, isn't that something?"

He looked at me expectantly, pushing his glasses up on his nose, so I hastened to say "Wow!"

Lonesome Cove really was a wow setting. The woods made a backdrop of cozy seclusion, and the shoreline opened out to an endless and ever-changing vista of sky and sea. No wonder Mike chose it. And if Donald was a bit chatty, Pamela seemed warm and hospitable. With any luck, she'd be the one who provided the breakfasts. I wasn't sure Lily would want to face Donald first thing in the morning.

"Would you like to see the honeymoon suite?" she said

now. "We don't call it that usually, but if anyone comes here after their wedding we always call it the honeymoon suite."

"That would be great, but is it vacant today? I thought at this time of year you'd be full up."

"Oh, we've got guests in it, the Quillins, real nice folks," said Donald, once again assisting me on the perilous journey across six yards of level sand. "But they're out kayaking, and they know we're up there washing windows today. The last owners used to hire people to do it, but the missus is always saying, if you want a job done right, you do it yourself and save money to boot. She is just a bear for saving money. Watches every dollar and every dime! Come on upstairs."

We crossed a comfortable lounge area with a broad fieldstone fireplace and took a short flight of stairs to the secondfloor hallway. There Pamela unlocked a door to reveal another set of stairs up to the third level.

"We keep it real private up here," Donald explained, and Pamela chimed in, "Like a little love nest."

Love nest, indeed. The suite took up the entire peak of the A-frame, with an enchanting view of the channel and islands that you could enjoy right from the four-poster bed. A velvet love seat faced a smaller version of the fireplace downstairs, and the breakfast nook in back had lace-curtained windows looking into the trees. Fine old lamps, soft quilts, braided rugs...

"It's perfect!" I told the Coes. "I wish I was staying here myself."

"Well, it just so happens that we had a cancellation this week for our little downstairs room," offered Donald eagerly. "Isn't that something? We haven't filled it yet and we'd love to have ya!"

I explained that I was staying with Owen Winter, and it was

clear that they were impressed. He must be a big name on this small island. Then on impulse I mentioned Guy Price, curious to see if they'd react to the caretaker's name the way the Nyquists did. But no, not at all.

"Now, Price is one heck of a handy guy," said Donald, while his wife fluffed pillows that looked perfectly fluffed already. "Do anything, fix anything. He was helping the missus with her cuckoo clocks just the other day, while I was at the dentist's." He leaned in closer to stage-whisper "Queer as a three-dollar bill, you know, but a real nice fella."

Scandalized, Pamela blushed bright pink and said, "Hush now, Mr. Coe, you shouldn't say things like that."

But her husband just gave me a wink—it was comically exaggerated by his glasses—and led the way downstairs. I drove away from the Owl's Roost with a smile on my lips, my headache lifting. Dinner with Mom and her own "real nice fella" would banish it entirely. Especially if Adrienne and Kimberly had other plans.

And before then I'd have time to send e-mails to the bride and groom. Mike was taking the boys to a matinee, I knew, and Lily was working all weekend. So I wouldn't bother with phone calls, and they'd both read the good news about the wedding plans as soon as they had a convenient moment. I hummed "Chapel of Love" all the way back to Afterglow Drive.

Adrienne and Kimmie were on the veranda when I got there, nursing what looked like mint juleps. Adrienne sat upright and unrocking in a rocking chair, while Kimmie languished fetchingly across the porch swing, her capris exchanged for longslung shorts and an overflowing tube top.

From the way they fell silent as I reached the top of the steps, I was sure they'd been discussing the Kincaids, mother and daughter. And not favorably.

Well, to hell with them. I was all the more resolved to make friends with Owen, starting tonight. A leisurely dinner, a long chat with him and Mom as we watched the sun go down—

"Bulletin from the front, ladies!" Guy leaned out from the main door and flashed a quick smile at me. "Owen just called. He and Lou are staying on Orcas for supper with friends and won't be back till late. So it's just us dining on my fabulous Westcott Bay oyster stew. Girls night in, won't that be fun?"

Chapter Seven

I felt a little dazed, and not just from lack of sleep. I love oysters, but the notion of dinner with the flinty-eyed Adrienne was unappealing, to put it mildly. And judging by the eyerolling glance she exchanged with Kimmie, the feeling was mutual.

I also felt a little slighted. Mom had been so eager to see me, but apparently an evening with her new man's friends trumped her daughter's arrival. Trying to hide my disappointment, I said something polite and entered the house.

As Guy closed the door behind us, leaving the sisters to stew, he murmured, "Chin up, darling. Dree doesn't actually bite."

At least he'll be good company, I reflected on the way to my room. And I could use this opportunity to find out whether Guy's "mere joke" about Adrienne was true. If so, I'd do my best to dispel her ill will about Owen's new girlfriend and try to cast my mother in a more favorable light.

I always figure, when life hands you lemons, serve a glass of lemonade to someone else. My stay on Afterglow Drive might not be a treat for me, but if I could do Mom some good I'd be happy.

My little room was stuffy and the window still stuck, so I left the door open while I sorted my notes and went to pull

out my laptop. The only trouble was, in the rush to Boeing Field I'd forgotten to pack it.

"Damn!" I surveyed my luggage once and then again. Suitcase, jacket, purse, my spiffy new canvas tote bag with the red rope handles... and nothing else. "Hell and damnation."

"Trouble?" A voice at the door startled me. Not only did Guy Price move like a cat, he made even less noise.

"Nothing major, but I need to send some e-mails and I forgot my laptop. There must be an Internet café in Friday Harbor?"

"No need. There's a PC in the study." He frowned a little. "Which I think Dree was planning to use this afternoon. Tell you what, come use my little toy. You've got to see this thing, I just bought it...."

Guy led the way into his room and pulled out a gray plastic gizmo about the size of a checkbook, only thicker. It opened like a clamshell to reveal a tiny keyboard and screen.

"That's so cute!" I said. I'm quite sophisticated, technologically speaking.

"Isn't it? Here, I'll set you up with a message screen, and you can type away." He tapped a few keys and set the device on his desk. "Then we couple this little e-mailer to the telephone and it just chirps its little code and you're done. Magic."

"Guy?" Adrienne's peremptory voice came up the stairwell. "Something's boiling over down here."

"I wonder who?" He gestured toward the desk chair. "Back in a sec."

I wrote to Mike first, gushing about the Owl's Roost, but somehow I hit the wrong key and my message disappeared. I went hunting around and found it in the Deleted folder which, I couldn't help noticing, was at least half full of missives from women. The sender's name just above mine was Katy, whose subject line read *You must be kidding!* while AnnJ's note was headed *About next week*, and someone named Penny had sent a message today that was simply titled *Please*. Three-dollar bill, my eye.

I didn't open any of the messages, of course. I do have some scruples. I just retrieved my own and then started a new one to Lily, gnawing my lower lip as I tried to word the directions clearly while getting the hang of this diminutive keyboard.

Still, I finished with the e-mailer before Guy returned, and spent a few minutes admiring the view from his window. It looked down on the back deck, which boasted an outdoor dining table with seating for eight, and beyond that to the tennis courts and a wide swath of smooth grass. Croquet, anyone?

Partway down the property was an artful little flagstone terrace built around a capacious hot tub. Terrace and tub were framed by a trellis bearing clouds of pink blossoms from some summer-flowering vine. Nice, very nice.

I left the window, and after a moment's hesitation I took a quick peek into the bedroom. That watch was still on the bedside table. Not that you could always tell a man's watch from a woman's. This one was sort of in-between, with a sturdy stainless-steel band that was rather masculine and a sprinkling of diamonds around the face that was rather not. I edged a little closer...

"Hey, Pricey, it's me!"

I whipped around to see Kimmie standing in the doorway, one hand raised as if to knock. She stared at me curiously.

"Where's Guy?" she asked. She didn't come right out and say "What the hell are you doing here?" but she might as well have. "In the kitchen, I think. I was just-"

Both our heads turned as Guy's light steps sounded in the stairwell. He gave Kimmie a little pat on the backside as he entered the room.

"All finished?" he said to me lightly. "Anything else I can do for you, anything at all?"

There it was again, that little electrical tingle. Guy's hands slid into the back pockets of his jeans, and I had a sudden flash of them sliding into mine. Aaron had been away too long.

"No," I said, amused at him and annoyed at myself. "Not a thing. Well, you could show me how to send these messages."

"Oh, I'll take care of it." He winked. "My cell phone's on the blink, and I've got a little chatting to do myself before I get back to the kitchen."

And you're also going to read my mail, and maybe show it to Kimmie too. What was it he'd said, "Nobody knows more than me"? Well, they wouldn't get much satisfaction there. I was saving all my pointed observations about the island dwellers to share with Lily in person.

"Have fun," I told them both, and went off to take my long-delayed shower. Then I put on the nicest casual outfit I'd brought, took extra care with my hair and makeup, and went downstairs to have a drink before dinner.

I should have had two, or maybe three, because dinner was a disaster. Not the oyster stew, which was sublime, but the conversation.

To begin with, I was dismayed to find only three place settings at the long rosewood dining table, with Kimmie and Adrienne already occupying chairs on one side. I sat opposite, feeling like a job applicant, and made a remark about the weather. That brought a mechanical smile from Kimmie, a bored sigh from Adrienne, and not a single word in reply. The silence stretched out, and I drank my glass of excellent sauvignon blanc far too quickly to do it justice. Then Guy made a grand entrance with an antique soup tureen and proceeded to amuse himself with a bit of mischief—something that seemed to come all too naturally to him.

First he managed to brush Kimmie's bare shoulder and chest, provocatively and more than once, as he placed the tureen on the table and ladled up our bowls. Kimmie kept giggling, and the more she did, the more Adrienne's face turned sour.

"For heaven's sake—" she finally muttered, and Guy and Kimmie snorted and sniggered like little boys misbehaving in church.

Guy's next trick was to needle Adrienne directly, as he stood at the ornate sideboard slicing a baton of sourdough bread. "Dree, darling, I understand you've been up to no good in that plane of yours. It's not nice to frighten the guests, is it?"

Adrienne stared daggers at me through her red-framed glasses. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Have it your way," said Guy airily. He placed the bread basket before me and refilled my glass. He had changed into a wine-colored dress shirt, quite the look with his dark hair, and wore a subtle cologne, the kind that makes you want to lean close and inhale. "Salad coming up, and there's raspberry sorbet in the freezer for later."

"Aren't you joining us?" I asked hopelessly, as if the wolf could save me from the dragon. "You said we'd all be dining on—"

"Oh, I've already eaten. Cook, serve, and wash up, that's what Owen pays me for. Can you girls manage your own coffee?"

"I suppose you have a date?" asked Adrienne dryly.

"Perhaps, perhaps. Night, all!"

As he rounded the table toward the door, the amusement on Guy's handsome face was replaced by a certain excited anticipation. Sexual anticipation, if I was any judge. A date indeed, and an especially hot one. But with a man or a woman?

I glanced at Kimmie. She made a pouting face at Adrienne, who merely lifted a supercilious eyebrow.

"So," I said brightly, making lemonade like crazy, "Mom and Owen are on Orcas Island. That's the only one of the islands I've been to, before now. Did they take the ferry?"

Adrienne made a dismissive sound with her lips. "They took the *Dreamer*."

"That's our yacht," Kimmie explained kindly, as if to a rather stupid child. "Beautiful Dreamer."

"Ah." I would have asked some sort of intelligent question, except that I know little about yachts, and care less. "Mom must be enjoying herself. She loves the water."

"No doubt," said Adrienne. She managed to make the simple comment sound quite offensive.

"But then she loves any kind of travel," I soldiered on. "She and a friend went to Italy last year."

"Oh, too bad we didn't know!" Kimmie's smile was guileless, but was that malice in her eyes? "She could have stayed at our town house in Rome."

I gave up. If the Winter sisters wanted to see my mother as a low-rent lady from the sticks, let 'em. They couldn't dictate Owen's personal life, much as they'd like to, and if he and Mom were good for each other that was all that mattered.

Amused to find myself such a champion of Mom's romance, I relaxed a little and sampled the oyster stew. It tasted of the ocean, if the ocean were glossy with cream, with an undercurrent of sherry and a spray of cayenne. "Guy's quite a chef," I marveled as I reached the bottom of my bowl. "Has he worked for Owen long?"

"Long enough." Kimmie sent her sister a wicked little look. "The thing about Guy is—"

"What are your plans this week, Carrie?" said Adrienne loudly. She was clearly indifferent to the answer.

"Well, I've got a little business to take care of, but mostly just sightseeing." More silence followed, and I cast around for something to fill it. "I understand there's an unusual mausoleum near here?"

"Eww, that old place." Kimmie's nose was the kind that wrinkled adorably. "It's totally gross, ashes and everything."

"Perhaps Carrie is a ghost hunter," said Adrienne dryly. "Do you commune with spirits, Carrie? Afterglow Vista is supposed to be haunted."

Enough of this. I don't even like lemonade.

"It's Carnegie, not Carrie. If we're going to be friends, and maybe even family, you'll want to get it right, won't you?"

Adrienne sat back as if I'd slapped her, and I continued sweetly, "So, if the mausoleum is so gross, maybe you have some other suggestions for me?"

She sniffed. "I thought Guy gave you a guidebook. Or were you too busy with your little wedding to read it?"

"Exactly." I drained my wineglass—it was somehow my third—and stood up. "I was too busy with my little wedding, but I'll go read it now and let the two of you bitch about me behind my back. Good night."

Chapter Eight

My dramatic exit from the dining room was somewhat marred when I stumbled on the edge of the Persian carpet. But then I heard Kimmie giggle, so I recovered my balance and stalked up the stairs in a satisfyingly haughty manner.

Once up there, of course, the wind went right out of my indignant sails. No telling how late Mom and Owen would be, and meanwhile I was confined to my room like a scolded child. No sunset from the veranda for me, not with those two harpies around.

I considered going out for a drive, but my head was too addled with wine to manage the SUV. The hot tub, then? No, the thought of running the gauntlet of Adrienne's cold stares was simply too infuriating.

All right, I'd stay here and study the damn guidebook. Come to think of it, I'd had a long day and that bed looked awfully inviting. So I stretched out, opened the book at random, and started to read about the Pig War.

In case you're not up on your wars, this one happened—or didn't happen—in the 1850s. There was a turf battle between the Americans and the British over the Northwest Territories, so both sides put troops on San Juan Island. When an English porker wandered into a Yankee cornfield and got itself shot, everybody armed to the teeth. There could have been a major war, but after years of saber-rattling the border was settled by arbitration, so the final casualties totaled precisely one pig. Hence the Pig War. Who knew?

It was the kind of thing Aaron loved, being a history buff, but I was underwhelmed. *If they'd shot a hamster*, I thought drowsily, *they wouldn't even call it a war and the whole thing would be long forgotten. Takes a catchy name to go down in history.* 

I turned the page idly, and another catchy name jumped out at me. "The Afterglow Vista Mausoleum commemorates John S. McMillin, founder of the local limeworks, once the largest west of the Mississippi."

What on earth is a limeworks? Maybe there was a Lime War, or a Lemon War... The guidebook slumped gently against my chest, and I slept.

I woke up in the dark and in my clothes, confused about where I was and whose footsteps I was hearing.

"Aaron?" I heard myself murmur.

The footsteps stopped. Or had they been there at all? I thought I'd heard someone moving along the hallway near my door, which I'd left ajar to get more air. If I had, it must be Guy returning from his rendezvous. Mom and Owen would be back by now too, but it was far too late to greet them.

Or was it? I grabbed for my travel alarm, but in the unfamiliar darkness I sent it clattering to the floor. "Oh, hell."

I groped in the air for the lamp, then drew back my hand at the thought of that antique glass globe joining the clock in a nasty smash.

As I hesitated, I thought I heard them again, faint tapping footsteps. But they were receding *down* the stairs. Had Guy been home once already and was going out again? I shrugged and fell back onto my pillow. Maybe he was a midnight snacker. I listened for a few more minutes, but my eyelids were heavy. It was such an ideal pillow, substantial yet soft, and it cradled my heavy head so nicely...

My dreams, and any odd sounds attending them, melted away in a dawn that sent pearly light filtering into my room through the limbs of the madrona. I stood up and stretched my own cramped limbs, wishing that I too was out in the open air.

Well, why not? It was far too early to wake anyone else according to my clock when I fished it from under the bed but that didn't mean I had to stay indoors. I pulled a sweatshirt over my crumpled clothes, knotted a silk scarf round my neck in case it was chilly, and tiptoed across the hall to the bathroom.

When I came out again I paused, wondering if I'd disturbed Guy. But all was silence, so I slipped down the shadowy stairwell and out the front door.

Freedom! I surveyed my unpeopled early-morning kingdom, from the dew-spangled grass at my feet to the mistsoftened islands stretching out to the horizon. With long exuberant strides I followed the driveway to the road and turned downhill, toward the village, without seeing or even hearing a single vehicle. I love Seattle, but the traffic is hellish, and this was heaven.

I was partway to the village, and a possible cup of coffee, when a dark and sinuous creature rippled across the road and stopped at the verge to look back at me. I say "creature" because my mind went flipping through cat and dog and even raccoon before it registered that this was a fox.

"Oh," I breathed. "Oh, you beauty."

A *black* fox, with a silvery frost to its fur and shadowy redbrown eyes that regarded me impassively. I held my breath. Suddenly, fluidly, the fox turned away and trotted down a path into the woods, bushy black tail floating behind, its white tip disappearing into the dimness.

I followed, mesmerized, not really expecting to find the fox again, but enchanted to meet a fellow wanderer in the dawn. The path led uphill through a stand of some leafy tree, alder perhaps, and then into evergreens interspersed with madronas.

The woods seemed enchanted as well, dim and cool and hushed. The thin straight fir trunks and the stately curves of the madronas were touched with gold here and there by the rising sun, and their scattered leaves and needles silenced my footfalls as I moved between them. Not a whisper of wind disturbed the illusion of magical unreality.

The path crested the hill and dropped toward a clearing, where a cluster of thicker trunks rose up, thick and pale and... No, they weren't trees at all, but pillars, tall fluted pillars of stone arranged around a pavilion like a little Greek temple. One pillar was broken, leaving only a jagged base and crown, but the others supported a stone pediment, if that was the word, shaped like a ring and open to the sky.

In the center of the temple stood a table and six chairs. Ordinary, everyday shapes—but they were fashioned entirely of stone. The table was round and massive, the chairs low and simple with block-shaped bases and rounded backs. Utterly ordinary shapes, but in this material and in this setting, they were utterly eerie.

*Ghosts.* The hush and the half-light and the glimpse of a wild creature had lulled me into a dreamlike state, and I instantly imagined a dinner party of phantoms vanishing into the ether. But their furniture was real enough, the stone sur-

faces cool to the touch of my fingers, and the chairs looked solid and even inviting.

So inviting that I began to sit down. But as I did I noticed carving on one of the chair backs and stepped around to see. *Dorothy Hiett McMillin*, it read, and down below, *Jan. 19*, 1894–May 19, 1980.

I drew back with a small involuntary cry. Of course, this was Kimmie's "totally gross" old place, which Sigrid had discouraged me from visiting—the mausoleum called Afterglow Vista. And I'd almost plunked my butt on Dorothy's grave. Though I wasn't sure you called it a grave, if you were dealing with ashes instead of a body. That must be why the chairs had solid bases, to contain the urns.

The sun was well up now and the air was warming, but I shivered anyway. Bodies or not, I'd never seen a place quite so spooky. Or so fascinating, in a macabre sort of way. I circled the table reverently, reading the inscriptions on each chair, and resolved to learn more about the McMillin clan and their bizarre burials.

Looking past the table, I realized that I'd arrived at the mausoleum by the back way. A course of shallow stone steps led toward a well-tended walkway, and to one side a wooden platform projected out from the pavilion's edge like a stage. I also realized that the broken pillar had been artfully crafted to look broken, rather than being damaged by nature or vandalism.

But there had been vandalism; that was evident now in the growing daylight. The tabletop, nicely inlaid with a decorative border, showed scratches and gouging. Shards of a beer bottle lay at the base of one pillar, and some idiot had dripped dark red paint down the back of a chair and smeared a trail of it across the stone floor and platform. "Moron," I muttered, and glanced over the side to see if there was worse to come. "Some people should be—oh, God. Oh, *God.*"

There was a body, after all, at Afterglow Vista. The far edge of the platform hung several feet above the forest floor, and down in the dirt sprawled the motionless figure of a man.

Horrified, I stumbled backward between the pillars, but smacking into a chair brought me to my senses. I went scrambling down the steps and across the slope toward the body, my thoughts in chaos.

I thought the man must be the vandal, injured in the midst of his misdeeds. Or else some midnight reveler, blind with beer, who'd tumbled off the unprotected edge and been abandoned by his friends.

But no friend had been here in the night. The figure wore a dark red shirt, and the shirt had gone even darker where a puddle of blood had welled up and dried between the shoulder blades.

The man was Guy Price, and he'd been stabbed in the back.

I crouched close beside him, my knees in the pool of cold and sticky blood, but there seemed to be nothing I could do. Beyond the stab wound, the fall from the platform had done something dreadful to his spine. His hips were twisted at a sickening angle, and though his eyes were wide open, the pupils had shrunk to pinpoints.

I was about to run for help when Guy managed to speak, a mere thread of sound, weak and forlorn.

"Pen ..." The fingers of one outflung hand twitched as if to grasp something, and the voice grew urgent. "*Pen*..."

"I don't have a pen," I said helplessly. "What do you want to write? Just tell me, and I'll remember it, I promise." Silence, except for my own murmuring.

"I'm here, Guy," I said gently, over and over. "You're not alone. I'm here."

Then a trickle of blood ran from his lips, and he was gone.

I'd been calm enough so far, but now dull cold horror closed around me like a blinding fog. I staggered to my feet and fled the mausoleum at a stumbling run.

I wasn't running from the killer, though, because I didn't even have the presence of mind to wonder if he was lurking nearby. I was running from the presence of death.

Gasping and sobbing, I raced down the walk and found myself on the roadway, frantically waving down an oncoming car. A police car! It swerved around me, horn blaring, and rocked to a stop. A blond giant in uniform emerged, and I rushed toward him.

"Officer, someone's been-oof!"

I'm not the most sure-footed person at the best of times, and this was far from the best. Another time I might have avoided the pothole, or at least recovered my balance when I stepped into it. Instead I pitched forward and sprawled fulllength at the officer's feet.

Chapter Mine

The blond giant was Deputy Sheriff Jeffrey Austin, "like Texas, not Jane." He told me this after I dragged some air back into my lungs, but it didn't register till later.

His appearance registered immediately, though. Deputy Austin was about six foot eight, with enormous shoulders and arms the size of my thighs, only with a lot more muscle. I became personally acquainted with the muscles when I tried to stand up and my knees turned to mashed potatoes. I've never fainted in my life, but I came damn close.

"Whoa, there!"

Austin saved me from hitting the ground again, lifting me the way I'd lift a child. He carried me easily to his patrol car, where he tucked me into the backseat and listened gravely as I stammered out my story. Then he spoke into his radio, asked me to stay put, and jogged up the walkway toward the mausoleum. When he came back his handsome face, as broadly sculpted as his body, was stiff and pale.

We remained there in the car, not speaking, until more officers arrived. My sense of time was slipping around, but it wasn't much later that I was back at Owen's house, having my bloody hands swabbed and photographed and my clothes impounded.

As if I wasn't feeling strange enough, I wasn't allowed to

talk to Mom or anyone else. A different officer stood outside my door while I changed into fresh clothes, then escorted me down to the veranda. I sat listlessly on the porch swing, waiting to be questioned, blinking my eyes against the sunlight that danced on the straits. Somehow, unbelievably, it was still a lovely September morning.

Owen and his daughters, along with my mother, were inside the house being interviewed in separate rooms. The police don't say "interrogate," at least not to your face. They say "interview." I was mulling this over, restricting my thoughts to safe topics like word choice instead of dark ones like murder, when it struck me. What kind of cop makes remarks about Jane Austen?

Apparently the kind who deliberately sits on something low so as not to overwhelm the witness. Deputy Austin pulled up a footstool and arranged himself on it, opening a small notebook with a leather cover. A breeze stole up the front lawn and ruffled the pages.

"How are you doing, Ms. Kincaid? I put you out here so you'd get the fresh air. Feeling up to some questions?"

I nodded, gulping. We started with the softball stuff, name and address and occupation, and how long I planned to be on the island. Then he flipped to a new page and fired a fastball over the plate. "What was your relationship with Guy Price?"

"We didn't have a relationship! I only met him yesterday."

Austin's eyebrows rose. They were broad, straight brows, a shade darker than his fair hair, above innocent-looking pale blue eyes. Nice eyes, actually, but that was beside the point.

"So you two were acquaintances?"

"Yes."

"All right, then, that was your relationship." His long lips curved in a smile. Everything about Deputy Austin was nicely proportioned, just big, as if he'd been enlarged on a copy machine for people. "What did you think I meant?"

"Nothing," I said, flustered. "Aren't you supposed to put me at ease so I'll tell you things?"

"Point taken." He clicked his ballpoint—it almost disappeared within his massive hand—and smiled some more. "Now, what have you got to tell me?"

*Imagine a man that big having dimples that cute,* I thought. Then, appalled at this levity, I gave him a scrupulous description of my morning, including every minute detail from the appearance of the fox to the last words of Guy Price. Austin nodded and scribbled, asking for clarification here and repetition there.

When I was done he said, "We need your cooperation on this, Ms. Kincaid."

"Carnegie." Might as well keep things straight, with Ms. Louise Kincaid around.

"All right, Carnegie, it would really help our investigation if you don't discuss the details of the scene with anyone, especially the media. Would you agree to that?"

"Of course. Anything else?"

"That's it for now." He flipped the notebook shut. "And they're called silver foxes, by the way, even though some of them are red and some black. Sounds like you're a nature lover. Me too."

"Really?"

"Really. In the office they give me a bad time about being a bird-watcher." I found myself relaxing just a little, but then he went on, "I understand you spent some time in the victim's bedroom yesterday."

I stiffened. "Guy has a suite. I mean, he had one. I was in the office, not the bedroom. What are you implying?"

"Not a thing. But I'd like you to take a quick look there now and tell us if anything seems different to you. Kimberly Winter has already looked around, but the more we know about Mr. Price's last hours, the better. So if you'll just—"

"I will *not* wait, I want to see my daughter!" The front door banged open and my mother appeared like an avenging... well, mother. Her feathery silver hair was in disarray, and her crumpled white blouse told me that she'd worn it yesterday and put it on hastily this morning. "There you are, sweetheart. Are you all right?"

Mom's not much of a hugger—she's better with yelling at policemen—but she hugged me now as I rose from the porch swing.

"I'm fine, Mom, really. I just have to go up and look at Guy's room."

"May I ask why?" Adrienne had planted herself in the doorway with her arms folded fiercely, as if to guard the old homestead against marauding desperadoes. A shotgun and sunbonnet would have fit right in. "I think we've had quite enough disruption without—"

"Calm down, Dree." Owen Winter came up behind her and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Let's let these people do their job. It's good to see you, Carrie, though I'm sorry it's under these circumstances."

Owen's pale blue eyes were cold, and just as I'd told Lily, he seemed angry beneath his calm demeanor. Something about the clench of his jaw, and the way his lips would suddenly tighten, just didn't match his amiable words.

The fog in my brain had cleared by now, and if anything my perceptions were turned up almost painfully high. The five of us made an odd tableau there on the veranda, and I took in several things simultaneously. My mother's expression, soft and glowing, as she looked at Owen. Adrienne's instant deferral to her father, coupled with a poisonous glance at me. The fact that Owen had shed some weight since I saw him last and was looking taut and sporty in slacks and a black knit shirt with a designer logo on the pocket. Also, from the corner of my eye, Deputy Austin drawing himself up as if coming to attention, to give Owen a respectful nod that felt like a salute.

Then the tableau shifted and I was following the deputy up to Guy's rooms. A young technician in latex gloves and paper slippers stopped me from going inside, so I stood in the doorway to make my survey.

"It all looks pretty much the same," I said. "Those piles of paper on the desk were there yesterday, and that's the shirt he put on ...."

Guy's Hawaiian shirt was draped innocuously over the same chair, but the sight of it brought on a vision of his red shirt, stiff with blood, and I swayed on my feet.

"I-I need to sit down." I pushed past the deputy—it was like stepping around a stone wall—and into my own bedroom, where I slumped onto the edge of the bed. "Sorry, I'm just—"

"You're just in shock," he said kindly, squatting in front of me. He smelled nice, like soap. "Take your time. I won't ask you about Price's friends on the island, since you just got here, but did he get any phone calls yesterday that you know of? Kimmie said that his going out after dinner seemed like a last-minute decision. We need to know who he was meeting."

I shook my head, and then my conscience pricked. I couldn't quite bring myself to confess the snooping I'd done in Guy's absence, but I had to say something. "He might have gotten an e-mail, I suppose."

"We checked the PC downstairs. Nothing."

"No, I mean on this little e-mail gadget he loaned me."

Austin frowned and stood up. "What gadget?"

I described the gray plastic e-mailer. "It's in his desk drawer."

"Not this morning it isn't." The leather-covered notebook reappeared. "What size was it? Brand? Wireless, or with a cable? Did you see any messages on the screen? Any names?"

"Well..." I was blushing, but at this point the deputy had zero interest in my inappropriate behavior. He pressed me for the exact words I'd read, but my memory was sketchy as well as guilty. I told him what I could. "... and the last one was Ann-something, just an initial. AnnJ, that was it. I'm sorry, that's all I remember."

He nodded, all business now, and handed me his card. "If you remember anything more, anything at all, day or night, you call me and report it. Is that clear?"

"Absolutely."

But when I did remember something more, and did report it, the result was anything but absolutely clear.

Chapter Ten

The rest of Monday passed in a haze of unreality. The police came and went, the phone rang constantly, and I couldn't concentrate on anything for more than five minutes at a time. It was depressing to be alone and irritating to be with anyone else, and I had the feeling that my mother and the Winters felt the same way.

In the end I took a long nap in my room, but all that did was make it hard to sleep later that night, after a dispiriting evening spent staring at a book without seeing the words.

Tuesday morning was better. Mom and I both awoke early, and after a quick consultation we were dressed and driving off in my SUV. I thought of it now as Scarlet the Harlot, the gas-guzzling slut. My white van in Seattle is Vanna White. I can't help it.

Mom wanted to run some errands and give the Winters some time alone this morning—and also, no doubt, to grill me about Aaron. What I wanted, with indecent urgency, was to have breakfast without Adrienne and Kimberly around.

And I knew just the man to make it for me: ZZ Nickles, the barbecue chef who'd be cooking Lily's wedding supper. He was expecting me this morning, and I was quite grateful to have something, anything, to occupy my mind. Mom was pensive on the drive to Friday Harbor. Somewhere around the winery she ventured, "Caretakers must be odd people, don't you think? Unusual, I mean."

"How so?"

She chose her words carefully. "To have no roots. To apply for a job and a home at the same time, as if they don't have a separate life."

I thought about all those e-mails. "I think Guy had a life. We just don't know much about it. He said you were marvelous, you know. He called you a breath of fresh air."

"Isn't that sweet! I'll have to thank-"

She remembered that Guy wasn't around to thank anymore, and groped in her purse for a tissue. By the time I pulled into town we were both dabbing our eyes.

The streets of Friday Harbor run steeply down to the water, and the water carries as much traffic as the streets. The harbor is a deep and sheltered anchorage, embraced by a thickly forested point of land on one side and an equally forested island on the other, with the green coastline of Shaw Island visible in between.

With the weekend over, the pleasure-boat marina was a thicket of masts. They glittered in the sun, as white as birch trees, punctuated here and there by flower baskets hanging from the marina's lampposts. A stout green and white state ferry was just chugging away from its dock, and farther out a seaplane dropped from the pale blue sky to the deep blue water like a glinting dragonfly.

It was all very bustling and gay, and just what Mom and I needed.

Parking in Friday Harbor is tighter than jeans from the dryer, but we were in luck. As I turned left on First Street a van full of teenagers was just pulling away from our destination, a neat little brick building whose scalloped red awning proclaimed ZZ NICKLES! WORLD-CLASS BBQ!

I took their space and got out, noting that the building's back deck overhung the slope to the harbor. Excellent—our wedding party would have a nice outdoor dimension to it. But even more excellent, at least for now, was the card in the window bearing those three little words that every old-fashioned girl longs for: *Breakfast All Day*.

ZZ Nickles was an old friend of Lily's father from when her family lived in New Orleans, and he'd jumped at the chance to serve up the wedding feast. I'd been looking forward to meeting him ever since I heard his honeyed, good-humored voice on the telephone. No one had ever called me Sugar Pie before.

Lily remembered him, barely, as a big laughing man who dubbed her Cupcake and her brother Jelly Baby. His ribs were legendary—the ones he cooked, not his own personal ribs—and his secret sauce, according to him, was celebrated on three continents. ZZ didn't say which three, but who cared?

"It's the wedding lady!"

The man himself came out to the sidewalk to escort us into his establishment. Somewhere between sixty and eighty, ZZ had the look of a big man who'd shrunk with age, with skin black as midnight and close-shorn hair as white as the spotless white apron he sported. His eyes were a warm golden brown under heavy lids, and his teeth showed large and yellowed as he grinned.

"Made in Heaven Wedding Design!" he caroled. "Elegant Weddings with an Original Flair! I read your whole Web site, Sugar Pie, and you are just as elegantly original as your business. And this fine lady must be your mama." Mom smiled gallantly, putting tears aside. "How did you know, Mr. Nickles?"

"Why, your daughter is fortunate enough to resemble you, of course. But don't mister me, please! I'm ZZ to my friends, and since I've never met a stranger, I'm ZZ to everybody. Now, come in, come in!"

He ushered us into the restaurant, whose interior was as warm and embracing as its namesake. Red vinyl booths lined the pine plank walls, with black-and-white photos of old New Orleans scenes hanging above them. The round tables in the middle, also of pine, were half-filled this morning with a mix of tourists and locals, and heavenly scents wafted from the kitchen.

Heaven was present in more ways than one. Various plaques bearing Bible verses were scattered among the photographs, and there was a Christian fish symbol on the cash register by the door.

Once we'd settled into a cozy corner, ZZ opened his arms to pat us each lightly on the shoulder.

"I heard about the terrible crime out your way. It's a shocking thing, shocking. But the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away."

Then the grin emerged again, like the sun from clouds. "But did you bring me even a little bitty appetite? My new cook just pulled some biscuits out of the oven, and there's huckleberry jam that my granddaughter Peggy made with her own two hands. I'll be insulted right down to the *bone* if you don't try it."

"Coffee?" I said hopefully.

"Of course, coffee! Where is my brain this morning? Let's get you all taken care of, and then when you're good and ready we'll talk about that little Cupcake's wedding."

ZZ summoned our waitress, and soon I was ordering eggs and biscuits while my mother sipped cautiously from a steaming mug. Mom usually packs a jar of instant coffee in her purse to doctor whatever brew she's served—a practice that has mortified me since adolescence. But the jar had been left behind today, and she looked up in surprise from her sipping.

"I can't believe it," she whispered. "It tastes like proper coffee!"

"Hell freezes over," I announced. "Film at eleven."

She ignored the jibe and asked the question I'd been dreading. "Now tell me, is Aaron coming to the wedding or not? You said his doctor might not allow it, but if his arm is healing, then why can't he travel?"

I shifted on the red vinyl. The unrelenting doctor was a face-saving invention of mine, and I'd come to regret him. "I'm not quite sure. But there's still a week to go."

"Five days," she said. "And last-minute flights are so expensive, you would think Aaron would want to—"

"Mom, he'll come if he's coming, all right?"

She *tsk*ed. "Don't snap, dear. You're still upset from yesterday, aren't you? You'll feel better once you have something to eat."

I'll feel better once I know for sure whether Aaron's dumping me, I thought, but it was easier to agree. We made a little small talk, about the restaurant and the island and her visit with Owen so far. But inevitably, though reluctantly, we speculated about the events of Sunday night.

"The house was dark when Owen and I got back," Mom explained. "We assumed everyone was asleep. And Kimmie and Dree are both heavy sleepers, so they didn't hear Guy drive back, or go out again. Did you?" "I'm not really sure," I said thoughtfully. I was remembering those tapping footsteps. Were they a dream, or not? "So neither of the sisters was walking around the house that night?"

"No, why?"

"Just curious. Have you gotten to know them very well, Mom?" I tried to be diplomatically neutral, like Switzerland. "They seem a little..."

"Hostile?" She chuckled. "Carrie, dear, don't look so shocked. I can see through false courtesy just as well as you can. Dree and Kimmie are just so irritated that I'm around!"

"It's not just you. Adrienne tried to frighten *me* to death." I abandoned diplomacy and told her about the scare tactics in the airplane. "I'm going to pay her back for that one."

"You don't mean that. Retaliating wouldn't make you feel one bit better."

"I do mean it! Getting her back would make me feel great, I just don't know how yet. But seriously, I am sorry they're not being friendlier to you."

"Don't be." She took a healthy swallow of her nondoctored coffee. "I'm in love with Owen, not his girls."

"In love?" It was disconcerting to hear the phrase from my mother's lips, but nice to see the youthful flush that it brought to her cheeks. "If Adrienne heard you say that she'd bar the door. She looked so ferocious when—"

I broke off, my fork in midair and my mouth agape.

"What is it, Carrie? Can't you breathe? Should I do that Heimlich business?"

"I'm fine," I said faintly. "I just remembered something...." Something explosive. The idea of barring the door had called up a mental picture of Adrienne Winter on the veranda this morning, her arms folded. In the picture—I was sure of this—Darling Dree's left wrist was showing. And on that wrist she wore the diamond-dusted watch I'd seen Sunday, right next to Guy Price's bed.

Chapter Eleven

"Where's your pretty mama, Sugar Pie?"

I looked up, startled. Mom had gone off on her errands, leaving me to brood over this new development—which I hadn't told her about. As ZZ doffed his apron and settled into the booth across from me, I took a deep breath and put on a smile.

"She had things to do," I told him. "But she loved your coffee, and she's not easy to please."

"That's the chicory, makes it real roasty tasting. Your mama's got taste. I always say, you can spoil the best meal in the world with a bad cup of coffee..."

He went on talking, but I was so preoccupied that I hardly heard him. Uncomfortable thoughts were still unreeling across my mind like the crawl on a TV screen.

Guy Price and Adrienne? Not Kimmie? Then what was all that needling he gave Dree at dinner? And could she possibly have followed him to the mausoleum and ... no, of course not. That was ridiculous. Or was it?

ZZ fell silent, looking at me expectantly, and I realized that he must have asked me a question.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, is your mama very upset about this dreadful murder?"

"She'll be all right. But it's sad about Guy, isn't it? He was a charming man."

ZZ made a sound like a growl. "Appearances are deceiving, young lady."

Well now, I thought, what have we here? This was the kind of chilly reaction that I'd seen with the Nyquists. Intrigued, I tried to probe a bit further.

"You have to admit," I said, "Guy's appearance was remarkably handsome."

The chef's expression grew wrathful, and one gnarled old hand made a fist on the table.

"He was as a whited sepulchre, which indeed appears beautiful outward, but is within full of dead men's bones and of all uncleanness!"

Whoa. Hard to get happy after that. I said uncertainly, "I take it you didn't get along?"

ZZ looked away, withdrawing his hand, and I could see the effort he made to regain his composure. "I don't get along with sinners. I don't get along with men who pollute the souls of young people with drugs."

"Guy Price was a drug dealer? Do you know that for sure?"

He sighed heavily and turned his heavy-lidded gaze back to me. "Maybe not for sure. But it doesn't matter now, does it?"

"I guess not." I fumbled with my paperwork. "Well, shall we get started? You said on e-mail you had a question about the wedding cake..."

"Yes, indeed," said ZZ. We both relaxed a bit as the Old Testament patriarch morphed back into the modern-day chef. "I know you already ordered it from Sutherland's, and they make real fine cakes. But my granddaughter Peggy has been kind of apprenticing with them, and I'd take it as a favor if you'd allow her to make this one and then take photographs for her portfolio. They said they'd need your permission."

Lily had chosen a three-layer cake flavored with vanilla beans and lavender sugar, and a relatively simple white-onwhite frosting design. Nothing too ambitious for an apprentice.

"I don't see why not," I said, "as long as the bakery guarantees the results. But I'd like to talk with Peggy first."

"Course you would. Hey there, Peggy girl!"

ZZ waved to one of the waitresses, an elfin young woman of about nineteen who had just finished serving an all-male table across the room. The fellows were laughing and teasing her, but she was giving as good as she got.

"Pretty as a princess, isn't she?" said the proud grandpa, as the girl made her way to our booth. "But I've told her time and again, she needs to stop that flirting."

"She's lovely, ZZ."

I wasn't just being polite. If ZZ had black-coffee skin, Peggy's was a creamy café au lait, and the eyes in her heartshaped face were large and luminous, hardly needing the heavy makeup that she wore. ZZ introduced us, and when I shook her slender little hand her grip was surprisingly strong.

"I understand you'd like to make Lily James's wedding cake," I said.

Peggy nodded eagerly as she slipped into the seat beside me. Her sultry perfume was as heavy as her makeup, and I drew back a bit. *Nineteen going on thirty-five*.

"I'd do a really good job for you," she said, in a highpitched but confident voice. "I've taken community college courses in bakery and pastry work, and Mrs. Sutherland says I've got a natural talent." 72

As the girl elaborated on her qualifications, ZZ beamed at her proudly, and I was soon nodding in agreement.

"You've got the job, Peggy," I told her. "Sigrid will have some lavender flowers set aside to decorate the platter. Can you pick them up from her on Saturday or early Sunday morning?"

"One of us will, for sure," said ZZ. "'Scuse me a minute, I see a customer I need to say howdy to. You girls finish up and I'll be right back."

As he moved away, light on his feet for a man his age, Peggy's self-assured manner fell away, and her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Is it true that you found Guy?" She leaned toward me, looking into my face intently as if to read the answer there. "Did he ... did he suffer? Did he say anything?"

"Uh, well..." The switch from wedding cakes to sudden death was too much for me, and I groped for words. Then I fell back on a higher authority. "The police asked me not to talk about it. I'm sorry. Were you and he, um, friends?"

She gave an eloquent little shrug. "We hooked up some. You know how it is."

"Not exactly. Was Guy—"

"Shh! He's coming back."

Peggy flitted away as soon as ZZ rejoined us, and soon the chef and I were deep into the rehearsal dinner menu.

The mind is a funny thing. Half of mine was right there with ZZ, discussing barbecue shrimp and baby back ribs and "burnt ends"—those extra-tasty charred bits of brisket—and how much potato salad to allow per person.

But the other half was pondering his granddaughter's connection to the murdered man. Not to mention that little e-mail gizmo and the phantom footsteps I'd heard in my sleep. Who knows how many women had been tiptoeing through Guy Price's life? And was he really dealing drugs? That might explain his murder right there.

I was itching to ask ZZ for more details, but I didn't want to antagonize him so I didn't raise the question again. Make nice to the man who makes your food, that's a good rule for most occasions. And Lily's wedding was an occasion very dear to my heart. I just wished I could get Guy Price out of my head.

The real question was, should I tell the police about Guy's extracurricular activities with Adrienne, and the footsteps I might have heard in the night? ZZ's accusations and Peggy's love life, intriguing as they seemed, were none of my business. But if those footsteps weren't Guy's, and both sisters claimed to have been in their own beds all night, then someone was lying. And that someone was surely Adrienne Winter.

But that didn't make her a murderer, just a woman who'd been indiscreet. I haven't always been the soul of discretion myself, so it hardly seemed grounds for getting her in trouble with the police. To tell or not to tell?

Mulling this over as I left the restaurant, who did I see but the police themselves in the large and handsome person of Jeffrey Austin. ZZ's place was across the street from the San Juan County courthouse, a blocky brick edifice, and Jeff was just coming out the main door. He waved and crossed over.

"Hi! Feeling better today?"

He stood close enough for me to smell that nice soap again. I rarely feel like a delicate little person, and now I was discovering that I didn't mind the sensation at all.

"I'm fine, Deputy Au-"

"Make it Jeff. The state's got the case now, so I figure I can relax."

"The state?"

"Washington State Patrol. Their major-crime team is taking over from here."

"So will they be coming to the house too?"

"I doubt it, but Owen agreed to leave the victim's rooms sealed just in case. Mostly they'll focus on the mausoleum area. It's driving the forensics team crazy, though, 'cause they've already got tourists hanging around the perimeter trying to take snapshots."

"Ugh! How can anyone be so ghoulish?"

"Most people's lives are pretty ordinary, so they want a little thrill." He gave a tolerant shrug. "They don't mean anything by it."

He seemed so sensible and so fair-minded that I made my decision on the spot. After all, how could I face Mike Graham again if I withheld information about a murder case? And if it caused Adrienne some grief, well, that was just too bad. She was a master at dishing it out, now she could try taking it.

"You know, Jeff, I did remember one other little detail. It probably doesn't mean anything, but..." I told him about the wristwatch next to Guy's bed, and also the footsteps in the night, making it clear that I hadn't actually seen anyone in the hallway. "Maybe no one was there at all. I could have dreamed the whole thing. But I'm sure about the watch. The watch was Adrienne's."

"Got it." He nodded several times, busy with the everpresent leather notebook, then put it away. "You never know what's going to be pertinent and what isn't, so I'll pass this on. You said you'll be around till your friend's wedding on Sunday?"

"That's right." Assuming he had another interview in mind, I said, "I'll be working on that and visiting with my

mother, but my schedule is flexible, so I'm available any time."

"Are you available to have dinner with me, say Thursday night? Just something casual."

"Oh. Oh. Well..." What would Aaron think? More likely, what would Aaron care? If he couldn't even answer a damn e-mail... To hell with it, there's no harm in a dinner. "Yes, I'd like that."

"Great. I'll pick you up at six. No patrol car this time, I promise."

"And I promise not to pass out."

We said good-bye and I headed for my rendezvous with Mom in Fairweather Park, taking the stairway down to Front Street with a spring in my step. *No harm at all*.

Chapter Twelve

I found my mother seated on a low stone wall, gazing raptly upward at a remarkable outdoor sculpture. It was composed of two cedar columns, maybe twenty feet high, connected by a crossbeam to form a sort of gate against the soft blue sky. Each column bore a set of boldly carved figures, a stylized orca and two salmon on one post, a woman and a cougar on the other.

"It's called 'Portals of Welcome,' " said Mom. "They're traditional Coast Salish house posts, carved by a Native American woman who's known around the world for her art. Aren't they marvelous? Owen told me all about it."

She turned her face to me, and the girlish flush was back on her cheeks. "He's so fascinated by the world around him, Carrie. I've never known anyone quite like Owen."

"Very impressive," I agreed, and I suppose I meant the man and the sculpture both. "Sounds like you've been having a good visit."

"More than good. Sit down for a moment? I wanted somewhere quieter than the restaurant for us to talk."

I joined her on the wall and waited curiously while she took a deep breath, began to speak, faltered, and then tried again. "Carrie dear, there's something I've been wanting to tell you, but it seemed disrespectful to Guy to come right out and—"

"He proposed!" I burst out. My jibe at Adrienne had come true. "Owen proposed to you on Orcas Island!"

"On the way back," she said, and the words gushed out in a happy torrent. "We were going to tell you girls in the morning but then the police came, and he gave me the loveliest ring but it's too large so he's having it resized, and—"

"Oh, Mom!"

I threw my arms around her, with my misgivings about the Winters vanished in the romance of it all, and we both had a fine old time laughing and crying at once. After we employed our handkerchiefs, Mom explained that they hadn't yet set a date.

"But Owen says that we'll have any kind of wedding and honeymoon I want, and don't spare the expense."

"The perfect bridegroom! Will you let me plan it?"

"I wouldn't let anyone else."

We hugged some more—Mom was getting good at it and I asked, "How did his daughters take the news?"

"He hasn't told them yet, because of Guy. And because ... well, they may not be pleased, not at first. But they'll want him to be happy, won't they?"

"Of course they will," I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. Unsure of my success, I changed the subject. "Tell me again how you met Owen. Tell me everything."

I knew perfectly well how she'd met him, at an author reading at the Sun Valley Writers' Conference, but that didn't matter. There is nothing, but nothing, that a woman in love enjoys more than recounting her romance to a friend.

And a true friend will listen attentively to every detail, no matter how small. I'd done it for Lily, she'd done it for me,

and now that I was past my preconceptions about middle-age decorum, I was determined to do it for my mother.

So we began with their very first conversation, as we strolled around the marina for an hour or so, and by the time we took the steps back up to the car we'd only reached their second date. I was being a *good* friend.

I saw Jeff Austin again on our way out of town, coming the other way at an intersection. He was deep in conversation with another officer, but not so deep that he didn't see us. And Mom, for her part, wasn't so wrapped up in her story that she didn't notice his wave, or my blush, as they drove by.

"Isn't that the-"

"Yes."

"He seems very friendly."

"Jeff's a friendly guy."

"Jeff?" she said, her maternal antennae quivering.

"We were chatting outside ZZ's," I said defensively. "Just, you know, details about my statement. So, um, Owen took you to that concert, and then what?"

Mom returned enthusiastically to her narrative and talked of nothing else the whole way back to Afterglow Drive. The theater dates, the dinners, the walks by the Boise River, I heard about every one of them.

She concluded with a description of Sunday's boat trip to Orcas Island just as we reached the veranda of Owen's house. If I knew nothing else by then, I knew that my mother was absolutely thrilled with her new man. Dad was the cherished past, but Owen was the present and the future. Any reservations I had—and they were very slight—would be best unspoken.

The wonderfulness of Owen got a little old, I have to admit, given the trouble I'd been having with Aaron. But then, Aaron might be moving out of my life now, and new men might be moving in. In any case, how many hours of adolescent swooning had Mom tolerated from me? Fair is fair.

The veranda was empty, of Winters or police, and so was the house.

"They must be in back," said Mom. "Have you seen the clematis arbor? I was so sorry not to be here when you arrived on Sunday, but Owen has made some nice plans for us this week—"

"We're out here, Lou!"

We followed Owen's voice to the hot-tub terrace. He and Kimmie, who was swathed in a fluffy white robe, were sitting in the sunshine with a tray of iced tea and sandwiches between them. The breeze had died down and the starry pink clematis flowers suffused the air with the delicate scent of vanilla.

Owen, ever the gentleman, rose at our approach and kissed Mom on the cheek. "Did you tell her?"

Mom nodded, and I proved the point by stepping up to give him a big hug.

"Congratulations, Owen. I'm sure you'll both be very happy."

Owen beamed—no angry grimace this time—and drew up chairs for us. As he pressed a glass of tea into Mom's hands, he kept his own hands over hers for a moment and mouthed the words *Love you*.

Kimmie watched the two of them without speaking, and I didn't like the look in her eye.

"I was just telling Kimmie," said Owen, settling back into his chair, "that the weather should be good all week, so we'll postpone our picnic a few days. If you think you'll still want to go, Lou, after this awful business?" "Of course we will," Mom said stoutly. "We can't just sit here and brood." She turned to me and explained, "Owen has this lovely little island on the other side of Speiden Channel—"

"It belongs to Dree," said Kimmie, her tone not quite rude. "Daddy gave it to her for her birthday, to build a cottage on. It turns out she can't, but technically it's still her island."

"That was my mistake, about the cottage." Owen's smile was a little too hearty as he glossed over his daughter's petulance. "You see, a pair of bald eagles are nesting in a tree on the only level spot on the island, and since you're not allowed to build too close to an active nest—"

"Dree's cottage would have to go on stilts in the water," Kimmie completed. She stood up and trailed a toe in the hot tub. "So all you can do is picnic there, you and *Lou* and *Carrie*."

She pronounced our names with mocking distaste.

"Perhaps you can come with us," said my mother, getting an A for effort. "We haven't seen very much of you—"

Kimmie dropped her robe abruptly, and the three of us saw a great deal more of her than we expected. She was stark naked underneath.

"Kimberly Winter!" said Owen.

But he stopped there, unsure what to do or say. Slowly and insolently, his daughter stepped down into the steaming water, turned about to face us, and lowered her gorgeous form so that her breasts were right at the waterline.

"No thanks," she said. "I hate picnics."

Make that an A-plus. Mom calmly set down her glass, and if her face was scarlet, her hand was almost steady. I could have cheered.

"What a shame," she said. "Owen, I believe I'll go upstairs and—"

"There you are, you bitch!" The back door slammed as Adrienne came marching out. She halted at the edge of the terrace in that same fierce arms-folded posture. "What the *hell* did you think you were doing?"

She hardly spared a glance for her sister, nude or not, because she was glaring daggers at me. My own glance went straight to Adrienne's wrist. But I wasn't mistaken, that was the watch I'd seen. *Thank goodness. I'd feel like a prize idiot if I gave the police a false lead.* 

"For God's sake, Dree," said Owen, "what on earth-"

"I'll tell you what on earth," Adrienne spat out. "Your girlfriend's daughter went to the cops and accused me of murder."

The conversation, if you want to call it that, went downhill from there. It seems that one Lieutenant Orozco of the Washington State Patrol had just phoned Adrienne from Friday Harbor, having learned from "a source" that she might have had a "more personal relationship" with Guy Price. The identity of the source was obvious, and the nature of the relationship was strongly implied.

"He wanted to go over my movements Sunday night," said Adrienne venomously. "My movements! This bitch here must have told them I was screwing Guy, or killing him, or—"

"I did not! I just reported what I saw and heard, that's all."

"What business do you have reporting on my daughter?" Owen demanded. His face had flushed a dark, dull red, and his hands kept flexing into fists. "You are a guest in this house—"

"Don't take that tone with Carrie!" Mom broke in. Kimmie's flagrant behavior had rattled her, I could see, and now she was really shaken up. "Of course she had to tell the police everything she knew."

"You stay out of this!" Adrienne blazed at Mom. "She doesn't *know* anything, and neither do you!"

"Dree, you will apologize to Lou this minute," said Owen. "Like hell I will!"

"Listen, bitch," I began, but Mom put a warning hand on my arm and said, "Temper, dear."

I heard a snigger from the hot tub. Through all this, Kimmie had said nothing at all but simply sat there bobbing gently, a wicked little smile on her face. So what else could I do? I snatched up her fluffy white robe and dumped it over her silly blond head.

As Kimmie splashed and sputtered I did some marching myself, upstairs to my bedroom. I was damned if I was going to explain myself to the Winters, and damned if I was going to stay in their house another night. If my mother wanted to marry into this clan of maniacs, that was her business.

I was rooting around for my cell phone when Mom arrived, to hover in the doorway with a reproachful expression.

"Oh, Carrie, how could you?"

"How could I what?"

"This is why you were talking to that deputy again, isn't it? I know Adrienne's been unpleasant to you, but don't you think this is going too far?"

With a furious jerk, I upended my canvas tote bag onto the bedspread and pawed through the voluminous contents. I was learning that in a tote that holds everything, you can never find anything.

"You think I did this just to get back at her? You think I lied to the police?"

"I'm sure you didn't lie, but if you implied something that cast an unjust suspicion—"

"Look, Mom, I saw Adrienne's wristwatch next to Guy's bed, and I heard footsteps in the hallway when Adrienne claims she was sound asleep." I picked up my cell and stabbed at it. "That's all I saw, that's all I told them, end of story."

"Oh, dear," said Mom. Her voice dropped to an appalled whisper. "You don't really think Dree is a murderer? That's absurd!"

"Maybe. But—"

I stopped abruptly at the sound of someone coming up the stairs. Adrienne, looking murderous, brushed past my mother and into my room.

"Just in case you're interested in the truth," she said acidly, and raised her left arm. For a split second I thought she was going to hit me, but instead she held her wrist—and her watch—close to my face.

"This is a Swiss-engineered Raymond Weil timepiece. The movement is mechanical, which means it's not massproduced quartz like"—her gaze flicked to my wrist—"like *yours*. One of Guy's hobbies was repairing clocks and watches, and he was fixing this for me. Satisfied?"

Without giving me a chance to answer, she turned her back and descended the stairs.

"Oh, dear," Mom said again, while I stood there feeling like a prize idiot.

Then I found my phone and tapped in a number.

"Who are you calling?" she asked.

"The Owl's Roost. I heard they had a vacancy."

Chapter Thirteen

Donald Coe was overjoyed to offer me a room but effusively regretful that it wasn't available until Wednesday. I thought about booking elsewhere, but with Mom so distressed that I was leaving at all, I decided to spend Tuesday night at Owen's instead of departing in a huff.

But the night wasn't too bad, because Owen calmed down and took me and Mom out for dinner in Roche Harbor. His apology was implied, I implicitly accepted, and the three of us had a quiet but cordial evening. Best of all, Kimmie and Dree were nowhere to be seen when we got back. So I went off to bed early, too tired to remain vertical, and was deep asleep before they got home. Murder will do that to a girl.

On Wednesday morning both sisters slept in, and I explained that I needed to transfer to the Owl's Roost for the sake of the wedding preparations. Mom was still doubtful, but Owen was clearly just as happy to keep them and me apart for the moment. So he pretended to believe me, and I packed my bag and slung it in Scarlet's backseat.

"You will come on the picnic to Eagle Island, though?" he asked, as he brought Mom and me coffee on the veranda before I left. I do love a man who brings me coffee. "It looks like Friday would be best. You won't be too busy?"

"I wouldn't miss it," I said, quite sincerely, and both he

and my mother looked pleased. "Lily doesn't arrive till Saturday, and this is a small wedding, so the arrangements are pretty manageable."

Mom saw her chance and seized it. She's good. "In that case, I'm sure you'll have time for lunch with the four of us tomorrow? You have to eat, after all. Shall we say noon?"

Her eyes telegraphed the message: Make peace with his daughters, please. For my sake.

Peace was unlikely, but a truce was possible. So for her sake I said, "That sounds nice. Thanks for the coffee, Owen, and I'll see you tomorrow at noon."

By the time I drove up to the Owl's Roost, the news of Guy Price's untimely end had run through the island's grapevine. Pamela, red-eyed and somber, seemed genuinely sorrowful, but Donald's eager curiosity kept bobbing up through his clichés. I tried to keep Jeff Austin's attitude in mind—"They don't mean anything by it"—but I still found his inquisition distasteful.

"I suppose you wanted to get clean away from there, huh, after your horrible experience?" He made Roche Harbor and Lonesome Cove sound two hundred miles apart instead of two and a half. "I can understand that, I surely can. Here, let me."

With a great show of helpfulness he pulled my luggage from the SUV, stopping to adjust his glasses and dropping my jacket on the driveway in the process. "I mean, you must be darned near traumatized after seeing what you saw ...?"

I ignored this invitation to spill the details. "I just need somewhere quiet until Sunday."

"Of course you do, poor thing," said Pamela. She picked up my jacket and tucked it into the crook of her arm as if it were a kitten. "You'll be nice and private back in 6C. You even have your own separate parking." "It's not our very best unit, you understand," said Donald, toting my suitcase through the spacious, comfortable lounge of the A-frame. An older couple sat reading in the easy chairs by the fire, and they gave us friendly nods as we passed them to go down a little hallway. "But it's where the missus and I camped out till we built the cabin, so it can't be too shabby, can it?"

"Not shabby at all," I assured him.

And in fact the bedroom was much larger than the one I'd had at the Winters', with its own shipshape bathroom, a desk and chair in the far corner, and even a mini-kitchen with hot plate, microwave, and half-size fridge. The unit's back door opened onto a small private porch facing the woods.

"This will be perfect."

"If you need to talk about your horrible experience," Donald said gravely, "you know, just to get it out of your system, I'd be happy to—"

"There's a path down to the beach right through the trees there," said Pamela, busy fluffing the pillows on the double bed. She seemed to be on automatic pilot after the death of their helpful neighbor. "And those are your two parking spaces next to the porch. If you go the other way on the path it leads to our cabin, which is the office too. Breakfast served in the lounge from eight to ten, and we rent kayaks and bicycles by the day or—oops!"

A thin beeping sounded, and she checked the pager clipped to the waistband of her stretch pants. "Someone's waiting. Come on, Mr. Coe, I'll see to whoever it is and you get back to making your chili. Let Carnegie settle in and relax."

What I really needed was to settle in and get myself organized. Eddie Breen was always pushing me to do more business development, and before I left he'd suggested that I offer Made in Heaven's services to the larger hotels on the island. In all the turmoil, I had forgotten that he'd set me up with an appointment in Roche Harbor today. Sometimes I wondered who worked for who.

So I unpacked quickly, arranging the paperwork for Lily's wedding on the wobbly little desk, with Eddie's notes on top of that. Even on this sunny day the corners of the room were dim, so I clicked on the desk lamp. Dead bulb. A search through 6C, including the plywood cupboard beneath the bathroom sink, got me nothing but a jagged splinter in my thumb. I dotted the carpet with blood before I noticed it.

Might as well go ask Pamela for a bulb, I decided as I made myself a toilet-paper bandage, and have her run my credit card at the same time. This was an expense I hadn't planned on, but well worth it to get away from Adrienne. I could visit Mom and Owen just as easily, and much more sanely, from here.

The woods outside my new lodgings were eerily reminiscent of the fir trees and madronas around Afterglow Vista, but when that thought occurred I gave myself a stern mental shake. San Juan Island was covered with woods like these, and I was determined not to be haunted by Monday's tragedy.

So I squared my shoulders and strode up the path, listening to the bird calls, breathing in the salt-tinged air, and trying to breathe out all the anger and stress of the last three days. *Lily and Mike are getting married on Sunday, that's what really matters*.

From the outside, the Coes' cabin was utterly ordinary, a small shingled building set among the trees, with beigecurtained windows, a film of moss on the north slope of the roof, and a set of swaybacked wooden steps leading up to the front door. A sign on the door said OFFICE, and below that a folksy plaque informed all comers that a stranger is just a friend we haven't met yet. It might have been any manager's cottage at any modest countryside resort in the Pacific Northwest.

But inside the cabin was another matter. I tapped on the door, opened it, and froze in horror at the sight of a huge, grotesque object sitting on the office counter. It was a lamp, I realized, an owl-shaped lamp of such surpassing green and brown ceramic ugliness that it seemed to leave an imprint on my retinas when I blinked.

Slowly my gaze traveled upward to a macramé owl with buttons for eyes that hung from the ceiling, and then traversed the walls, which were covered with owl posters bearing captions like *Who Gives a Hoot?* and *The Eyes Have It*.

Houston, we have touchdown on the Planet of the Owls.

"Back here!" fluted Pamela.

There was a utility room behind the counter, but her voice came from a connecting door off to one side. I stepped through it into a small living room crowded with furniture just as comfortably plump as the lady of the house.

The lady was perched on the sofa talking to a young woman, but I could hardly take them in through the onslaught of the decor. Here, too, the owl plague had spread. Lamps, figurines, throw pillows, cuckoo clocks—there were several cuckoo clocks—all of them bore brown feathers and black beaks and enormous circular dark-pupiled eyes.

I was seriously creeped out.

"Carnegie, I was just telling India here all about you." Pamela leaned forward to pat the seat of an upholstered chair. As she did so, a rhinestone owl pendant with garnet eyes swung out from between her generous breasts. "Come sit down and visit." But the young woman popped to her feet and thrust out a hand that jangled with bracelets. She wore a fluttery flowery gauze top, bell-bottom corduroys, and platform shoes that made her almost my height. Ropes of beads draped her narrow chest, along with some kind of amulet on a rawhide cord and an antique silver perfume vial dangling from a black velvet ribbon. At least it wasn't shaped like an owl.

"India Doyle, assistant community editor for the Friday Harbor *Tideline*." She gave me a look of mingled awe and lust that I would have welcomed from Aaron, or even Jeff Austin, but that felt damn odd coming from her. "You're the one who found the *body*."

Ms. Doyle was what they used to call coltish. Not just her frisky, long-limbed movements, but also her large protruding brown eyes and the yard-long mane of brown hair that she sporadically flung aside with restless little tosses of her head. Even her mouth had an equine look, its short upper lip revealing strong square white teeth. Definitely coltish.

I shook her hand and backed away a step, because her other hand was clutching a reporter's notebook. "Listen, um, India—"

"It's really Jennifer," she confided, flinging. "But do you know how many Jennifers there are? I chose India because it's so soulful. I think I must have lived there in another lifetime. What does Carnegie symbolize?"

"Nothing, really." It was hardly the time to discuss my father's fondness for Andrew Carnegie's libraries. "Listen, I can't talk about Guy Price, especially not to the press. I'm sorry, but that's final. Pamela, could I get a lightbulb?"

"Of course you can. Mr. Coe, 6C needs a bulb changed!"

I heard noises from the kitchen and said, "I can do it myself, honestly. I just need the bulb." But Donald was already bustling in on a gust of warm onion-scented air, mopping the sweat from his bald head with a paper towel. His apron said WHAT'S COOKING, GOOD LOOKIN'?

"At your service! Let me just get my burners turned off and— My golly, we are just as busy as two bees today! There's another car pulling up out front. You want to talk to them, missus, while I help Carnegie here? Hello, India. What's new in the news?"

He chortled to himself at that, and explained, "She's with the newspaper, y'know."

I confirmed that I did know and was protesting again about the lightbulb when the room suddenly filled up with large men. One of them was a uniformed police officer, another was Jeff Austin, and the third, a lean and stoop-shouldered fellow in jacket and tie, was holding up an identification card and staring at me with an utter absence of expression on his dark, narrow, pockmarked face.

"Detective Lieutenant Anthony Orozco, Washington State Patrol. Are you Carnegie Kincaid?"

I allowed that I was, and he said, "May I ask why you changed your domicile?"

"My...Oh, you mean why did I move here?" *To hide from my future stepsisters* didn't seem like a plausible answer. "Well, I'm planning this wedding, and the bride and groom are going to be staying here, so I wanted to check it out...." That sounded lame, so I added, "Why shouldn't I move where I want, anyway?"

"You should have notified us. Would you accompany me to your lodgings, please?"

"What's going on?"

"Please."

He wouldn't say more, and Jeff Austin gave me a reassuring nod from behind him, so we trooped outside. I led the way past the hideous ceramic owl lamp and under the repulsive macramé owl hangings and over to owl-free 6C, stammering questions all the while.

"This is about Guy Price, right? Do we have to do this now? I've already told Deputy Austin everything I know, but I'd be happy to—"

"Please take a seat," said the detective. He spoke with punctilious formality, but his face was still expressionless.

Jeff stayed outside to deal with India and Donald, who had shown an unseemly eagerness to follow. I was grateful for that, anyway. I sat at the desk chair, but the cops stayed on their feet.

"Thank you," said Orozco. He produced a sheet of paper and intoned, "You are hereby commanded to go to 808 Owl's Roost Road in the County of San Juan in the State of Washington—"

"But I'm already here!"

"'You' means us," said the other cop helpfully. "It's a search warrant."

"Oh. I see." But I didn't. "Why do you need to search—"

Orozco cleared his throat thunderously and began again. "You are hereby commanded . . . "

The search-warrant thing wasn't like on TV. Nobody said, "Freeze!" and everybody was painstakingly polite and not so much as a clothes hanger in 6C was touched until Detective Orozco read me the entire search warrant aloud.

The warrant was quite wordy and rather tedious to listen to, so by the time he read the second one, which kept referring to "said vehicle," I wasn't really following. But the gist of it struck home once they asked me to step outside and I saw my poor Scarlet rolling backward up the driveway chained to a tow truck.

"Hey! Hey wait, I've got a meeting to go to!"

I jogged after them, waving my arms in vain, as said vehicle disappeared into the trees. As the truck changed gears onto the main road, I staggered to a halt and stood there swearing. Children of the merchant marine can really swear.

"You'll get it back in a day or two," said Jeff. He had followed me up the driveway with India Doyle trotting along behind him. Donald and Pamela must have returned to the office. I wondered how they felt about the occupant of 6C now, and decided not to inquire.

"We're done with this," said Jeff, handing me my purse. "Did you say a meeting? I can call you a taxi. It might take a little while, but—"

"I'll take you," said India, ready and willing to pursue her scoop. "And I won't ask you a thing unless you say it's OK."

I ignored her and continued to stare at Jeff in disbelief. "You think I killed Guy. You think *I* killed Guy? *Me*?"

"Of course I don't, not personally." He gave a weak smile. "But Kimmie Winter made a big deal to Orozco about your being in Price's bedroom, and he came down on us hard for not getting a warrant yesterday. I'm sorry about this."

"But I'm not under arrest, right? I can go about my business?"

"Oh, sure. In fact I'm sure your room is clean, so you can probably get back in there soon. It only takes a long time if we find something like—"

"Deputy Austin!" barked Orozco from the porch of my erstwhile home. His voice carried, but his language stayed formal. "Could you join us, please? We seem to have some blood in here."

Chapter Fourteen

Rather than miss my meeting, I let India drive me back to Roche Harbor in her salt-rusted Volkswagen bug.

"Maybe you can get a different car now," she said helpfully, grinding through the gears. "That SUV must get, like, two miles to the gallon. Reliance on fossils fuels is just a—"

"I didn't pick the damn car," I snapped. "Let's just hold the conversation for a while, all right? I need to focus on this wedding."

I also needed time to rethink the idea of stonewalling India. Predictably enough, a small plastic Buddha sat impassively on her dashboard, and I stared at it and pondered. *Now that I'm a suspect, I have a personal stake in discovering Guy Price's killer. And who better to help me do that than a local reporter?* 

Roche Harbor's marina is like a miniature of Friday Harbor's, and the place itself is much smaller as well, a resort village rather than a town. The stately white-porticoed Hotel de Haro stands on a slope above the water, presiding over the modern cottages and condos like a white-gowned dowager with a gaggle of girls.

"You may have hot tubs and Internet connections and such," she seemed to say to the modern lodgings, "but Teddy Roosevelt slept *here*." Roche Harbor village has various shops and restaurants to tempt the tourists and, of most interest to me, two exquisite and bride-pleasing Victorian gardens. These were being crisscrossed on this sunny day by strolling visitors, who were also wandering up the hill to visit the private chapel, the charmingly named Our Lady of Good Voyage. Many a couple had begun their matrimonial voyage in Roche Harbor, and Eddie wanted a piece of the action.

I parked India at an outdoor espresso bar and went in search of the resort's special-events manager. But just as I feared, that gentleman was getting along fine without me and Eddie—and he hadn't even heard yet that I was suspected of murder.

"I appreciate the thought," he said, handing me back my business card, "but as you can see, we're quite well staffed."

I thanked him for his time, made a note to cancel my other appointments, and rejoined India. She had moved to a table in the shade, where she was sipping herb tea and inscribing haiku in her notebook.

"What's a two-syllable word for what trees are like?"

"Leafy," I said. "Branching. Verdant. You want to talk about Guy?"

"Heck, yeah!" She flipped eagerly to a blank page. "Let's start with how the two of you first met."

"No, let's start with a deal." I put the flat of my hand over the paper. "I'm sorry to let you down here, India, but there isn't any 'two of us.' I met Guy Price for the first time in my life on Sunday, I was snug in my bed all Sunday night, and when I went for a walk early Monday I came across him by accident just before he died."

"But the police—"

"The police are so far off base they can't even see the base.

But if you help me figure out who really killed Guy, so we can point them in the right direction, I'll give you an exclusive interview with his last words and everything. How's that?"

"Wow, he had last words?"

"Yep. But you can't print anything before I say so. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes. Yes, absolutely."

We shook hands solemnly, and for all India's irritating flakiness, I took her at her word.

"All right, then. Just before he died, Guy asked me for something to write with so that he could warn someone."

"Who?" Her eyes were owl-sized. "What about?"

"I have no idea. But maybe you do. I heard a rumor he was dealing drugs—"

"That too?"

"What do you mean, too?"

She toyed with her perfume amulet. "Well, I always kind of wondered about Guy and blackmail."

"Blackmail!"

"Uh-huh. Seems like he was always snooping around where he didn't belong, and sometimes he'd ask me what I'd found out about people while I was working on a story. It was just this eerie feeling I had about him. But drugs would make more sense."

"How do you mean? Wait, let me get some coffee."

The harsh, grassy smell of India's tea had been bothering me, but she'd finished it by the time I came back with my cappuccino.

"OK, go ahead. Why does Guy dealing drugs make sense to you?" Not having much faith in her eerie feelings, I skipped over the blackmail theory. "Is there much of a drug trade on the island?" "Sure. Canada's only fifteen miles from here, and everybody knows there's smuggling. I think most of it goes on to Los Angeles or wherever, but—" She nibbled on her lower lip. "You know, I just remembered something. Guy asked to borrow my boat once, and he offered me three hundred dollars in hundred-dollar bills! That sounds like a drug dealer, doesn't it?"

"Maybe. You have a boat?"

"Just a little Mako outboard, nineteen feet. No cabin or anything, so I don't take her out when it's rough. But she helps me commune with the sea. Sometimes I turn my cell phone off and just drift. I named her *Sedna*. That's the Inuit goddess of the ocean."

"Really." I myself preferred to commune with a hot shower, but to each her own. I returned to the more pertinent point. "So you loaned *Sedna* to Guy?"

"No way!" She tossed her hair. "He had this weird aura, you know, kind of dark. I didn't want him messing up *Sedna*'s spirit force."

"Right. Of course not." Someone came to clear our table then and glanced pointedly at the other people waiting for seats. I stood up. "Let's take a walk, shall we?"

As we passed the gardens, admiring their overblown latesummer glory, a man rose casually from one of the benches and sauntered along parallel to us. His round pale face looked familiar, but as India said, it was a small island.

I steered her out along the main dock of the marina. Sleek luxury yachts shone in the sun, their owners sipping cocktails in the cockpits, and smaller boats bobbed at their moorings. All along the pristine white railings small American and Canadian flags flickered in the breeze. Such a bright, festive place to talk about murder. "I suppose Guy could have been storing drugs for someone who did have a boat," I said.

"And then he stole some for himself and they shot him! You always hear about revenge killings with drug dealers."

India seemed to have separated Guy Price, the person, from Guy the abstract figure in this hypothetical drama. But that's what I needed to do myself, if I was going to unearth the truth.

"I don't know," I said doubtfully. "When Guy went out that night, I was sure it was for pleasure and not for business. And then the way he was killed..."

We stopped at the end of the dock, and I glanced around to be sure no one was listening. A father and daughter were feeding the gulls some distance behind us, and beyond them I saw the moonfaced man again, apparently inspecting one of the yachts. He didn't look like a yachtsman, though. In any case, they were all out of hearing.

"Guy wasn't shot," I told India quietly. "He was stabbed. In the back."

"Oh, jeez." She gulped, but pressed on with her theorizing. "I don't suppose he was mugged, way out there in the woods?"

"Not unless the mugger was taking a midnight stroll. In fact, I don't see how anyone could have come across Guy accidentally. Someone deliberately met him at the mausoleum and stabbed him."

"That doesn't sound like drug dealers, does it? It sounds more personal." India leaned on the rail and unstoppered the perfume vial to dab at her throat. The scent was rank and musky, and I wondered which religion du jour it sprang from. Then she came upright with a gasp. "Personal or else *ritual*. Maybe it was the Masons!" "What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you know?" She plunged an arm into her shoulder bag, an oversize piece of Peruvian weaving with long floppy drawstrings, and rummaged around inside. "John McMillin built all kinds of Masonic symbols into Afterglow Vista, and the Masons have secret ceremonies there sometimes. Guy was always snooping in other people's business. Maybe he spied on them and so they killed him! I've got a thing in here about it."

She produced a small pamphlet and began to read bits of it aloud. "The broken column represents an unfinished life...winding path is the way of the spirit...seven steps for the seven liberal arts..."

"I really doubt that," I said, but she kept on reading. "Hey, would you listen to me?"

She looked up, coltish eyes bulging in excitement. "What?"

"India, my *dentist* is a Mason, for crying out loud. They don't go around murdering people."

"Well, some people think they do. I read this one book about a secret international plan to—"

"Some people think a lot of things." *Oh, Lord, I've hooked up with a conspiracy nut.* "Let's get serious here. Did Guy have any enemies that you know of? Not that he'd rendezvous with an enemy in the middle of the night."

"A rendezvous," breathed India, savoring the word. "Maybe it was a lovers' quarrel."

"A woman scorned," I murmured. "Guy said something about hell hath no fury. I wonder if he was thinking about a woman scorned."

"You mean a man, don't you?"

I recalled those little electrical currents I'd felt. India must

be low wattage. "One or the other. Do you know anything about his personal life?"

"Not really. But I could ask around."

"That would be good. Tell people you're writing a profile about him or something."

"OK. What are you doing next?"

"First off, I need wheels. Could you drive me to Frugal Fred's? And after that I've got a wedding to work on." She looked puzzled, so I explained about Made in Heaven.

"What a fabulous job!" she whinnied. "So romantic."

"Yeah, today I'm going to romantically arrange for a portapotty. Listen, you go ahead to your car. I'll be there in a minute."

Once she'd left, I walked up behind the moonfaced man and tapped him on the shoulder. If I was wrong about this, I'd just ask for the time, but when he turned around I knew that I wasn't. I really had seen him before, in Jeff Austin's patrol car yesterday—only then he was in uniform. *What do you know, I'm being followed.* It was a nasty thought.

"Hello, officer," I said evenly. No point being rude. "Listen, I'm going to Friday Harbor to rent myself another car, so when you guys are done with the SUV, would you just return it to Frugal Fred's?"

Moonface reddened and groped for words, but I just gave him a big smile and walked away, absurdly proud of my petty victory. *Suspect me, will you?* 

India was nice and quiet on the way to Friday Harbor, and I was lost in thought about Lily's wedding. I was determined not to let this fiasco interfere with her big day. No paging through the photo album years from now, wincing at the memory of the marriage license that Carnegie forgot to pick up, or the full-bladdered guests searching for the facilities that Carnegie forgot to arrange. If ever I wanted a wedding to go perfectly, this was the one. No foul-ups and no glitches.

But the first glitch came at Frugal Fred's, after I sent India on her way. Fred—a morose and goateed youth whose name was George—had just rented out his very last car.

"There's, like, two big family reunions starting up today," he said, "and they got 'em all. But don't you have that SUV Owen Winter ordered for you? Aw, dude, don't tell me you wrecked it."

"Nothing like that," I assured him, but didn't elaborate. Might as well preserve what shred of privacy I had left, until the police delivered said vehicle back to him and blew my cover. "I just need another car. You don't have anything at all?"

"Well, there's like a Hummer out there, if you think you could handle it." He looked at me dubiously. "It's a lot of horses."

I groaned. I hate those things. The gas-guzzling was bad enough, but the thought of people playing soldier on the way to the mall or the video store, let alone on these peaceful island byways, made me gag.

I was desperate, however. "Let me take a look at it."

George left the counter and pushed open the door to the parking lot. Outside in the low sunshine, the lucky guy who beat me to the last car stood with his back to us, bending over the trunk to stow his suitcase. He wore snug jeans and a Red Sox cap, and at the sight of him I stopped so fast that George ran into me. The cap could have been anyone's, of course, but not that fine-looking rear view.

The lucky guy was Aaron Gold.

Chapter Fifteen

There should have been fireworks, or at least violins. Some sort of cinematic crescendo as we fell into each other's arms and melted into a long, passionate, rewind-and-replay-worthy kiss.

Yeah, right. Instead there was me stammering "What are *you* doing here?" while Aaron jerked around in surprise and said, "Why *shouldn't* I be here?" and Fred aka George said, "Look, dudes, if you just chill I can call around for another car."

Aaron and I dispensed with George and then we did kiss, but awkwardly. He hugged me with his left arm, and afterward he kept the right side of his face turned away from me. That meant we weren't making much eye contact, and eye contact would have been useful given my idiotic response to his sudden appearance on the island.

Being suspected of murder was playing hell with my social graces.

"Aaron, when did you get to Seattle? Why didn't you call me?" I heard the shrillness in my voice and tried again. "If I'd known you were coming, I'd have..."

"You'd have what?"

"I don't know, hired a band. Had my hair done. Deported my Italian gigolo."

The joke fell flat. Aaron looked at the ground and tugged

the right cuff of his long-sleeved shirt down over the edge of what looked like a cast or a brace. It was way too warm for long sleeves today.

"I flew out from Boston last night," he said. "Lily wanted to tell you I was coming, but I asked her not to."

"So you could surprise me?"

"So I could back out if I wanted to. Three guesses why."

Aaron looked me full in the face then, and slowly turned the other cheek. A dark and tentacled scar crawled out of his collar and up his neck to splay along his jaw, as if trying to claw its way into his eye. The scar was thick and raised and quite remarkably hideous. Sickening, even. I couldn't look away.

"Sorry, Stretch," he said.

That tore it. I started bawling, and if Aaron thought I was only upset about his face, the fact that I blubbered the words *murder* and *search warrant* soon disabused him of the idea. We ended up sitting in the rental car while I poured out the whole story of Guy Price and went through all three of my handkerchiefs.

The third hankie was really for Aaron. Not for the scar, but for the ordeal he'd been through, and especially for the unfamiliar look of bitterness in his eyes. I didn't tell him that, of course. Even as rattled as I was, I held on to a few of my wits.

"So I can't go back to the B-and-B yet," I said with a final snuffle, "and I don't want to go back to Owen's house. There's this reporter who's helping me, India Doyle, but—"

"Helping you with the wedding?"

"No, with finding out who killed Guy."

The look in his eyes now was quite familiar: wariness mixed with amusement. "You're kidding, right?"

"Of course I'm not kidding. The police are never going to figure this out if they're concentrating on me."

Aaron closed his eyes and opened his mouth, then reversed the procedure with an exasperated sigh. "Listen, Stretch, the food on that ferry looked like bus-station stuff, so I'm starving. Let's get some dinner and— What?"

George was peering into the driver's window. "Dudes, I gotta close. You still fighting about the car?"

Aaron smiled for the first time, making the scar pucker and twist. "I'm taking the car and this other dude too. Go ahead and close up."

ZZ's was the only restaurant I could think of. As I directed us down Spring Street and onto First, I tilted the rearview mirror and dabbed at my face.

"Lord, I look like a train wreck."

"Join the club," Aaron cracked, and I actually snickered. Then he noticed me stop myself. "Go ahead, Stretch, laugh. Humor is an important element in the rehabilitative process. Says so in all the articles."

"Been reading up on the subject?" I asked, trying hard to sound casual.

"You bet. Shock, denial, grief, anger, all those phases. They interest me strangely."

"So you're in the humor phase now?"

He did a deft three-point job into a tight parking space, mostly using his left arm. "Only sometimes. I rotate through just to keep it interesting." He peered up at ZZ's awning. "Let me guess, this place makes the world's best barbecue."

"Very astute, Watson."

I was doing so well with the lighthearted tone, then I blew it by fumbling at the restaurant door. I was trying to save Aaron from having to open it for me, but I bumped into him instead. We did a brief do-si-do, then he barred my way by reaching out his right arm. "Would you just let me?" he snapped. "It's not very strong yet, but it still works. And give me a minute to eat something before we talk, OK?"

I went in ahead of him, flushing hotly. The early-supper crowd was sparse and I was relieved not to see ZZ around. I wasn't up to his hearty hospitality at the moment. We ordered brisket sandwiches, and when a basket of corn bread arrived first Aaron made short work of two hefty squares.

Then, with some food to cushion them, he gulped down a couple of capsules from a bottle in his pocket. Not quite surreptitiously, but in a way that warned me not to ask what they were. I could guess, though: painkillers.

"Now," he said, "let's start again. Tell me, without tears if possible, exactly what the police have said and done."

So I told how I'd been questioned, how I'd put Adrienne briefly and mistakenly under suspicion because of her watch, and how I'd ambushed Moonface at the Roche Harbor marina. I had missed lunch, so once the sandwiches came I had to talk between bites, but I managed.

I also managed to forget about the scar. E-mail is so flat and impersonal, but Aaron in person was still Aaron, and all the unscarred parts of him looked damn good.

"So now the police are following me!" I concluded, with dramatic indignation. "Owen's daughter made them think I was involved with Guy somehow, and now they're following me. Can you believe that?"

"Of course I can. They'd be fools not to."

He wiped ZZ's savory sauce from his lips with a redcheckered napkin, and I was so distracted by the thought of kissing him again that it took a moment for his words to register.

"What? Whose side are you on?"

"Well, look at it from their angle. This guy Price is going

along...That's funny, isn't it? This guy Price is named Guy Price."

"Never mind that," I said, increasingly irked. "What angle?"

"OK, Guy Price is going along month after month, year after year, not getting killed, and then this woman from Seattle shows up. She's seen in his bedroom, reason unknown—"

"I was just using his e-mailer!"

Aaron held up a silencing hand. "She's seen in his bedroom, and the very next morning she comes running out to the road, covered in blood, saying she just happened to be traipsing around the woods at dawn and just happened to find the man's corpse. Why wouldn't the cops follow you?"

"But—"

"But nothing." He drained his water glass and set it down. "You're the logical suspect. I bet they've tweezered up every hair in your clothing by now, looking for a match to the victim's. For all they know the two of you were longtime lovers, or estranged spouses in a custody battle, or partners in some criminal enterprise, or who knows what else."

This wasn't going at all the way I expected. I hate it when that happens. I took a pull on my beer. "So you don't think I'm being hounded and harassed?"

"Nope."

"But you are going to help me find the real killer."

"Nope again." He waved for the waitress. "Two coffees, please. Unless you want decaf, Stretch?"

"Regular's fine," I said sullenly.

The coffee, when it came, was borne by the slender little hands of ZZ's granddaughter.

"Hi, Carnegie," she said, but she wasn't looking at me. Instead she leaned closer to Aaron than was strictly necessary, handing him his mug with an impish smile. "Who's your friend?" "Aaron Gold, meet Peggy Nickles," I said dryly. "She's going to bake Lily's wedding cake."

"Hi, Peggy."

Aaron's voice was neutral, but I saw the glint in his eye. The top button of the girl's uniform had come undone—no doubt by accident—and a lacy red bra peeped from the opening.

"Pleased to meet you," she said. "Gosh, what happened to your face?"

Someone hit the Pause button in my brain, and apparently in Aaron's too, as Peggy stared at him like a curious child. But the endless awkward moment was only a moment, and then Aaron spoke.

"I had a run-in with a forest fire, and the fire won."

"Ooh, that must have been scary." Peggy gave a delicious little shiver, and a little more red lace showed. "But, you know, it actually looks kind of cool. Like a gangster or something. Are you going to have plastic surgery?"

I caught my breath. The same question had been in my mind, of course, but I'd been too leery of trespassing to ask it.

"Probably," said Aaron. He sounded almost nonchalant. "They can't do it until the scar tissue 'matures.' Could be a year or even longer. Meanwhile, I've quit smoking!"

The two of them laughed, and it struck me that he was more at ease with Peggy than with me. But was that a good thing or a bad thing? I was pondering that as ZZ appeared behind her shoulder, looking stern and patriarchal.

"You've got tables waiting, young lady. Get along."

Peggy sighed and followed him away, but not before she dropped Aaron a provocative wink. He winked back, and I kicked him under the table.

"A little young for you, isn't she?"

"Hey, I'm on vacation. Her boss was kind of rude, though."

"He's not just her boss, he's her grandfather, so watch yourself." I sipped thoughtfully at my coffee. "You know, ZZ thinks that Guy Price was a drug dealer. I suppose it's possible that's why he was killed, but—"

"A drug hit?" Aaron scowled and rapped down his cup. "Hold it right there. Let's talk about this outside."

Then he dropped some bills on the table and walked out of the restaurant. I couldn't have been more surprised if he'd knocked over the table or thrown his coffee on the floor. The Aaron I knew simply didn't behave like this.

I followed him out to the sidewalk. "What was all that? I don't care how scarred you are, don't *ever* treat me that way again."

He made a brushing-aside motion with one hand. "Fine, whatever. Sorry. But are you out of your mind, to stick your nose into a drug hit? This is a small place, Carnegie. Start asking questions about something like this and the word will go out so fast you'll get whiplash. You found the corpse, for God's sake! You could have seen something, or even someone. They won't know for sure, but they'll make damn sure you can't testify."

Aaron didn't raise his voice, but the intensity of his tone caught the attention of a few passersby—and one of them was Moonface, who was pretending to look in a shop window. I was still being tailed! I scowled at him, then got into the car and slammed the door. Aaron followed suit.

"First of all," I said, "we don't even know there is a 'they.' I think Guy was killed over something more personal than drugs, and I'm going to find out what. You can help me or not."

"Not," he said fiercely, and the accelerator whined as he turned the key too hard. "Where to now?"

Good question, on a couple of levels.

"Back to the bed-and-breakfast, I guess. Turn right up here and I'll direct you." I deliberately slowed my breathing, trying to speak calmly. "If the police aren't finished there, I can always go over to Owen's. Where are you staying?"

Aaron didn't answer. He might have been busy with the traffic coming off the ferry, or he might not have heard me. *Or he might be expecting to stay with me*, I thought, wincing inside. And I'd like that, if he'd quit being so belligerent. I'd like that a lot. Maybe if I just invite him...

But, not for the first time in my life, I was wrong. Aaron followed my prompts to Roche Harbor Road, merged into traffic, then said, "Lily got me a room at some hotel. Harold, Harrow, something like that. I guess she's staying there too."

"Hotel de Haro. It's a great place, you'll like it. Built in the 1880s, full of antiques—"

"You mean creaky furniture and paper-thin walls."

"I mean, it sounds really nice. Aaron, what's going on? Why are you acting this way?"

Just ahead, a side road led off along a grassy field scattered with trees. Aaron turned into it and pulled up by a barbedwire fence. We got out of the car. To our left the sun was sinking into veils of gold and saffron cloud, and above us the sky had that luminous, expanded quality that tells you the ocean is nearby.

Aaron stood with one hand on a fence post, looking into the sky with his jaw set. Then he pounded his fist on the post and turned back to me.

"What you're doing is dangerous, Carnegie. Dangerous, as in getting hurt. You don't seem to realize..." He shook his head, and a lock of black hair fell across his brow.

"Realize what?"

"What it feels like to get hurt. Everything's different afterward."

I was beginning to understand. The hostility, the rude behavior, the reluctance to come back to Seattle. It wasn't just Aaron's confidence that was shaken. Being trapped in that fire had violated his trust in life, his fundamental sense of wellbeing, and he was still regaining his balance.

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing, just held out my arms. Aaron stepped into them and then pulled me to him so tightly that I gasped. He leaned back against the fence post and I leaned into him, eyes closed, for a long time, just listening to him breathe.

Then the breathing sounds grew loud and weird. I opened my eyes—and yelped in fright. A face like a skinny camel's was hanging over Aaron's shoulder, almost nose-to-nose with me. I saw dark fathomless eyes fringed by flirtatious lashes, and above them two twitching ears that swiveled forward and then flattened flat back when Aaron looked around and gave a startled shout.

"What the hell?"

The affronted creature reared its head, wrinkled its cleft upper lip, and issued a high humming noise.

"Duck!" I cried.

Too late. The llama nailed us both.

Chapter Sixteen

Llama spit, I have since learned, is not actually spit, but a portion of the stomach contents expelled by the animal to demonstrate dominance, frustration, or fear. What I learned immediately, and unforgettably, is that llama spit is sparse and green, and that it stinks like you would not believe. We're talking about a throat-strangling, eyes-watering, my-kingdomfor-a-bath kind of major, serious stench.

Aaron rolled down all the windows and we zoomed away, hoping the air would help. It didn't.

"Take a right here...another right...now a left...Oh, thank God."

I couldn't bear the thought of stumbling into the Hotel de Haro reeking like this, so the sight of the Owl's Roost driveway devoid of cop cars, was a huge relief. I had my key out before I opened the car door, and rushed across my porch and into 6C with Aaron right on my heels.

"You first," he gasped gallantly, wrenching at his shirt buttons.

I didn't demur, but closed the bathroom door, stripped, and stepped into the shower. It took the whole guest bottle of shampoo before I could breathe normally again.

I could tell the room had been searched, from the tidy

grouping of my normally chaotic toiletries, but my short traveling robe was where I'd left it on the back of the door. I wrapped myself up and cleared the way for Aaron. He was already down to jeans and bare feet, and he'd opened the room's windows but not the door to the hallway, thus sparing the other guests. Good man.

While he scrubbed down, I put on slippers and dug out a plastic bag for our sullied shirts. The room smelled almost normal by the time he emerged, his hair dripping into his eyes and an Owl's Roost towel knotted around his hips. He held a wrist brace in his left hand, the straps dangling.

"I think I'll live. You OK?"

I nodded, mute.

"So what's the matter?" He looked down at himself. "Oh."

The scar on Aaron's face was only a token of the damage caused by the fire and the crash. His chest was marred too, horribly, and the dark hair on his right forearm was seamed with pale lines and angry red patches where the shattered bones had been fitted back together.

"Oh, Aaron."

His face was stone. "Don't stare, Stretch, it's rude. Just get my bag from the car, would you?"

I brought it and we dressed in silence, our backs to each other. A gentle gray twilight was falling. We heard muted footsteps overhead and then distant voices and car engines as the other guests went out for dinner. The trees outside the open windows rustled and grew still.

Then came more silence, which I had to force myself to break. We spoke at once.

"Aaron, do you want—"

"I guess I should—" He tried again. "Do I want what?"

"Um, do you want directions to the hotel?"

"Yeah," he said flatly. "Yeah, I guess I do."

I was at the desk pulling out the map when my cell phone chirped.

"Hey, girl," said Lily's voice. "Is he there? You forgive me for not warning you?" She sounded cheery enough, but I could tell she was worried. "Is everything OK?"

"Fine." I glanced over to where Aaron was tying his shoes. "Everything's just fine."

"Oh, *good*. He stayed at my place last night, but when I dropped him at the ferry he looked like...well, I wasn't sure he'd get on it. So you two are all right with each other?"

"Yes, mother," I teased her. "You can relax now."

Aaron looked at me across the width of the bed. A long, considering look.

"Relax, my ass," said Lily. "Do all your brides get butterflies this big?"

"Giant butterflies. Pterodactyls."

Aaron came around the bed toward me. Lily was still speaking, but it was hard to focus on her words. The room felt very warm.

"Last night I dreamed there was a tornado during the ceremony!" she said, laughing.

"What? Um, honestly, everything's going to be beautiful. The lavender fields are...beautiful. Lily, can I call you back tomorrow? Fine. 'Bye." I set down the phone and looked into Aaron's eyes.

It might have happened then. We might have fallen into bed and erased the last few months. But as we stood there hesitating, something changed. He began to speak, stopped, and I saw his Adam's apple move as he swallowed nervously. *Aaron Gold, nervous?* The very idea must have done something to my own expression. I looked away, he took a step back, and then someone was knocking briskly at the hallway door and the moment was gone.

"There you are!" said Pamela, her plump arms piled with folded white terry cloth. "I completely forgot to tell you, but we ask everyone to turn in their damp towels by ten in the morning because that's when we do laundry." She paused for breath. "But I thought I'd bring you an extra set now, in case you want to sleep late tomorrow after that little fuss with the police ...?"

Apparently the price of clean towels was information. And since we'd just run through every towel in the place, I opted for full disclosure.

"It was a bit of a fuss, wasn't it?" I said brightly. "The police are investigating me because I'm the one who found Guy's... who found him."

From Pamela's look of distress I sensed that she, unlike her husband, wasn't hungry for the gory details of the murder scene. But she had a right to know why 6C had been ransacked.

"They searched my room, I guess you know that, but I hope it didn't disturb your other guests. I'm terribly sorry, Pamela. If you want me to leave—"

"Absolutely not," she said, with a valiant little scowl. It was unimpressive, like a Pekingese baring its fangs, but I was glad to have a defender nonetheless. "You're our guest, and I'm sure that O'Roscoe or whatever his name is will come to his senses. You wouldn't hurt a soul, I can tell that just by looking at you."

"Which means you're an excellent judge of character," said

Aaron from behind me. His tone, like mine, was a shade too hearty. "Pamela, is it? I'm Aaron Gold. Great place you have here."

She stared at his scar and then looked away in poorly disguised pity. How many hundreds of times had Aaron endured that by now? But even pity didn't trump Pamela's keen eye for a dollar.

"I'm so glad you like it," she said to the air beyond his shoulder, and then turned to me. "You do know there's a surcharge for a second person?"

"I was just leaving," said Aaron. "Wasn't I, Stretch?"

"I guess so."

Pamela, damn her, took her own sweet time leaving, so she watched as Aaron picked up his duffel bag and moved toward the unit's back door.

"Wait," I said.

He waited, but I couldn't think what to say next.

"See you tomorrow?" he offered.

"Yes! Yes, there's a lunch at Owen's place. Maybe you could give me a ride there?"

"Fine. What time?"

"Noon. See you then?"

He didn't look at me. "Fine."

My phone chirped again as Aaron went out his door and Pamela at last closed hers. I thought it might be Lily again, but it was Mike Graham instead—and the bridegroom wasn't calling about butterflies. In fact he was still at work. I could make out phones and voices in the background, and Mike himself was in official detective mode.

"I just saw the homicide report. Are you all right?"

"More or less."

"Did they offer you victim's assistance counseling? That's for witnesses too, you know."

"I guess they don't have counseling for suspects."

"What do you mean, suspects?"

"I mean me." I recapped the events of the past few days. "So tell me, do I need a lawyer?"

"Only if you really think you're being harassed." I was relieved to note that my innocence was a given, at least with Mike. "But I've worked with Orozco. He's a good man. He'll have your background down here checked out, and—hold on."

I heard his palm cover the receiver, a muffled exchange, and then he was back.

"I should go. Don't worry, once it's been established that you didn't know the victim, you'll be in the clear."

"But they've got me under surveillance, Mike! I'm probably being surveyed, or whatever you call it, by every cop on the island."

He chuckled. "I doubt that. They've got bigger fish to fry." "What kind of fish?"

A disconcerted pause, perhaps as Mike remembered that he was talking to a civilian.

"Never mind. Forget it, OK? Just sit tight and cooperate, and I'll see you soon." He hurried on as if to cover his slip. "Unless you want to come back to Seattle and postpone the wedding? I hate to do that to Lily, but if this has been too rough on you—"

"That's sweet of you to offer, Mike, but don't even think about it. The plans are all set and there's no reason to change them."

Of course, my personal plans included pointing Orozco's investigation in a more accurate direction, but it seemed the

better part of valor not to mention that. Mike could be so fussy about the general public getting involved in police work. You'd think he'd be grateful, really.

"Are you sure?" he was asking.

"Sure I'm sure. And don't forget," I said, looking sadly at my empty bed, "I've got Aaron here to hold my hand."

Chapter Seventeen

I spent Wednesday night not sleeping and Thursday morning on the phone.

First I canceled my other marketing appointments, then I called Eddie to tell him I'd done so. I expected a bit of grumbling, but got exponentially more than that.

"What the hell kind of trouble are you getting into on that island?" he sputtered. "You know who's downstairs right now?"

My heart sank. "The police?"

"The goddamn police, that's who's downstairs! And they've already been up here, going through the files and asking me all kinds of goddamn questions. Who the hell is this Guy Price?"

I explained the situation, and then explained it again, and by the time I got done, the sputtering had almost subsided.

"How's Louise taking all this?"

"Well, I haven't told her about the search warrant, so don't you either, all right? I don't want to upset her, especially now with—" I caught myself. Best to let Mom tell him herself that she planned to marry Owen. "Especially now when she's having such a nice time."

"That makes sense," he said grudgingly. "But try and stay

out of trouble, would you? If it's not one thing it's another with you. Of all the—"

"Eddie, I've got to go. Aaron's here to take me to lunch."

"So he finally showed up, huh? About time."

No kidding. "Good-bye, Eddie."

Aaron parked his car in the space next to the porch and got out. He had dressed for the occasion in sharply creased khakis and a summery shirt. A long-sleeved shirt.

"Could I get a glass of water, Stretch?"

"Of course."

I almost asked him how he was feeling, but that was obvious—he used the water to wash down more pain pills. I refrained from comment, and I also refrained from telling him about the police searching my houseboat. If Aaron didn't want to help, fine. India and I would figure this out for ourselves.

Being a Seattleite, I'd brought a jacket just in case, but once at the car I tossed it in the backseat. The San Juans are in the "rain shadow" of the Olympic Mountains, and today was another typically sunny afternoon.

"Gorgeous day, isn't it?" I said.

"Beats Boston."

Having exhausted that topic, we fell silent until we reached the main road. Then Aaron, obviously groping for another one, said, "Hey, fill me in about the Winters. You said Owen has a daughter?"

"Two. And two is plenty. Wait'll you meet them."

This was better; the drive from the Owl's Roost to the house on Afterglow Drive was barely long enough to explain my tumultuous relations with the Winter family. But I talked fast and got it all in, from my harrowing plane ride with Adrienne to my mother's engagement to her new fiancé's barely suppressed streak of anger.

Meanwhile I kept checking the rearview mirror for police cars, marked or unmarked. But if Moonface was back there following us, I didn't spot him. Maybe he was learning on the job.

Aaron, ever the reporter, kept his questions about the Winters short and to the point. But before we got out of the car there was one question I had to ask him.

"Tell me," I said, my fingertips on his arm. I could feel the strap of his wrist brace beneath the thin cotton of his shirt. "Are you really OK with this? It sounds like you haven't been socializing much since..."

"Since the hospital. Tell you the truth, Carnegie, I haven't been socializing at all. But I've got to start somewhere, don't I?" He grinned a little, showing a flash of the old Aaron. "Besides, I like your mom, so I'm going to find out if this new guy is good enough for her. First I'll ask him about their sex life, and then—"

I smacked him on the shoulder and climbed out of the car. "You behave yourself. I've got enough trouble with these people, so help me out here. Play up to them, OK?"

"Anything you say, Stretch. Send in the clowns."

But it wasn't a clown who answered the door. It was a dragon.

"Well!" said Adrienne, startled, and blinked at Aaron from behind her round red glasses. She wore a tailored blouse in the same shade of red, stylish white trousers, and a far less furious expression than when I'd seen her last. "I didn't know we had another guest coming."

Then I was the one who was startled, because Aaron started playing up in a big way.

"Aaron Gold, here for the wedding. Hope you don't mind me barging in." He offered Adrienne his very best smile, the one he keeps under the bar for special customers. "Say, are you the one who restored a vintage Piper Cub? I did a piece on classic Cubs for *The Boston Globe* once..."

As we followed her though the house Aaron laid it on with a trowel, and by the time we emerged onto the back deck he had the dragon nibbling from the palm of his hand. It was like watching a lion tamer at work.

Out on the deck, Owen was reading *The Wall Street Journal* and Mom was arranging a jar of wildflowers, lacy white daisies and pale blue chicory and the creamy heads of Queen Anne's lace. The two of them looked gracious and relaxed, and the luncheon table was positively photogenic, with bright linens striped like beach umbrellas and wineglasses twinkling in the sun.

I could just see the photo spread in *Sunset* magazine: "Island Luncheon Al Fresco" or "A Savory San Juan Spread." Now if we could just avoid "Future In-laws Feud Over Food."

"There you are, Carrie," my mother said. "And Aaron, how lovely to see you!"

She gave him a quick hug and a peck on his left cheek, without a single glance at the scar on his right. *Nicely done, Mom.* 

"I hear you have good news, Louise," said Aaron.

She blushed and nodded. "Owen, you've met Aaron Gold, haven't you?"

"Of course," said the lord of the manor in his bluff, confident way. "I remember you from Sun Valley. Lou told me how you got caught in that fire. Hell of a thing."

"Has it been dreadful, dear?"

There was no pity in Mom's voice, just friendly concern, and Aaron answered in kind.

"Dreadful to the power of ten. But I'm through the worst of it." He changed the subject, a bit awkwardly, by looking up at the rear facade of the house. "This is a remarkable building. Turn of the century?"

"Right around 1905," said Owen, gratified. "Down at the heels when I found it, but the remodel did wonders."

"You kept the best of the architecture, though," said Aaron. "That's good to see in these old Victorians. Maybe I could get a tour later on?"

"You bet. Ah, here's my other daughter. Kimberly, come meet Carrie's friend Aaron."

"Call me Kimmie," she cooed, sashaying up from the tennis court with racket in hand.

Kimmie's little white skirt and halter top displayed a golden crescent of midriff and about a mile of leg. She flicked a glance at Aaron's scar, took in the rest of him with a lingering appraisal, and fluttered her lashes so hard I could feel the breeze.

"Any friend of Carrie's is a friend of mine."

She might as well have said, "Any man of hers is fair game for me." I tried to catch Aaron's eye, but he was smiling blandly and peering down Kimmie's cleavage. It occurred to me suddenly that pain pills on an empty stomach can be very relaxing.

"Sit down, all of you," said my mother, "and I'll bring out lunch. No, Owen, you stay there and visit. Carrie, come get another place setting."

They took their seats at the table, with Kimmie narrowly beating out her sister for the chair next to Aaron. He dropped me an exaggerated wink as I followed Mom inside. "You should have told me Aaron was coming after all!" she fussed, but it was a happy fussing.

"It was a last-minute thing. Here, let me take that."

I relieved her of a bowl of pasta salad and a platter of grilled chicken. There was another platter, of roasted vegetables ringed by lemon wedges, and a plate of shortbread cookies spiraled with raspberry jam.

"Wow, who made all this?"

She laughed sheepishly. "The caterer at the Hotel de Haro! Owen has an account with them, and they deliver. I'm getting so spoiled."

"Well, you deserve to be spoiled."

She patted my shoulder. "Thank you for coming, dear. I know you're making an effort, and I appreciate it. Besides, it's such fun to see our fellows together."

As she held the screen door for me, I took in the scene at the table. Mom's fellow was nodding thoughtfully at something my fellow was saying, while Kimmie and her breasts paid close attention. Then Adrienne, determined to stay in the game, handed Aaron a wineglass with the bold air of a chess player advancing a pawn.

I hurried to join them before anybody started tearing anybody's clothes off—and before I started tearing out anyone's hair.

But lunch turned out to be surprisingly pleasant after all, at least at first. Adrienne deigned to be civil to me, no doubt due to Aaron's presence, and Owen made an excellent host. I actually relaxed and enjoyed myself. As the wine flowed and the platters emptied, our conversation ranged from the Winters' house to their many summers in the San Juans to the charms of the Pacific Northwest versus those of New England.

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"I've never been there," I said. "But I'd love to—"

"Never?" Kimmie made it sound like I'd never tried indoor plumbing. She inched her chair closer to Aaron's. "I go all the time. I adore New England. The fall colors, and those quaint little Vermont fishing villages..."

"Last time I looked, Vermont was landlocked," said Adrienne dryly. "Are you sure you aren't you thinking of Maine?"

"That's what I meant," snapped Kimmie. "Dree, you're always so—"

Owen cleared his throat. "Carrie, tell us more about this wedding you're putting on. I understand it's going to be at the Nyquists' farm?"

I described the plans for Sunday's ceremony, and in a heady moment of camaraderie I invited them all to the party at ZZ's on Saturday night. Lily had already suggested this, but I'd been hesitant. Now the look on Mom's face told me I'd done just the right thing.

"Why, thank you," said Owen. "Sounds real fun."

Adrienne made a sour little grimace. "Barbecue has never been my favorite—"

But her father didn't hear her, or maybe didn't want to. He continued, "I've been wanting to ask about Made in Heaven. I admire anyone who can keep a small business going these days. Tell us how you got started with weddings."

Who could resist a flattering opening like that? As we finished our meal I told the tale of my bridal career, trying to make it brief but entertaining. Owen leaned forward to listen, Mom looked proud of her little girl, and Aaron threw in an amiable wisecrack or two.

But Kimmie sighed restlessly and let her gaze wander, and Adrienne positively bristled at my taking center stage. She listened silently at first, but she didn't stay silent for long. "So my partner Eddie is the money man," I was saying. "He keeps the books and—"

"I suppose he'll post bail if you're arrested," she said in that harsh, sardonic voice. "Having the police show up with a search warrant must have been quite a shock."

Mom dropped her fork. "Search warrant?"

"Oh, didn't you tell her?" asked Adrienne, innocently polishing her red eyeglasses on a napkin. I had a sudden vision of stamping them underfoot until the lenses splintered. "Apparently *I'm* not the prime suspect for Guy's murder anymore."

The blood drained from my mother's face, and a babble of overlapping voices arose. Mom's was dismayed and Owen's was baffled, with Kimmie giggling and Aaron protesting that it was routine, just police routine.

"I didn't say she was guilty, for heaven's sake," said Adrienne archly. "I was just making an observation."

I said nothing at all, but I was thinking furiously. How had she found out about Orozco? Same old answer, I supposed. It was a small island. I gritted my teeth and turned away, just to quell my desire to slap her.

So I was the one who spotted India Doyle trotting around the side of the house with her mane rippling in the breeze.

"Hi, there!" she sang out. "I hope I'm not interrupting." The table fell silent.

"Oops, guess I'm interrupting lunch. But that's all right, I'm fasting today. I do a juice fast for twenty-four hours every two weeks, to cleanse my system. You feel so much *lighter*..."

I didn't expect Owen to throw her out, exactly, but I did expect some kind of indignant refusal to let reporters invade his home at this touchy time. But apparently India was a familiar visitor to the Winter household, if not a universally welcome one. As she prattled on about wheat-grass juice or some damn thing, Owen reluctantly brought her a chair, and Mom poured her a tumbler of water with a kind of resigned courtesy. Adrienne, having lobbed her little grenade, merely sniffed and went inside. Kimmie gave India a desultory greeting and then busied herself trying to charm Aaron onto the tennis court.

"Just one game?" she wheedled. "If you don't play I could teach you. I'm a wonderful teacher."

"I'll just bet you are," he said, grinning lewdly. Pain pills and wine, wonderful. I kicked him under the table and he jumped. "But thanks anyway."

So Kimmie flounced off to practice her serve, and Aaron turned his tipsy attention to India.

"Carnegie was just telling me about you," he said. "I'm a reporter myself."

"A real reporter?" she squeaked. If she noticed his scar at all, she didn't show it. "I mean, for a real paper?"

"Well, fairly real . . ."

I wanted to ask what she'd learned about Guy—and I wanted in on that conversation—but Mom asked me to help her with the dessert and coffee. Once again, Owen offered to assist and she declined.

"You've been waiting on me since I got here," she said gaily. "Turnabout is fair play."

But once she had me alone in the kitchen, Mom shut the door furtively.

"Are they really going to arrest you, Carrie? I'm sure Owen knows the best lawyers—"

"Of course not! And you don't have to whisper. I told Aaron all about it, and India was there when it happened."

She rolled her eyes, the way she used to roll them at me and my brother when we tried her patience.

"India's always on the spot, isn't she? Her father is an important colleague of Owen's, so we've tried to be nice to her, but—"

"But now you can't get rid of her?"

"Exactly. Never mind India, though. What's all this about a search warrant?"

I explained, making it sound as insignificant as possible, and of course I didn't tell her about Moonface tailing me.

"So you're not worried?"

"Not a bit, and I don't want you worrying either. We'll have our visit, and Lily will have her wedding, and everything will be fine. All right?"

"All right, dear. If you say so."

We started the coffee and brought out the shortbread, to find Aaron and India with their heads together, laughing at some journalistic joke, and Owen pushing his chair back from the table.

"No dessert for me, Lou. Nice to see you, India."

"Wait," she said, "I still need to get an interview. If that's all right?"

That tight, angry look I had learned to dread came into Owen's eyes. "I thought this was a social call."

"Well, not exactly. I'm working on a profile of Guy Price, sort of an extended obituary, you know? I've been talking to different people who knew him, and I thought since you were his employer—"

"I have nothing to say for the newspaper." He stood up.

"Oh, it can be off the record," she said, rising as well, but I could have told her she was wasting her time. Owen's expression was like a thunderhead, growing darker and more threatening by the minute.

"I said, I have nothing-"

"Just general background, kind of an impression of his personality, or maybe some ideas about who else I should interview? Like if he had any special, um, romantic friends—"

"I said no, dammit!"

India stood between Owen and the kitchen door, and as he moved to get around her his foot caught in a chair leg. He shook off the chair so viciously that it crashed into the girl, making her yelp in pain and surprise. Mom, moving out of the way, bumped into me and dropped the dessert plate, sending sugary fragments and crockery shards every which way.

The screen door slammed behind Owen so hard that it bounced back open, hit the wall of the house, and then slammed shut again.

"At real papers," said Aaron, into the ensuing silence, "we call that 'No comment.'"

Chapter Eighteen

Aaron never did get his tour of the house, because Owen didn't come downstairs again. Mom followed him up while India, Aaron, and I cleaned up the mess on the deck. True to form, Kimmie just kept on thwacking her tennis balls.

After a few minutes Mom returned, to apologize with a wan smile. "He's not quite himself today...."

*Or is he showing his real self?* I wondered. Whichever it was, I resented his leaving my mother in this awkward situation.

"No problem," I told her. "We should take off anyway."

"I understand. You and Aaron must have a lot of catching up to do." She escorted the three of us through the house and paused on the veranda to say good-bye. "Aaron, you will join us for a picnic tomorrow, won't you? We're taking the *Dreamer* to the prettiest little island."

"I'd love to, but—"

In her own motherly way, she ignored his last word. "Wonderful! They're saying it might rain, but not until later in the day. I'm so happy you'll be with us."

I was too, but not so happy when India started shifting wistfully from foot to foot and looking hopeful. Mom, no doubt mindful of Owen's rudeness to the girl, sighed and said, "You too, India, if you'd like to come ...?"

She spoke without enthusiasm, but our young scribe leapt at the chance like a yellow Lab who's been offered a walk.

"I'd love to! I've got a big hole in my schedule because the city-council meeting was postponed. It must be karma, don't you think, Lou?"

I sighed myself. A little of India Doyle went a very long way. And I'd have to get used to this "Lou" business. *No more "Carrie" from the bitch sisters, though. I've had it with that.* 

I kissed my mother on the cheek and led the way down the steps to the driveway, with India tagging along. Her VW was parked right behind the rental car.

"So, where to now?" Aaron tossed his keys jauntily into the air and bobbled them on the way down, letting them drop to the gravel with a clang.

I said, "Why don't I drive for a while?"

He shrugged indifferently, and as I plucked up the keys I thought of a way to kill two birds with one stone. I still needed to hear what India had found out about Guy, and I still needed some caffeine.

"How about the café down in Roche Harbor? Then India can tell us—"

"Ohh, no," said Aaron. "I'm on vacation, remember? And I've been stuck in my sister's apartment for months. I want to explore the island. See the sights, take a long walk on a beach somewhere."

"All right." Maybe fresh air would clear his head. "But I'm not sure where . . . "

"How about American Camp?" said India. "South Beach is great for walking, and there's the historical park where the soldiers were stationed during the Pig War."

Aaron perked up. "Of course-this is where the Pig War happened."

"I knew it," I groaned. "Right up your alley."

"American Camp it is," he said cheerily. "India, lead the way!"

Half an hour later we were at the south end of the island, where the scenery contrasted dramatically with the area around Roche Harbor. Instead of wooded hills and cozy inlets, we drove across a wide and treeless prairie of oatmeal-colored grasses, enlivened by the occasional scampering rabbit or the shadow of a hawk who'd ordered rabbit with a side of field mice for lunch.

South Beach is a long, windswept stretch of pebbles, with the Strait of Juan de Fuca stretching out vast and blue on one hand and tall crumbling cliffs of stone and sand rising on the other. We crunched along, our faces to the wind—with me quite deliberately in the middle.

The beauty of the place soothed my ruffled feathers considerably, though. The gulls wheeled and cried, and long straight ripples combed the calm water to break at our feet in lacy edges of foam. It was an effort to bring my thoughts back to murder.

"So what have you found out, India? Who have you interviewed so far?"

"They're not even interviews, really. Most people seemed to like Guy, but nobody wants to say much about him. Not to me, anyway." She craned around me to ask Aaron plaintively, "How do you get people to talk when they don't want to?"

"You can't," he said with a shrug, not breaking stride on the pebbles. "But you can get them to talk about themselves and then slide in the question you really want answered. People love to talk about themselves. Is that a city out there?"

He shaded his eyes with one hand and pointed to a low

peninsula in the middle distance, where the windows of tiny buildings winked in the sun.

"That's Victoria, on the tip of Vancouver Island," she told him. "Canada sort of curls around the San Juans, with the border running down the middle of the strait."

"Very interesting," I said. "Now, the questions we want to ask about Guy—"

"So that's the border they were disputing." Aaron stopped and looked around enthusiastically. His buzz had worn off, but now he was high on history. "There was a big standoff, major international tension. The British sent warships, and the American army had hundreds of soldiers here. Did you know that George Pickett, of Pickett's Charge, was in command?"

"Actually, I did," said India proudly. "There's a monument to him near the visitor center."

"Really? I'd like to see that."

"About Guy—" I persisted.

"Give it a rest, would you, Stretch?"

"All right, don't yell at me."

"I'm not yelling!"

India stepped tactfully aside to examine a piece of driftwood, while Aaron and I looked at each other sheepishly. Don't fight in front of the children.

"Tell you what," he said quietly. "Give me a couple of hours to be on vacation, and then I'll help your friend with her interview skills. Deal?"

"Deal. But she's not my friend."

"Whatever."

So I held my peace as we tramped along the water for a couple of hours and then as we joined the other tourists ex-

ploring the far-flung reaches of the park. As we strolled through the dry golden grasses, we had to pick our way among the rabbit holes that riddled the ground. In some places there was more hole than ground; American Camp was bunny heaven.

Our first stop was the officers' quarters. This was a single clapboard building with a tall flagpole beside it, set in an acre or so of meadow enclosed by a low white picket fence. But here the history buffs were foiled. When we clomped across the wooden porch, we found the door shut and a small typed notice tacked to it.

Aaron bent to read. "Closed to the public, due for restoration soon, funds are being raised, blah blah. Feel free to walk around the exterior."

So we did, listening to the American flag snap in the wind and imagining those long-ago soldiers so far from home. Then we pressed on to the park's interpretive center, where we learned that the funds were already raised, and *soon* meant very soon indeed. A large sign announced that beginning Friday the entire park would be closed for six weeks of restoration and construction work.

"Friday, that's tomorrow!" said Aaron, and gave India a friendly hug. "I would have missed this completely. Thanks for suggesting it."

She shivered happily, like a praised puppy, and the two of them went on exclaiming at our good luck as they examined every last photograph and pamphlet in the place, inch by historical inch. I tried to follow along, but soon lost interest.

So I went outside again to breathe the salt air and watch the hawks circling overhead. Natural history is more my line. With a high thin cry, one of the hawks folded its dark wings and came dive-bombing down for a rabbit. It's tempting to root for At last the history fanatics emerged, but then they insisted that we search out the monument to good old Pickett. It was a smallish stone obelisk that look more like a grave marker than anything else.

I frowned at it. "I've heard of the Charge, but I can never remember which side Pickett was on."

"You're kidding!" Aaron hooted. "The South, of course. He served as an American captain here, then he resigned his commission to join the Confederate army. The Charge was the high-water mark of the Confederacy before the tide turned against them at Gettysburg."

"Sounds like changing sides was a bad career move."

"You're hopeless, Stretch, you know that?"

As Aaron went on wandering, India and I went off to find a restroom. She sent a glance at him over her shoulder, then shook back her hair.

"He calls you Stretch, that's so cute. What do you call him?" "Just Aaron. At least out loud."

"He's so easy to talk to, I feel like I've always known him. Oh, my gosh, maybe I knew him in another life!"

*You just watch your step in this one*, I thought sourly. Not that I had a claim on Aaron, exactly, but all this female fawning was getting on my nerves.

It didn't help that when we rejoined Aaron to return to the cars, he fell in step with India and prompted her to tell us all about her journalistic career. At her age, this included college.

"And then my *very* favorite class was on obituaries ...."

I snorted, but Aaron said, "Don't laugh, Stretch. If you can write a good obit, really tight but still lively, you can write just about anything."

"You think so?" India's eyes gleamed in the late-afternoon light, and her damn hair rippled in the breeze. "I got an A in that class."

"Much deserved, I'm sure. You know, I'm getting hungry. Should we get a snack someplace?"

It was clear that by "we" Aaron meant the three of us. I pointed out, ever so helpfully, that India was fasting.

"Oh, that's all right," she assured me. "There's a really nice juice bar near here where I can—oops, I need to get this."

Her cell phone warbled a soulful little tune, no doubt something mystical, as she scooped it from her drawstring bag.

"India Doyle. Sure...uh-huh...twenty minutes. Got it." She returned the phone with a sigh. "Warehouse fire. I've got to go."

"What a shame," I said.

"I know. But I make extra cash as a photographer, so I can't afford to miss this. We don't get many fires. See you tomorrow, Aaron."

He watched as she drove away.

"Nice girl."

"A regular Lois Lane."

Aaron cocked his head at me, narrowing his eyes against the declining sun. "Are you jealous, Stretch? I'm flattered."

"Well, don't be. I'm just ...."

He moved closer and captured one of my hands. "Just what?"

This was more like the old Aaron—and I was having my old response to him. A minivan pulled up next to us, and a couple of tourists unloaded a mob of shrieking kids. Better to respond in private.

"I'm just in a hurry to get back to the bed-and-breakfast," I said. "I've got things to do."

He circled the tip of his thumb on my palm. That makes me crazy, as he very well knew.

"What kind of things?"

"Why don't you drive me there and find out?"

It's a small island, but in our current state it seemed like a long drive. And then when we turned into the Owl's Roost driveway, the parking spaces next to 6C were taken—by my long-lost SUV and a patrol car with the motor running.

"Scarlet!"

A young woman in uniform was just getting out of her, and a second cop in the patrol car was clearly waiting to drive his colleague back to Friday Harbor. I was torn between relief at getting my own wheels and impatience to be alone with Aaron.

"Go ahead and park in front of the building, would you?" I told him. "This shouldn't take long."

"It better not."

As he drove on, I walked over and identified myself to the woman. She looked at me carefully—memorizing the face of a killer?—then handed over Scarlet's keys along with a receipt for me to sign.

"Thanks," I said, signing. "I told Moonface to send it back to Frugal Fred's, but now I need it after all."

"Moonface?"

I described the policeman who'd been following me, and she gave a puzzled smile.

"That sounds like Larry Calhoun—good name for him but why'd you tell him? He's not assigned to this case."

"Oh, come on. He's been following me and you know it."

She looked at me curiously. "Larry's on vacation this week."

"Have it your way." I gave her back the receipt. "And have a good evening."

As the patrol car departed, my thoughts turned to my own evening. Aaron was now leaning against the door to 6C with his arms folded, and by the ardent look on his face his thoughts were way ahead of mine.

I joined him on the porch, but we didn't touch. Not yet.

"So, Stretch, about all those things you were going to do?"

"Well, first on the list is inviting you inside."

"Good plan," he said with a wolfish grin. "Because I have some things of my own to—aww, now what?"

A big black mud-spattered four-by-four, dwarfing even Scarlet's bulk, pulled up to the porch. The driver got out, reached back inside, and straightened up with a bouquet of yellow roses in his hand. I recognized him, of course, but so much had happened in the last few days that the roses made no sense to me at all. Not until he came up the steps and handed them to me.

"Sorry about the mud," said Jeff Austin, smiling warmly at me and nodding politely at Aaron. "I would have washed it, but I figured, better a dirty truck than showing up late for our first date."

Chapter Mineteen

Actors call it freezing up.

It's a good way to put it, because I went cold all over. I knew I had some lines in this farce, but I couldn't think of them for the life of me. What could I possibly say that wouldn't embarrass Aaron? Or Jeff, either, but he wasn't the one I was worried about. It was a tricky three-character scene, and I was speechless.

Someone seemed to have handed Aaron a script, though. After a moment of blank surprise, he put on civility like a mask and offered Jeff his hand. His words were normal enough, but his voice was a stranger's.

"Hi, there. Aaron Gold, I'm a friend of Lily James. I came up a little early for the wedding."

"Pleased to meet you," said the deputy with a broad and friendly smile. "Jeff Austin, like the city, not like Jane."

He seemed perfectly at ease, and why not? He had no way of knowing what was going on. He towered over Aaron, and as his own massive hand engulfed Aaron's injured one, I cringed inside at the thought of him gripping too hard and causing pain. As if he could do worse than I already had.

Groping desperately for my dialogue, I came up with "Umm..."

"Well, I won't keep you two," said Aaron. "Have a good time."

Then he walked away without ever meeting my eyes.

Jeff said, "Do you want to put those in water before we go?"

"Put what? Oh, of course." I tore my gaze from Aaron and looked down—to notice my sodden, sandy sneakers. "I'll change shoes too."

"No problem."

*Easy for you to say.* I left the door open, but Jeff remained politely on the porch while I stoppered the kitchen sink and set the roses in it. I couldn't deal with vases just now. I was working on automatic pilot, body and brain just going through the motions.

I did wonder dimly about changing my clothes, but Jeff was in jeans and a polo shirt so I just slipped on some sandals. I remembered now, he had mentioned "something casual." *But that was ages ago! Before the search warrant, before...* 

Before Aaron Gold traveled three thousand miles to watch you going out with another man. I blinked back a ridiculous tear, then went to the mirror to comb my hair.

Get a grip, girl, I said to the glass. It's just a meal. Some nice quiet place where nobody knows you. You can find out more about the murder investigation, and then later you can tell Aaron...

Right, as if Aaron will listen. As if he'll ever speak to you again. My reflection scowled. Well, what was I supposed to do, live in a convent until the man decided to drop in again? After three months, for crying out loud! Who does he think he is, blaming me for an innocent dinner date?

"Ow." The comb caught in a tangle and I yanked at it impatiently. "Ow!"

"You OK in there? I don't mean to rush you, but this place gets kind of busy so I made a reservation...."

"Coming."

I slashed on some lipstick and presented myself on the porch. Jeff escorted me down the steps, then held open the door of his truck with an easy courtesy. His next comment was courteous too—and given the mischievous fate that had brought him and Aaron together, it seemed somehow inevitable.

"I hope you like barbecue," he said.

I sighed and buckled up. "Love it."

Our spot at ZZ Nickles was well worth reserving: a table for two outside, tucked into a corner of the deck that overlooked the marina and the islands beyond. We ordered wine and a couple of the specials, and after that it was easy enough to make small talk about the spectacular view.

Friday Harbor faces east, which in my opinion is the best way to watch a sunset. Instead of squinting into the sun we could sit back, sip our wine, and enjoy the parade of sailboats and motor craft, big and small, that moved across the water.

We chatted for a little and then fell silent, as the boats and the forested islands became dark silhouettes against a low white veil of sea mist, which itself was turning to pink and then to rose. Above the mist, the blue sky paled to shimmering swathes of silver and violet, like mother of pearl.

"It's lovely," I breathed, and Jeff nodded.

"I thought you'd like it here. The food's good too."

My explanation that I'd been to ZZ's before was interrupted by the arrival of dinner. An older woman had seated us and taken our orders, but Peggy delivered our plates.

"Hey, Deputy Jeff," she said coyly, sliding over his honeysmoked pork loin. "You're looking good tonight."

"Thanks." Jeff's smile was wary. "This smells delicious."

"Extra good, in fact. You've been lifting." Peggy set down

my rotisserie chicken without looking at me, then dropped a diminutive hand on the broad shelf of Jeff's shoulder. "I bet you could lift me right off the ground with one arm."

He shifted uncomfortably, which seemed to be her aim, and she gave a husky little laugh. Then she bent over slowly—to light the hurricane lamp on our table.

"You enjoy yourself, now." She winked at Jeff and left us to the twilight.

"She's just a kid," he said sheepishly. "She flirts with everyone."

"Including Guy Price, from what I've heard."

His face went still. "Did he tell you that?"

"Guy didn't tell me anything personal. I barely knew him, remember?"

"Right. Well, tell me something personal about yourself, then. Have you been to the San Juans before?"

When his smile was genuine, Jeff Austin was a remarkably good-looking man. But I wasn't here to make first-date chat.

"I'd rather talk about Guy, actually. Do you think the rumors about his drug dealing are true, or do you think there was some other motive? I assume you don't suspect me or we wouldn't be here."

I was hoping to startle him into revealing something, but I only half-succeeded. He blinked in surprise, but remained circumspect.

"Of course I don't suspect you. But I really shouldn't discuss an ongoing investigation."

"Of course not. Sorry."

He refilled my wineglass and tried a fresh tack. "Besides, that's shop talk. I'd rather get to know you. What does a wedding planner do, exactly?"

Once again, it was a flattering invitation, so as we ate I once

again told my tale about Made in Heaven. But something Aaron had said popped into my mind, about getting people to talk about themselves so you could slide in your real questions.

Was Jeff using that technique on me to assess my character, or to fish for some connection that I might have to Guy Price? I couldn't prove that I'd never been to the island before, and no doubt Guy had come to Seattle once in a while.

Well, two could play that game. I finished gushing about life on a houseboat and emphasized again how much I was enjoying my very *first* trip to San Juan Island. Then I turned the tables, planning to trail a lure of my own.

"Now you. If you don't want to talk shop, tell me what else you do with your free time. Bird-watching is all very well, but what's the social life like in a place this small?"

"Oh, but there's plenty to get involved in. I'm on a soccer team, and I've got a buddy with a boat..."

We talked about sailing, and hobbies in general. Then I dropped my hook. I had scoffed at India's theory about a Masonic plot, but there was no harm in finding out if the police agreed with me.

So, claiming that my partner Eddie might retire to the San Juans, I asked Jeff about men's clubs and civic groups.

He shrugged. "All the usual ones, I guess. Rotary and Elks and—"  $% \mathcal{L}^{(1)}$ 

"And Freemasons?"

He didn't really react. "Sure, there's a lodge here in town. I don't know much about them, but you could ask Owen."

Now I was the one reacting. "Owen Winter?"

"Yeah, I saw his name in the paper the other day, about some charity event they're doing. I guess he's pretty high up in the organization too." Peggy came back then, which was just as well because I needed time to think. When she asked about dessert I just shook my head, lost in this new possibility.

*Owen*? I'd meant to work the conversation around to Afterglow Vista, but I hadn't expected this. Could India's theory really be plausible, that Guy was killed because he went spying on secret Masonic ceremonies? Spying certainly seemed to fit with Guy's character, but did murder fit with Owen's? Jeff clearly didn't think so, but maybe he'd never observed Owen's sudden fits of anger.

I thought it over. Owen had come home late from Orcas on Sunday night, but who was to say that he hadn't gone out again, after my mother was asleep? And what about—

"What about you?"

I looked up, startled from my musings.

"Excuse me?"

"You want coffee or not?" said Peggy. Female customers were a mere inconvenience to Peggy.

"Decaf, please."

"OK. But *you* don't want decaf, do you?" she teased Jeff. "You drink black coffee at all hours, I've seen you. You must stay awake all night! What do you do with yourself all night?"

Her hand was on his shoulder again, but she snatched it off when a stern voice boomed from behind her.

"You've got orders up, girl!"

ZZ glowered at her as she scurried away, and then glowered even harder at Jeff. But when he looked at me his expression softened.

"Well now, Sugar Pie, you're becomin' a real regular. That's good."

"It's your food that's good." I grinned up at him, happy to leave my dark imaginings for the safer world of flirty girls and their righteous grandfathers. "The rehearsal dinner is going to be terrific."

"I believe it will be, at that. Evening, Deputy."

As ZZ ambled off to greet another table, Jeff sighed in relief.

"Good thing you were here to cover for me. You know, you're on awfully friendly terms with the locals for a first-time visitor."

"ZZ makes friends fast. Just like Guy did."

He shook his head. "You're determined to talk about the case, aren't you? I'm starting to wonder if that's the only reason you came out with me tonight."

I ignored this opportunity to assure him of my romantic intent. I was feeling cross with Aaron, but not that cross.

"Wouldn't you be determined?" I countered. "I've never been a prime suspect before."

Twilight had fallen, and when Jeff leaned forward, the candlelight gilded the long planes of his face.

"You're not the prime suspect, Carnegie. You're not any kind of suspect at all."

"But what about the search warrants?"

"Routine. Don't worry about it."

*Maybe I shouldn't*, I thought grudgingly. Whether Guy's demise was a drug hit or a personal vendetta shouldn't really matter to me, now that I was off the hook. Maybe it was time to leave police work to the police, and leave the paranoid fantasies to India. Owen Winter as a murderer? Ridiculous.

So I sat back and gave not-worrying a try. Maybe the wine and the view had gone to my head, but the idea of minding my own business had a certain peaceful appeal. The more Jeff and I went on chatting, the more I liked it. So when he suggested an after-dinner walk by the marina, I agreed with a tranquil smile. But then something happened that blew my tranquillity right out of the water. Peggy went by with a tray of drinks for another table, and managed to bump Jeff with her hip. She giggled and apologized, quite unnecessarily, and then kept her gaze on him as she turned away—only to collide with another waitress. Peggy hung onto her tray, but one wineglass tipped over and sent its contents sloshing down Jeff's back.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she squealed as he got to his feet. "Here, let me clean you up."

She set down the tray and began to dab at him with a napkin. Or rather, to massage him with it. I'd had about enough of young Peggy, so I snatched the napkin away from her and finished the job, blotting the wine firmly from between his shoulder blades.

"It's fine," he said, though it clearly wasn't. He looked furious. "Carnegie, I'll be right back."

I didn't answer. I just sank back into my chair with the napkin still in my hand, trying to tell myself that I hadn't felt what I'd just felt beneath the damp cloth of the shirt. But the truth was undeniable.

Jeff Austin was wearing a wire.

Chapter Twenty

A wire. Jeff was getting our conversation on tape. I'd had bad dates before, but this was ridiculous. And was it even legal? *Probably*, I told myself. *Especially if I'm on the short list for Murder One*. People say I've got a redhead's temper, which is a piece of old wives' nonsense, and as my coffee cooled off I did too. *Don't get mad, get even*.

I'd already insisted that I had no relationship with Guy Price—the police could record that in triplicate—so why not have a little fun at their expense? By the time the deputy returned, I was able to smile without grinding my teeth and accompany him down to the marina like a good little first date. I even let him hold my hand, the bastard.

Walking along the docks reminded me of my houseboat. Not the look of Friday Harbor so much, but the fresh damp feel of the air and the smell of salt and tar and engines.

The sounds, too, were familiar, the hollow thump of our footsteps on wooden planks, the thin clink of blocks against masts, the slap and sigh of water against the gently bobbing hulls. It was like being on my home turf, and that boosted my confidence.

"Tell me, Jeff, have you found that little e-mail gadget of Guy's yet?"

"Why?"

"Just curious. I'm sorry now that I didn't snoop around in his mail when I had the chance. Just so I could help the investigation, of course."

"Of course." He sounded uneasy. *Good*. "No, we're still searching. I don't suppose you have any ideas about where we should look?"

"Not a clue," I said innocently. It's not hard to act innocent when you really are. I pressed on with my fun. "But I'm so relieved not to be a suspect anymore. It was really upsetting, being followed that way."

"Followed?"

"Yes, by Larry Calhoun. I'm surprised he's been so clumsy about it, but I guess you don't do much surveillance work up here. Or maybe he's new to the force?"

That hit home. Jeff stopped and turned to face me with a disconcerted frown. *Transcribe that, Deputy.* 

"You think Calhoun's been following you?"

"I know he has. But that'll stop now that I'm not a suspect. Won't it?"

"Yes." He scowled. "Yes, it will."

Satisfied at adding that little entry to Officer Calhoun's performance review—*Failed to remain anonymous while observing a suspect*, or maybe just *Screwed up surveillance*—I decided to quit while I was ahead.

"Jeff, it's been a crazy week, and I'm beat," I said. "Thanks so much for dinner, but let's make it an early night."

Not that I slept much, alone in 6C, after he dropped me off with a peck on the cheek. Between pondering the Guy Price case and wondering how Aaron was feeling, I didn't drift off until the wee hours. And even then I kept thinking I smelled llama.

Friday morning I overslept and awoke with a throbbing

headache and a heavy heart. The number-one item on my list of The Last Thing I Want to Do in This Life was to go on a picnic with the Bitch Sisters.

If only Aaron would show up for the picnic, I thought dolefully, I could try and explain. But I knew he wouldn't, not after a humiliation like last night. Aaron was a reasonable man, but there's such a thing as the male ego. If he even showed up for the wedding now it would be for Lily's sake, not mine.

The number-two item on that list was talking to Pamela, but I needed towels. So I trudged up the path to the office, blinking at the sunlight that filtered down through the fir branches, and tried to tell myself it was a nice day for yachting.

No one was there, so I stuck my tongue out at the hideous owl lamp and then tapped the intercom button on the counter. The lamp's flat ceramic eyes watched me with silent malevolence. Lampus Horribilus, western race. Known for slaying its victims with sheer ugliness.

"Top of the morning!"

Donald came burbling through the connecting door, and suddenly talking to Pamela didn't seem so bad.

"How ya feeling, any better?" He blinked happily at me from behind his half inch of glass. "I see the police brought your car back. The missus and I were just saying what a shame it is they're pestering you when they should be out catching the real killer. Hang on just a sec."

He took my damp towels into the utility room and returned with a stack of fresh ones, his bald head rising over the top like a nearsighted jack-in-the-box.

"I mean, isn't that something? Don't they have any other leads?"

"I wouldn't know." I grabbed the stack and headed for the door. "Have a nice day."

"You too!" he caroled as it shut behind me. "And if you ever want to talk about—"

I trudged back to 6C, checking my watch on the way. I'd missed breakfast in the lounge, not that I wanted to chat with the other guests at the moment, and in fact I just had time to shower and make it to Afterglow Drive. No doubt Mom could come up with something to stabilize my stomach for the trip across Speiden Channel. I may live on the water, but I'm no sailor.

When I got to Owen's house the front door was ajar so I went on in, my spirits rising slightly at the smell of breakfast. Sometimes a girl just wants to see her mother and eat some toast. But when I got to the kitchen my appetite fled.

The kitchen had a little round table with a flowered cloth in a window corner, and just now the table was occupied by two people. One was Aaron, who was holding out a half bagel and grinning roguishly. And the other, her square white teeth biting into the proffered bagel, was India Doyle.

"Good morning!" she mumbled around her mouthful, and then swallowed. "Aaron's teaching me about East Coast food. I kind of forgot the picnic was today, so I rushed over here without any breakfast. Have you ever had lox? They're really good."

"Hello, Carnegie," said Aaron, his voice flat and his eyes fixed over my left shoulder. "Your mother just went upstairs."

Then he turned back to India, handing her the bagel with a smile that was emphatically not meant for me.

So that's how it was going to be. Aaron was going to tough it out—and freeze me out—with India costarring in the role of Other Fish in the Sea. *Fine. See if I care.* 

I rearranged my face into polite indifference, then sniffed

the air. Kimberly came in behind me, her perfume preceding her by a couple of yards.

"Not in jail yet, Carrie?"

Kimmie's honey hair was tousled, as if she'd just gotten up, but she wore full makeup and a nautical-looking striped top over white capri pants. When my girlfriends at school wore pants that tight my father used to say "If she had a dime in her back pocket you could call it heads or tails."

"Still at large," I said. "And it's Carnegie, not Carrie."

"Ooh, I'll be careful about that. Aaron, be a sweetheart and make me one of those, would you? I'm just famished." She swiveled over to the table and took a seat between the bagel eaters. "There you are again, India. Always popping up, aren't you? And here I thought you had a job."

India wilted perceptibly, and Kimmie, mission accomplished, turned her attention back to Aaron. But she hadn't allowed for the fact that he was sober today, and she didn't know what I knew: that if there's one thing Aaron Gold can't stand, it's a bully.

"Help yourself," he said, nudging the bagel plate over. "India, why don't we wait for the others out on the deck? I've got more stories to tell you about the *Globe*."

"Sure!" She jumped up. "I just want to use the little-girl's room. I'll be there in a minute."

As Aaron went out the back door, India gazed at him like an adoring puppy, and Kimmie very nearly hissed like an offended cat. I was amused, but only for a moment. Should I use this opportunity to talk with Aaron alone? It might be my only chance all day. I couldn't decide.

Then Adrienne entered the kitchen and arched an eyebrow at me.

"Morning, Carrie. Any visits from the police today?"

I decided, and let the screen door slam on my way out. That startled Aaron, seated at the table looking over a newspaper, but before he could say a word I took the chair across from him.

"About last night," I began. "I'm sorry it was so awkward, Aaron. I forgot about the dinner with Jeff, and—"

"And you're dating other people now. No problem." A muscle at the angle of his jaw was twitching. "But you might have mentioned it to me first."

"Well, *you* might have mentioned you were coming to the wedding."

"So you could save me a place instead of filling it with this other guy?"

"At least he showed up!" I hate having anyone angry at me. It makes me defensive, and when I get like that I speak before I think. This time I opened wide and put both feet in. "You've been sulking in Boston for months."

"Sulking?" Aaron went very still and folded the newspaper very carefully. "Sulking. Carnegie, if you had any idea what I've been—"

"I'm back!" said India, plunking herself down beside me with her beads rattling. "Isn't it a gorgeous day for a sail? My horoscope says I'm going to make discoveries, and today has this kind of expanding energy, don't you think?"

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"If you could give us just a minute, we're having a private—"

"I can see that." She planted her elbows on the table and her hair swung forward like curtains. "You two have some interpersonal issues, I can tell. Have you ever done compatibility resonance work? It's based on the enneagram. That's an ancient Egyptian—"

"Oh, for God's sake!" I snarled. "Could you just go back to your own planet for ten minutes? We're trying to talk."

She gasped, and Aaron stood up.

"We have nothing to talk about," he said quietly. "Come on, India. Let's take a stroll."

Chapter Twenty-One

As Aaron steered India down the flagstone path, I smacked the table with my fist and turned my head aside. Right toward Adrienne, who stood just within the back door. Even through the screen I could see the petty triumph on her face.

"Temper, dear," she said, quoting my mother, and turned away.

Suddenly my mother was the one person in the world I wanted to see. I took a moment to compose myself, then strode quickly through the kitchen, ignoring both sisters, and headed upstairs.

Mom had been single for so long that I was halfway to the second floor before it occurred to me that barging in on her and her man would be kind of rude. And I'd seen enough rudeness this morning.

"Dammit, Lou, we've been over this!"

I had turned around to take my first step downward, but I froze with my foot in the air at the sound of Owen's voice. It was tight and controlled, as if he were furiously angry but determined not to be overheard. Which of course made me determined to overhear as much as I possibly could.

I ascended stealthily, moving in slow motion to test for squeaky steps, until I reached the second-floor hallway. This was broader than the one above where my bedroom had been, carpeted in celadon green and wallpapered in a soft floral pattern. A door at the other end was slightly open, but I couldn't see inside. I waited.

My mother's voice was calm enough, but I could hear the tension in it.

"I simply don't understand why it should be a secret, Owen. Let me just explain to them—"

"Absolutely not! You promised me you would keep this confidential, and I insist—"

She interrupted him, murmuring too low for me to hear. Then came a muffled exclamation that gave me goose bumps—it sounded like a cry of pain. I took a stride toward the door, hesitated, and then broke into a run when I heard the unmistakable slumping crash of a body hitting the ground.

"I'm coming, Mom!"

I burst into the master bedroom with all flags flying, ready to do battle with this evil-tempered man who for all I knew was a cold-blooded killer and—

"Oh."

In contrast to my sudden waking nightmare, my mother was the one on her feet. She stood beside a king bed with its sheets and duvet dragged halfway to the floor. Entangled in the bedclothes, and himself more than halfway on the floor, was Owen Winter.

Mom was fully dressed, but Owen wore a pair of truly regrettable pajamas, the top of which had ridden up over his belly as he slid from the bed. He also wore a scowl of mortification and rage, and when he saw me he bellowed an obscenity that struck like a blow.

But what really hurt was my mother's expression of baffled dismay.

"Carrie, what on earth are you doing, coming in here like

that? Can't you see..." She faltered, at a loss for a sufficient phrase, then mustered enough dignity for both of them. "Can't you see that we're busy?"

"Um, of course." I began to back out of the room. "I'm so sorry. I didn't...Sorry."

I could hear her helping Owen back into bed, as I took myself and my utter embarrassment downstairs. Out on the veranda, I sank onto the porch swing and put my face in my hands. Whatever I'd interrupted up there, it obviously wasn't murder and it probably wasn't sex and it certainly was none of my business. *If only Lily would get here quick so I can foul up my friendship with her too.* 

Ten minutes later Mom came down, and I heard her talking to the others inside. It sounded like Aaron and India had come back in, but I was done with eavesdropping. Then she came out and joined me on the swing, with an air more of sorrow than of anger.

"Owen asked me to apologize, Carrie. He tries not to use language like that, especially to women."

"I'm the one who should apologize. I just thought I heard...I thought it sounded like an emergency. Or something. Mom, what's going on? What's the big mystery?"

She sighed. "It isn't big and it shouldn't be a mystery. Owen has sciatica, dear. The attacks are terribly painful, but he doesn't want people to know about them."

"Why not? Sciatica is, what, some kind of back trouble? Lots of people have back trouble."

"That's what I keep saying!" She gave a little chuckle. "Men are so odd, aren't they? Your father was the same way about his fear of heights. Owen thinks that sciatica is something an old man would have, like gout or lumbago."

"But that's silly!"

"Of course it is. But he's rather vain about looking and acting younger than his age. And he's always been so healthy that he thinks he can simply stop the pain through force of will. It took me the longest time to get him to see a doctor, and even now he won't take his muscle relaxant the way he should."

So his fits of anger are really spasms of pain. It all made sense now. Not a lot of sense, but a lot more than the idea of a retired business executive stabbing his caretaker in the back over some imaginary Masonic code of silence.

It did seem odd to me that Owen was so obstinate about hiding his weakness. But wasn't that just what Aaron had been doing, holed up in Boston for the past three months? My mother was a lot more patient than I was.

I was so intent on my thoughts that I missed Mom's next remark.

"What did you say?" I asked. "What about Sunday night?"

"Just that he didn't have his prescription with him when we went to Orcas Island. By the time we got home the pain was so bad that it kept him awake until morning." My mom has a dimple, and it showed now. "Not a very romantic way for us to spend the night after he proposed."

"So you were awake with him all Sunday night?"

"Yes, I was."

She looked puzzled, but I was too busy thinking out loud to really notice. "Then he couldn't have killed Guy. If I'd known that—"

"Carrie!" Mom stood up, outraged. *Oops*. "Are you telling me that you thought Owen was a murderer?"

"Well, no, not really. It was just an idea—"

"A ridiculous and offensive idea. Honestly, Carrie, sometimes your imagination—" "We're all set" came a voice from inside.

The front door swung open to reveal India and Adrienne, with Aaron behind them toting an oversize wicker hamper. It was India who had spoken. She shied away from looking at me, and pest that she was, I wished I hadn't yelled at her.

"Lou," she said, which made me want to yell at her again, "are you sure you won't come with us?"

"Thank you, but I think Owen needs me here." Mom gave me a significant look. "I told them about Owen's head cold, Carrie, and since he's not feeling well enough to pilot the *Dreamer*, India very kindly offered to take you to the island on . . . what was the name, dear?"

"Sedna. She's the Inuit goddess of the ocean."

"So you keep telling us," said Adrienne sourly.

"But shouldn't we postpone until Owen feels better?" I stalled.

"He wants you to go on ahead, dear. We know how busy you'll be this weekend, and the picnic was meant to be a treat for you."

*Some treat.* "We'll make it a short trip, then, and have dinner with you tonight."

She shook her head. "I really don't think Owen will be up to it. You have fun and take as long as you like. I'll talk to you in the morning."

"Wait," I said, giving it one last try. "Sedna won't be big enough for all of us."

"Oh, I'm flying to Seattle for a meeting," said Adrienne. I realized that she was wearing a business suit and low heels, not exactly picnic apparel. She added, with a nasty little smirk, "And Kimmie decided to have a headache. So it's just the three of you. Won't that be charming?"

I glanced at Aaron, but he was still doing his we're-nearly-

strangers act. The prospect of a jolly outing with Ms. Multicultural and a guy who was mad at me was hardly appealing.

But the prospect of turning tail in front of Adrienne—and watching Aaron and India set off on a cruise together—was even worse.

"Anchors aweigh," I said, getting up from the swing. "But first I want my bagel."

Chapter Twenty-Two

I caught one break, anyway. I'd been dreading an attack of seasickness in front of the Winter clan, but as India's little boat sped across the channel the water stayed flat as a mirror and my stomach stayed where it belonged.

We saw plenty of other small craft, motorboats buzzing and sailboats with their sails hanging slack, but they were far enough away that no maneuvering was necessary. The only time we even bobbed a bit was when *Sedna* intersected the subsiding wake of a distant ferry.

"We're lucking out today," India shouted over the engine noise. "Sometimes there's a heavy rip out here."

It was a faster crossing than I expected, almost too fast. I had hoped to start some kind of conversation with Aaron, no matter how awkward, but I didn't succeed.

We sat on facing seats in the open bow with India behind us at the wheel, but when I tried to say something Aaron just cupped a hand to his ear, shrugged, and shook his head. His dark sunglasses gave nothing away.

The steep sandy shoreline of Speiden Island soon came into view ahead of us, with a smaller tree-covered island the shape of a gumdrop looming even closer.

"That's Sentinel Island!" India called out, pointing, as she curved away from it. "It's a nature preserve. See the seals?" There on the sand a dozen or more lumpy, mottled shapes were lolling in the sun, oblivious to the two-legged creatures skimming the surface of their realm. I gazed around, charmed out of my own worries for a moment. High overhead an eagle soared, its head and tail snow-white in the sun. Nature was naturing quite gracefully today, while we humans bumbled along, entangled in mere human nature.

If Sentinel was a gumdrop, Eagle Island was more of a biscuit. Rough gray rocks formed its base, giving way to long yellowing grasses and then fir trees on top, as if the little island had been punched out of some larger one with a giant's cookie cutter.

Sedna's hull crunched gently on gravel, and we scrambled ashore. Mom had added a beverage cooler and a rolled picnic blanket to our cargo, so we each took one item and went ashore.

We picked our way around crystalline tide pools that cupped purple anemones and bright orange starfish. Out in the deeper water, long reddish fronds of seaweed swayed, buoyed up to the surface by bulbous growths.

"That's bull kelp," said India, ever informative. "It can grow two feet in just one day."

I turned to look closer, but the cooler threw me off balance and I stepped ankle-deep into ice-cold water, nearly losing my footing on the slippery rocks. Aaron had the picnic hamper, but he managed to grab my elbow and steady me.

"Watch it, Stretch."

For once I was pleased to hear that silly nickname, but he dropped my arm immediately and didn't speak again as we followed India. She led us to a steep flight of wooden steps built against the rocky bank ahead.

"Lou said the best spot is right in the middle," India

told us, and scampered up with the blanket roll bobbing behind her.

My sneakers squelched as I climbed, and I heard Aaron breathing hard as he brought up the rear. *Funny*, I thought, *he's usually in such good shape*. Then I remembered what he'd been through this summer and silently rebuked myself.

Mom was right. The center of the tiny island was a perfect picnic site, a flat grassy clearing ringed by trees. Oregon grape and other shrubs filled in beneath them, but there was a fullcircle view of the sun-sparkled water between their narrow trunks.

Eagle Island felt like a clubhouse, a private little raft of land floating on the channel. No wonder Adrienne wanted to build a cottage here. Atop the tallest tree was the reason she couldn't: a huge mass of sticks and leaves, the eagles' nest.

As we craned our necks to look, Aaron's breathing slowed to normal. He set down the hamper and draped his windbreaker on it, revealing a light blue short-sleeved shirt—and no wrist brace. *Thank goodness I didn't bring him down with me on the rocks.* 

"You girls hang out here, would you? I'm going to go water a tree."

He crossed the clearing and dropped down the slope opposite from where we'd come, leaving India and me uncomfortably alone together. We both spoke at once.

"I shouldn't have—"

"I didn't mean—"

We smiled a little and tried again.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you, India. I've got a short fuse this week."

"I'm sorry I butted in, really I am."

She looked so repentant that I patted her shoulder and changed the subject.

"Tell me, have you found out anything more about Guy?"

"Nothing for sure. There is one name that keeps turning up—Brenda Bronson—but I'm not sure if she was doing business with Guy or was just a friend."

"Why does it matter?" I asked—as she clearly wanted me to do.

"Well," she said eagerly, "Brenda Bronson lives in Seattle now, but she was right in the middle of all the drug dealing on the island. And there's a rumor that she was bribing a San Juan County police officer to look the other way! If it's true, this could be a really big story for me."

"Which officer?" I only knew one, of course, and I couldn't imagine Jeff as a bent cop. But then I hadn't imagined him bugging our date either, had I?

"I'm trying to find out," she said. "Someone should be calling me later today."

"Who?"

India drew herself up with journalistic dignity. "I never reveal the names of my sources."

"What are you, *The New York Times*? We're supposed to be working together on this, remember?"

She sighed, the sympathetic but complacent sigh of someone who's read too many self-help books. "You really do have a short fuse, Carnegie. It's from being a redhead, you know. And I bet you're a Sagittarius, aren't you? Have you ever had your chart done? You could really learn a lot. I know this psychic who—"

"India," I said, my stomach roiling after all, "let's just eat lunch."

"If you say so."

Shaking her head at my willful ignorance, she unrolled the picnic blanket and I helped her anchor it on the grass. The blanket was a fancy one, bright red and big enough for a family, with a waterproof lining underneath and a fuzzy plaid fabric on top.

India set her ever-present woven satchel on the blanket and then reached for the hamper. But from inside the satchel came the soulful little tune I'd heard at American Camp.

This startled me. "You can get cell service out here?"

"Oh, sure." She pulled out her phone and answered briskly. "India Doyle... You're kidding. Where?... Uh-huh... Anyone hurt?... No, I'm out on *Sedna*, but I'll pick up my camera and get there as soon as I can. This is great!"

She turned it off and looked at me, bright-eyed. "Plane crash! A small plane went down in Griffin Bay. I bet I'll make *The Seattle Times* with this, and maybe even the wire services."

That was ghoulish enough on her part, but I was even worse.

"It wasn't Adrienne, was it?" I tried not to sound hopeful.

"No, a Canadian couple, and they both got ashore. But the plane's in shallow water, so the visuals are super." She knelt down to dig a piece of fruit out of the basket, fold a napkin around it, and drop it in her bag. "I should be back in a couple of hours."

"You're leaving us here?"

She looked up between curtains of hair. "Well, you can come with me if you'd rather, but don't you want your picnic?"

I did want it, and I wanted some time alone with Aaron even more. Even if he didn't.

"A couple of hours, you say?"

"Oh, sure. Three at the most. What time is it now, anyway?

I stopped wearing a watch when I changed my name. It was symbolic of freeing myself from the—"

"It's one o'clock," I said sternly, "and we'll expect you by four."

*Now, beat it before Aaron comes back*, I wanted to add, but I didn't need to. India was eager for her photos, and within minutes she had scampered back to *Sedna*. As I watched the little boat revving away from the island, Aaron emerged hastily from the trees.

"Hey, where's she going?"

I explained about the plane crash, faltering a little at the unhappy look on his face.

"... so we can have our picnic anyway. It's beautiful here, isn't it?"

Not unhappy, exactly. Irate would be a better word. Or maybe incensed.

"She just took off and *left* us? Why didn't you—" He looked at me sharply. "You told her to go without us."

"She suggested it, Aaron. But I did think it would give us a chance to talk."

"About what, your new boyfriend?"

"Don't yell at me."

"I'm not yelling! I'm just..." He peered out between the trees, to where India's little boat was shrinking irrevocably into the distance, and threw up his hands. Aaron is nothing if not pragmatic. "I'm just hungry. What's in the basket?"

I was ravenous, but the contents of the hamper would have been tempting anyway. The kitchen at the Hotel de Haro had gone all out: baguettes with goat cheese and basil, marinated olives and asparagus spears, and a watercress salad with candied walnuts. For dessert there were ripe pears and butterscotch brownies, and along with the iced tea and mineral water, the cooler yielded a bottle of red wine and a corkscrew. Only the best for Owen's guests.

It's hard to be angry, or even standoffish, when the sun is shining, the air smells of evergreens and the sea, and you're stuffing your face. The wine didn't hurt either. After half an hour of concentrated munching and sipping, Aaron drained his glass, tossed me a pear, and said, "So?"

"So what?" I asked warily, catching it. I was surprised that he'd open a discussion of our on-again, off-again romance; relationship conversations were not his favorite pursuit. For such an articulate guy, Aaron just didn't have the vocabulary.

But I should have known better.

"So what's the deal with the murder rap? Are the police leaving you alone now?"

"Not exactly." I busied myself with putting our dishes back in the hamper. How to talk about the police without talking about Jeff? "The, um, person I had dinner with last night—"

"Jeff the Giraffe?" Aaron lay back on the blanket in feigned nonchalance, propping his head on his left arm. "A giraffe crossed with a rhino. Actually, he looks like a Russian shotputter."

"Actually, he's a deputy sheriff."

"What?" Aaron sat up. "You're under suspicion of murder and you're dating a cop?"

"I'm not *dating* him. I met him when Guy died, and then later he asked me to have dinner with him, just casually. But that was before the search warrant, and I forgot all about it. He's not important to me."

And you are, I thought. Trust me, you are.

"So," said Aaron, as if he were forcing out the words, "so you weren't expecting him yesterday?"

"Of course I wasn't! Honestly, Aaron, I would never have

embarrassed you that way. You know me better than that, don't you? *Don't* you?"

I tried to hold his gaze, but he pulled out a pear and bent his head over it. His black hair fell forward as he drew a little gold penknife from his pocket and sliced the fruit into precise wedges.

"I do know you better than that," he said haltingly, watching the knife. "And you've got every right to be seeing other people."

"But I'm not! That's the first time I've even—"

"Let me finish, please. This is really hard to say." There was a long pause, then he squared his shoulders and looked straight at me. "You're right. I've been hiding out in Boston. Sulking."

"I shouldn't have said that."

"It's OK, my sister used the same word. She said that other people have worse problems, and that I'm never going to heal the rest of the way if I don't get on with my life. Then she told me to get off my ass and fly out here."

"I've always liked your sister."

He grinned. "Me too. I've always been pretty fond of you, come to think of it." The grin faded, and he went on, "But seriously, Stretch, if I've screwed it up for us and you don't feel...If you want a different kind of...I mean, if things between us aren't—"

"Aaron."

"What?"

"Shut up and kiss me."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Making love was different after all this time, and yet sweetly familiar. At first I tried not to touch Aaron's scars, but then I forgot all about them in the giddy pleasure of the moment. I hadn't fooled around in the great outdoors since my college days, and it was much more fun with a decent blanket and guaranteed privacy—not to mention how delightful it was to kiss Aaron without tasting tobacco.

When I awoke, Aaron's injured arm lay warm and heavy across my chest. The afternoon air was cooler than it had been, but the sun was still shining and the generous blanket cocooned us both. I bent my head to kiss his shoulder and curled myself snugly against him.

"Are you asleep?" I whispered.

"Yes," he said groggily. "And so are you."

"All right." And within moments I really was, returning contentedly to a dream about fields of lavender.

Waking up the second time was less pleasant. A bank of sullen clouds to the west had swallowed the sun, and I'd developed Popsicle toes from my bare feet poking out of the blanket. I pried my watch from under Aaron's shoulder blade and squinted at it.

"Yikes! Aaron, wake up. India's overdue, she's going to be here any minute!"

We got dressed like furtive teenagers, then rushed to erase all evidence of our illicit activity. Aaron's pear slices had made a bit of mess, but we soon had the picnic site shipshape.

"Socks, check!" said Aaron, flinging mine over to me. He held up one of my sneakers, still damp and smeared with algae from the tide pool. "Your slipper, Cinderella."

"Ugh. I'll put them on later. Have you got a comb I could borrow?"

"Check. Any brownies left?"

I sat on the now-tidy blanket and rummaged in the hamper. "Hmm...check!"

We split the last one, sitting hip-to-hip for warmth. The breeze was picking up, and it looked like we might get a little rain on the return voyage. I peered through the trees, but there was no *Sedna* in sight yet. Might as well use the time to bring Aaron up to speed about Roche Harbor's Most Wanted.

"I was about to say, before I was so rudely interrupted . . . "

I told him how I'd learned that Jeff Austin was recording me, and he crowed with laughter.

"I wish I'd been there!" Then his face changed. "Wait a minute. This son of a bitch asked you out just so he could get evidence against you?"

"Of course not! At least, I don't think so...."

I thought back to my conversation with Jeff in front of the courthouse. Was it only three days ago? Tuesday, the day after he interviewed me—and the day before 6C was searched.

"Oh, hell, I bet you're right. It was some kind of good-cop, bad-cop thing between him and Orozco." I sank my forehead on my knees. "What an idiot I am!"

"Hey, don't say that. He probably wanted to hit on you anyway. Who wouldn't?"

Aaron put an arm around my shoulders, which felt nice,

and we sat for a while in companionable silence. The ring of trees began to stir in the wind, and I shivered.

"The photographs must have taken longer than India expected," I said dubiously.

"Or else she's off meditating or levitating or something." He shook his head. "What a space cadet. Listen, it's almost five o'clock, that's plenty of room for error. How long shall we give her?"

"Give her before what?"

"Before we call your mother or the Coast Guard or whoever we call to get a ride back. You brought your cell, didn't you?"

"Well, no. I didn't think it would work out here."

"Carnegie!"

"Don't look at me like that. I'm sure she'll be here any minute."

"She'd better be. Anyway, if we don't get back soon your mother will call her, right?"

"Um, wrong. Mom's not expecting to hear from me till tomorrow morning, remember?"

He groaned. "You knew that, and you still let India go?"

"How was I supposed to know she'd run late?" I put on my sneakers, damp or not, and cast around for a distraction. "Listen, what do you suppose Jeff was angling for last night? It's not like I was going to confess over dessert."

"He was probably just checking out your state of mind."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, most murders are personal, and most people aren't skilled actors, so you might have given yourself away somehow. Unless the police are focused on some specific piece of evidence."

"They are," I said. "Guy's e-mail gizmo."

"Which is a technical term for what, exactly?"

I described the little gadget I had borrowed. "I saw his Deleted folder, just for a minute, so I gave the police the names I remembered. But I didn't read any of the messages—"

"And they would show what Price was up to lately."

"More than that," I said. "I bet he got an e-mail from the killer."

"What makes you think that?"

"Kimmie and Adrienne were sure that Guy was staying in for dinner on Sunday, but instead he rushed off. Now, he told me that his cell phone wasn't working, and the phone in the house never rang. Something made him change his plans."

"I bet you're right," said Aaron, with growing enthusiasm. I'd seen him in this intensely focused mood before, and it was reassuring to see it again. "So if you were the killer, you'd be trying to get your hands on the e-mailer to erase the files. Unless they were password-protected, in which case you'd just destroy it. But then you'd have to dispose of it somehow...."

The more we hashed over the idea, the more intriguing it became. And there was another missing item: the murder weapon. One electronic device, and one knife of some kind. Either, or both, crucial to solving the case.

"No wonder they searched your rooms on the island," said Aaron.

"Not to mention my home in Seattle."

"They searched the houseboat? Oh, to look for a connection to Price. Eddie must have freaked out."

"Believe me, he did." I tucked in closer. "I've been freaking out a little myself, Aaron. I'm so glad you're going to help me with this. It makes such a difference to—"

"Wait a minute!" He leaned away from me and frowned.

"I'm not helping you with anything, I'm speculating to pass the time. You just answer the cops' questions when they ask, and otherwise keep your nose out of it."

"Yes, sir." If there's anything I hate more than having people mad at me, it's having people tell me what to do. That's one of the many reasons why I'm self-employed. "Any other orders, sir? Permission to go on dating the cops, sir?"

"Very funny. But I'm serious, Stretch. I told you before, don't get involved."

"I'm already involved!" I stood up and rubbed my hands together to warm them. "What if they never solve the case and I'm always under suspicion? Besides, you also told me before that you'd help India with her interviews. Unless you planned to help her and not me. Where the hell is she, anyway? I'm freezing."

"It was your idea to let her go without us." Aaron rose as well and zipped up his windbreaker. "Though why you thought we could rely on such a flake—"

"You didn't think India was such a flake this morning at the house," I said frostily. "You were quite chummy this morning."

"Oh, grow up."

He strode to the edge of the clearing and through the trees to peer out at the strait, as if he could summon up *Sedna* by the mere action. I tried to think of a retort, but I was too cold and too distracted. Where *was* she?

It wasn't just the autumn chill in the air that was making me uncomfortable. The cloud bank had grown darker and mushroomed higher up the sky, bringing an early twilight.

I joined Aaron there at the top of the bank, jogging in place to get my blood moving while we scanned the water. We could see a few boats in the distance, but none of them was small and white and coming our way. A rush of wind hissed in the fir branches, and pinpoints of water speckled my cheek. Rain.

Aaron flipped up the collar of his jacket and muttered, "I can't believe you didn't bring your phone."

"Well, where's yours, then?"

He jammed his hands deeper in his pockets. "I let the contract lapse while I was in the hospital."

I said softly, "You almost let us lapse, Aaron."

He was saved from answering by the deep, reverberating *whonnk* of a ship's horn off to our left. A state ferry, rounding the north end of San Juan Island to pass through Speiden Channel, was warning an errant sailboat to scoot out of its way. The sailboat was headed away from us, but the ferry would pass fairly close.

"Hey!" Aaron scrambled and slithered down the bank, arriving too fast at the bottom and nearly taking a header into the water. He balanced on a shelf of rocks and waved his arms. "Hey! Hey, help!"

I followed him down, but at a much more deliberate pace, unwilling to risk a tumble for the sake of a futile gesture. Because you know what happens when you wave and shout at a passing ferry? The passengers, the ones who happen to notice you, wave cheerfully back, and the ferry continues on its implacable way.

Aaron's final gesture at it was a rude one.

"I could have told you—" I began, but a big motorboat appeared from behind the ferry and zoomed along even closer to us, so when Aaron started waving again, I did too. They came so near that we could make out the driver, a heavyset man in a red jacket, and his passengers, a woman and two little girls.

"Over here! Help!"

So near and yet so far. We screeched and jumped and gesticulated, but all that happened was that the little girls laughed and waved at us. Then the rain increased, and their mother bundled them into yellow slickers as the boat angled away.

"Why didn't they stop?" said Aaron. His hair was wet and flattened to his forehead. "This is ridiculous, we're in plain view."

"It's just not plain that we need help. We have to signal somehow."

But how to signal, that was the question. Setting our mutual irritation aside for the moment, we retreated to the shelter of the trees to brainstorm an answer. A signal fire? No matches, and anyway it would just look like a campfire. Writing SOS on the picnic blanket? Nothing to write with.

The situation was maddening: we could see the boats, and the boaters could see us, but we had no way to communicate our plight.

"OK," I said at last, "let's look at it from their point of view. You're driving along in your boat, trying to get out of the rain, and you see a little island with two people on it. What would make you stop and . . . I've got it! Let's play dead."

Aaron looked blank. "Dead?"

"Yes, don't you see? We lie on the rocks as if we're shipwrecked and unconscious, and some Good Samaritan sees us and stops to help."

"Doesn't the Good Samaritan resent being suckered?"

"No, because we really are in distress. Am I brilliant or what?"

"Maybe..." He mulled it over. "But we'll get soaked, and if we have to spend the night here we need to be as dry as possible." "We're nearly soaked already, and if this works we won't have to spend the night. Come on, give it a chance."

Playing dead is a remarkably tedious business. We tried to keep still, Aaron sprawled on the rock ledge and me draped over a boulder a few feet away, but it was damn uncomfortable. As the minutes crawled by and the rain turned from a shower to a torrent, I felt less and less brilliant.

I raised my head a little, blinking against the drops that bounced off the cold surface of the boulder. "Aaron?"

"What?" he croaked, his voice hoarse from shouting.

"I'm sorry about letting India leave us here."

He opened one eye but didn't move. "I'll only forgive you if this works. And after we kill India for screwing up. Can you spell hypothermia?"

My hands were numb, I realized, and my feet weren't far behind.

"It was a stupid idea, wasn't it?" I said.

"Way stupid. Let's give it ten more minutes."

"OK."

We only had to give it nine, because that's when we heard the roar of an approaching motor, the splash of an anchor, and the rasp of a startled male voice.

"Holy moly, Hank, I think they're drownded!"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Hank and Frank—any other time I'd have found that amusing—were two burly, unshaven geezers in baseball caps. Far from resenting our ruse, they thought the playing-dead idea was absolutely hilarious.

I was relieved about that until I understood the reason for their hilarity: Hank and Frank were drunk. Belching and guffawing, they led me across the shallows and hauled me up a short ladder into their cabin cruiser as Aaron went back up the bank for the picnic hamper.

My first step sent me skidding sideways, because the deck was strewn with beer cans.

"Watch it there, missy," said Hank, or possibly Frank. "You want a brewski while we wait for your boyfriend?"

"J-just a b-blanket," I said, through castanet teeth. The rain had stopped, but I was soaked.

"You sure you want him back?" leered the other. "Not much of a boyfriend, gettin' you marooned like that. How'd that happen, exactly?"

"L-long story. Aaron, come around this side!"

Drunk or not, the geezers were solicitous, and soon we were bundled into their spare parkas, which smelled of fish and cigarettes but were blissfully dry. They offered us the comfort of the cabin too, but one whiff of the stench in there sent us back on deck.

With nothing nonalcoholic on board, Aaron and I shared a warm beer and huddled on the rear bench of the boat while it rocked and bounced across the channel and into the calm, protected, ever-so-welcome haven of Roche Harbor. I climbed onto the dock, equal parts grateful and nauseated, and Aaron handed back the parkas.

"Thanks a million, guys," he said, reaching for his wallet. "Can I chip in for the gas or—"

"Naw!" said Hank. Or Frank. "You just take better care of missy there in future."

They shoved off again, leaving us to drip our way toward the parking lot where I'd left Scarlet. Aaron had parked his rental car in a separate lot for Hotel de Haro guests; I'd almost forgotten he was staying here.

It wasn't all that late yet. The hotel's lights were just coming on, and the dockside restaurant was bright and bustling with the Friday happy-hour crowd. But it felt like we'd been gone a long time.

I unlocked the SUV and Aaron set the hamper inside.

"Well..." I said, hoping he would invite me up to his room to get warm. Then I noticed he was supporting his right arm with his left and saw that his mouth was tight with pain. "Aaron, you're hurting."

"A little."

"What can I do?"

He smiled wryly. "Nothing, Stretch."

"Let me walk you to your room, at least. I could find you a doctor—"

"Thanks anyway," he said, but his eyes said Back off. "I'm

going straight to bed, and I'll call you in the morning. Are you all right to drive?"

"Sure. Take care."

I moved to kiss him on the cheek, but he was already turning away, as if reproaching me. So I threw my soggy jacket into Scarlet, revved her up, and set off back to the Owl's Roost. First I was going to get clean and dry, and then I was going to find India Doyle and give her holy hell.

I wasn't really all right to drive. Between the drizzly twilight and my benumbed state of mind, I took the wrong turn going up the hill from the harbor and found myself bumping along a wooded side road with the water to my right instead of my left. I needed to hang a U-turn, but the way was narrow, above a steep slope down to the water, and the jerk who was tailgating me didn't help any.

The road was twisty, with no real shoulder. I started watching for a pullout so I could let the jerk go by. I overshot the first one, but as the road dipped toward the water another one appeared.

I yanked at the wheel—and whiplashed back in my seat as Scarlet reared up, hovered precariously, and then jolted heavily down. Judging by the nasty scraping noise, we had run aground.

With a dispirited groan, I got out to look. The unpaved shoulder of the road held a number of rocks and, sure enough, I'd picked the nastiest one to slam poor Scarlet into. Shaped like a scraggly tooth, the rock was now wedged securely between tire and fender. We were hung up, but good.

And me with no phone, dammit. I looked around the darkening woods, hoping for house lights, and saw only the sky's reflection on the little bay down below me. But was that a boat near the shore? "Hello? Hello down there!"

As I called out, I took a few steps down the hill to get a better line of sight. It was dark in the woods but still light on the water, and the surface of the bay was pale between the fir trees. That was definitely the outline of a boat showing dark against the silvery gleam, but it was empty, just drifting in the shallows....

No, not empty. A limp shape lay in the open boat, and though I tried to deny it, I knew in my horror-struck heart what the shape was.

"India? India!"

I plunged down the embankment, slithering out of control and then catching myself on the rough trunks of the trees, again and again until I reached the bottom. There was no beach, just a narrow ribbon of gravel, and I splashed kneedeep into the icy water. Gasping from the cold, I grabbed the boat's fiberglass side and pulled it firmly ashore.

India lay faceup at the bottom of *Sedna* with her sightless eyes open to the sky. There was a dark round hole in the center of her forehead.

It wasn't the wisest thing I'd ever done, but who possesses wisdom at a time like that? I clambered aboard and crouched beside her, and as I did my knee came down painfully on something hard. When I reached to push it aside, my fingers closed around a gun, some kind of small handgun that was cold to the touch.

I dropped it in revulsion and cradled India in my arms. I don't know how long I knelt there, weeping. "Oh, India—"

"Hands out where I can see them!" The harsh voice came from the shoreline, but the speaker was hidden behind a powerful flashlight beam. The light struck me full in the face, its glare blinding my dark-adjusted eyes. "Get 'em out there. Now."

I lifted my empty hands in innocent appeal as the light moved down the slope. I didn't recognize the voice, but I did have a suspicion about who the speaker was. And once he stepped into the open at the water's edge, where the last light of day caught his stocky build and round pallid face, my suspicion was confirmed.

Moonface—Larry Calhoun, the cop who'd been tailing me—was still on the job.

This time there was no gallant gathering me up in anyone's arms. Moonface was no giant like Jeff Austin, and anyway he didn't see me as a distressed damsel. He saw me as a killer. That was evident from the way he kept his gun on me as he played the flashlight over India's body, and from the keyed-up excitement in his voice as he radioed for backup.

"I just found her," I said. "It's India Doyle, she's a friend of mine, and I only just found her."

I kept on saying that as Moonface herded me up the slope to his patrol car, but he didn't respond except to make little conversational gambits like "Stand facing the car!" and "Hands behind your back!" The man had no people skills at all.

Then, as another patrol car came screaming up beside us with its red light slashing through the gloom, he snapped a pair of handcuffs on my wrists. Handcuffs! Finding India's body had felt like a dark fantastical dream, but the cold metal biting at my skin was all too real.

"What are you doing?" I sputtered, as he guided me into the backseat. "Am I arrested?"

Moonface conferred with the occupants of the other vehicle, then got in the driver's seat and slammed the door. "I'm just asking you to come in and make a statement." "You call this asking?"

I lurched against the car door as he took a tight turn, and for the rest of the drive I kept quiet and worked on choking down a rising sense of panic. It's a horribly vulnerable feeling, not having your hands free. There were so many questions to consider, about India, about Aaron, about my own fate, but I concentrated on staying upright and remembering to exhale every time I inhaled.

After an eternity or two, I found myself in a small beige room inside the Friday Harbor courthouse. The only window in the room was a little slot in the door, and the only furniture was one of those cheap stacking plastic chairs you see in discount stores, and a set of bunk beds bolted to the wall. Each bare mattress had a shrink-wrapped blanket and pillow sitting on it. *Sanitized for Your Protection, You Perp*.

A middle-aged woman in civvies came in, removed the handcuffs, and searched me quite thoroughly.

"Am I under arrest?" I asked again.

"Turn around, please" was all she said, and continued her brisk impersonal patting and probing. When she left the room the door closed behind her with an unpleasantly loud click, and I realized that there was no doorknob on my side.

The room felt suddenly smaller, and I had to practice exhaling again.

Several more eternities passed, and then a young man, also in civvies, came in to examine and scrape my hands—for gunpowder residue, of course. I was an old hand at this, so to speak. He didn't say much either. Soon afterward the woman returned with a pile of clothing. At least she made eye contact this time.

"Take off everything and put these on, please. They're kind of miscellaneous, but they're clean." The county jail must not run to uniforms, because the clothes were indeed miscellaneous. But my own clothes were still damp from the rain, so I wasn't sorry to pull on the gray sweatpants and green plaid shirt she handed me, and to jam my feet into dry socks and someone's oversize loafers. I even raked my fingers through my hair in a reflexive attempt to make myself presentable. But for who?

I found out soon enough when a uniformed officer escorted me down the hall and into an office. Detective Lieutenant Orozco stood behind the desk, looking snappy in a dark shirt and light blazer. The woman who'd searched me was sitting to one side with a notebook in her lap.

I took in Orozco's shoe shine and cologne. "Sorry to interrupt your night on the town."

"Ms. Kincaid," he said solicitously, coming around the desk. "Please sit down. Your hair is wet; are you cold? Would you like some coffee?"

I'm not stupid, I could see that now the bad cop was playing the good one. But at this point I wasn't immune to a warm smile, and I'd have sold my soul for hot caffeine.

Soon I was cradling a fragrantly steaming mug, and Lieutenant Orozco was answering my questions. Sort of. He was meticulously courteous, as before, but somehow evasive.

"Of course you're not under arrest," he said, as if such a thing had never crossed his mind. "We simply need to analyze all the available evidence, such as your clothing, if we're to eliminate innocent persons from involvement in Ms. Doyle's death."

"I see." He made it sound so reasonable. "But I can leave if I want to?"

"Naturally you're free to go, but I understood that Ms.

Doyle was your friend. Don't you want to assist us in finding her killer?"

"Sure I do, but can't I assist you tomorrow?"

"It's best to record the details while they're fresh in your mind, and time is of the essence in this kind of investigation. As a witness to a violent crime—"

"The aftermath of a crime," I pointed out. "I didn't actually see the murder."

"What did you see, exactly? You were in the boat with Ms. Doyle, and then what happened?"

"I wasn't in the boat with her! I mean, I was when Calhoun got there, but— Let me start from the beginning, OK?"

"By all means. Officer Henniman here will record your initial statement."

I didn't like the sound of "initial." Would I need to make more than one? But I took a deep breath and described the afternoon: my brief conversation with India about Guy Price, followed by her abrupt departure from the picnic, then the way that Aaron and I had hitched a ride back to Friday Harbor, and Scarlet's run-in with a rock on the road above the bay.

"We've had your car brought back here," he said. "It wasn't damaged. Please go on."

The woman named Henniman scribbled constantly, but Orozco also made notes on the pad in front of him. He wrote a long one with a lot of underlining when I reached India's mention of the mysterious Brenda Bronson. I tried to read it upside down, but his handwriting was terrible.

"Then when I saw it was India in the boat," I said, giving up, "I climbed in and found this gun—"

"You handled the gun? You admit that?"

"There's nothing to admit! I just bumped into it and

moved it out of the way. Then Calhoun yelled at me and that was that."

"I see. These two men, Hank and ...."

"Frank."

"Hank and Frank, yes. Last names?"

"We didn't ask."

"What about the name and model of their vessel?"

I shook my head. "It was bigger than India's, though, with steps down into a cabin."

"That's not particularly helpful."

"Ask Aaron, then! He's staying at the Hotel de Haro. He's there now. In fact, I want to talk to him myself."

I reached for the desk phone, but Orozco dropped his hand over the receiver. He wore a broad gold wedding band, and I noticed that he bit his nails.

"I'll be calling Mr. Gold myself. In the meantime, if you would just wait..."

It sounded like a social invitation: "If you would just wait in the parlor." But the little beige room was no parlor, and I wanted no part of it.

"Thanks anyway," I said, getting to my feet. "I'll be at the Owl's Roost if you need me. You've been there, you know the address."

The phone under his hand rang, and he motioned me to a halt as he picked it up.

"Orozco. All right, go ahead.... When?... You confirmed that?" He looked at me and raised his eyebrows appraisingly. Then he said to the caller, "Yes, just in time. Thank you."

The lieutenant replaced the phone and drummed his fingers on it. "Ms. Kincaid, I must ask you to remain with us."

"You said I was free to go."

"It seems that I have more questions for you. For example,

about the violent argument you had with the deceased just this morning."

"What violent argument?" I said, violently.

"Apparently there was an altercation at the Winter home, during the course of which you seemed to be threatening Ms. Doyle."

"Threatening?" *Damn that Adrienne.* "I didn't threaten India, I just snapped at her a little. It was very trivial."

"And the reason for this trivial snapping?"

"It was...she was...I don't remember." I set aside that embarrassing memory. "Look, you need to talk to Aaron Gold. He was there when it happened, and he can tell you all about Hank and Frank too, and how we came back from the island."

But confirming that part of my story wouldn't prove that I didn't kill India, and the lieutenant and I both knew it. I could have done everything I'd said, including leaving the SUV at the roadside, and still committed murder.

Orozco took another tack at that point and returned to the subject of Guy Price's death. We went back over all my observations, and then he zeroed in on India's theory that Guy was a drug dealer.

"What made her think that?" he asked me. "Had she uncovered specific evidence?"

I shook my head. "As far as I know, it was still just speculation. She was asking around—"

"Asking who?"

"I don't know. Her contacts on the island, I guess, but I don't know who that would be. She said someone was going to be calling her—"

"What?" Orozco looked up sharply. "Calling her today? You didn't tell me that before." "I just now remembered." I closed my eyes, trying to recall India's exact words. "She said she was waiting for a call back from someone who might be able to help her."

"Man or woman?"

"Just...someone. I asked her who and she wouldn't tell me. She said she couldn't reveal her sources."

I wondered, as the lieutenant was clearly wondering, whether one of those sources had arranged to meet India Doyle on her boat and then brought a gun to the meeting. The thought of that little black hole in her forehead set me shivering.

"Are you all right, Ms. Kincaid? I can call a doctor if you like."

"No, thank you. But call Aaron Gold—"

"I will," said Orozco. "Meanwhile, I'm sure we'll have more questions for you as we investigate further, and I know that you'll want to cooperate with us."

"I'm already cooperating! I just want to go home."

"I'm afraid not."

The light dawned.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Is this that twenty-four-hours deal, where you can hold someone without actually charging them?"

"You're very well informed." Orozco smiled, as if he were pleased to pay me the compliment. "Under certain circumstances, yes."

"Circumstances like these right here?"

"Yes."

"So I can't leave?"

He shrugged sympathetically. "Alas, no."

Which is how I came to spend Friday night in a holding cell.

Chapter Twenty-Five

If you've never spent the night in jail, I would strongly advise against it.

Television shows the usual horrors, of course, the third degree from hard-faced cops and the threatening sneers from thuggish cellmates. But I had faced nothing so dramatic from Orozco, and I didn't even have a cellmate.

That was part of the problem, in fact. As I sat in the little beige room for the next hour or so—they had taken my watch—I had no one to talk to, nothing to do, and nothing to think about except the tragedy of India Doyle's death. And whether or not I should call a lawyer.

I decided on not, partly because I didn't know any lawyers, on or off the island, but mostly because I was hoping to be released any minute now. Or at least to be talking with Aaron. He'd covered enough crime stories, he could help me figure out what to do.

So when someone knocked at the door, my heart leapt up and so did I. Though my first thought was of Aaron, more realistically I expected Officer Henniman again, or maybe Orozco himself with an apology.

What I didn't expect was Jeff Austin with a pizza.

"I figured you might be hungry." He came in, filling the little room with his masculine bulk, and looked around as if in surprise at the lack of furniture. Then he set the flat white box on the bunk and handed me a tall paper cup that rattled with ice cubes. "How are you doing?"

So, they were playing good cop, good cop. I tried to figure out what that meant, but my empty stomach trumped my brain. As the savory aroma of hot cheese filled the cell, I realized I was ravenous—but no cheesy bribe was going to make me forgive his recording our date.

"Off the record?" I said coldly. Then I reminded myself not to say more, since Jeff didn't know that I knew about the wire. Tangled web and all that.

"Mostly off." He tipped his big hands palm up with a rueful grin. "If you confess I'll have to report it. But honest, I just want to make sure you're all right."

"How all right could I be?" I sat on the bunk and lifted a corner of pizza box. Half pepperoni, half sun-dried tomato. *How did he know?* I licked dry lips and took a slurp of soda. "But if you mean have I been treated properly, I guess so. Except that I shouldn't be here in the first place and I certainly shouldn't have been handcuffed."

"Handcuffed?" Jeff's blond eyebrows rose in surprise, but he bit back whatever he was going to say next. "Well, have some supper, anyway."

But I had some questions first. "Are you guys out looking for the real murderer? And do you think that whoever killed India killed Guy too? The two murders seem so different, but I know she was asking around the island about him, so—"

"Carnegie," he said, "we're doing everything we can, I promise. But I can't talk about the details, you know that."

"Yeah, yeah." I hit him with my final question. "Did you bring any napkins?"

He had a bunch in his back pocket, and he was hungry

too, so we demolished the pizza in companionable if uninformative silence. Then he wiped his good-looking mouth and shifted uncomfortably on the cheap plastic chair. He made it look like children's furniture.

"I should get going," he said. "Need anything else?"

"Pen and paper would be good," I said eagerly. "I've got a wedding to put on this weekend, and it would help me think."

Assuming I was out of the slammer soon. But I have to believe that, I just have to.

"Sorry," Jeff said sheepishly. "No pens."

"Oh come on, you think I'm going to attack you with it? Do I look like some kind of ninja commando?" He shrugged, and I let it go. There was a more pressing issue. "I asked Orozco to call my friend Aaron. Do you know if he did?"

He nodded. "At the Hotel de Haro, right. There was no answer on his phone, so we asked the front desk to check the room. He's not there."

"He must be having dinner. Can you send someone to look in the hotel restaurant? He'll want to know where I am. He'll want to be here."

"Sure. I'll go myself, since I've met him before, and we'll keep on calling. This Aaron must be a good friend."

"He's...well, he's part of my alibi."

"Of course." Jeff began to gather up the debris from our supper. "You think he can tell us more about India Doyle?"

"I doubt it. He wasn't there when she told me about this Brenda Bronson person."

My paper cup slipped from the deputy's hands and cartwheeled to the floor. It still held some ice cubes, which scattered at our feet with a noise like breaking glass.

"Brenda Bronson?" he asked as we cleared up the spill. "Did you tell the lieutenant that?" "Of course I did. Do you know her?"

"I might have heard the name."

I pressed on, just in case he was wired again. "I told the lieutenant absolutely everything I know. I never threatened India. We had a little bit of friction, that was all. And I've never fired a gun in my life!"

"This'll all get sorted out, you'll see." Jeff gave me a reassuring smile. "Get some rest now."

Rest, my eye. Try hour after hour after *hour* of tedious sleepless solitude, wondering about the murders, wondering how much trouble I was really in, and especially wondering where Aaron was. If his damn arm was hurting so much, why wasn't he in his hotel room where he belonged?

The night dragged on endlessly, broken only by the strangely embarrassing necessity, once the soda worked its way through, of knocking at the window to ask Officer Henniman to escort me to the bathroom and back. They don't talk about bladders on TV, but if you're locked up in real life it's a serious issue.

By Saturday morning I was ready to jump screaming out of my skin.

I knew it was morning, despite the unchanging fluorescent light in the hallway, because dear Officer Henniman, who was growing quite friendly, showed up with a toothbrush for me. After another supervised trip to the bathroom, she brought me coffee and a tired croissant, and then I put in another hundred years or so of sitting and pacing.

No wonder prisoners dig tunnels—I was ready to start excavating with my fingernails. Where on earth was Aaron? If I ended up having to call my mother from jail, I'd kill him.

Finally, *finally*, there came another knock on the door. This time my visitor was truly unexpected, and truly welcome:

Michael Graham. Lily's bridegroom, my friend, and hopefully my ally.

Mike is an attractive man, with serious brown eyes and crinkly brown hair, and he's normally a snappy dresser. But today he was in summer tourist mode, looking just a tad dorky in a yellow polo shirt, khaki shorts, and a black nylon fanny pack worn frontward.

But he'd never looked so good to me, and I could have kissed him. In fact I only refrained because Lieutenant Orozco was waiting behind him in the hall.

"Mike!" I cried. "You came early. Can you get me out of here?"

"I flew up when I heard what was happening," he said, his somber face warming into a smile. "Lily and the boys are still coming by ferry. And yes, the lieutenant is releasing you."

"So I'm off the hook?" That made me sound like a trout, catch and release. "I mean, everyone knows I'm innocent now?"

"We're pursuing various lines of inquiry," said Orozco formally, but with a glint in his eye. "Thank you for your cooperation, Ms. Kincaid. Your car is in the lot next door. Lieutenant Graham assures me that you'll remain on the island for the near future, in case we have more questions for you."

Mike dropped an arm around my shoulders. "She's not leaving, Tony. I can't get married without her. Come on, Carnegie, I'll walk you out."

He escorted me up the hallway to the front desk, where my pal Officer Henniman waited with a big plastic sack of my belongings and a receipt. I dashed off my signature and grabbed the sack, pausing only to pull out my tote bag.

"Can I return the clothes you gave me later?" I asked her, desperate to be gone.

"Certainly, just—"

"Great. 'Bye!"

Then, hallelujah, I was trotting down the courthouse steps in the bright breezy morning, a free woman. Physically grubby and emotionally mortified and just plain sick from lack of sleep, but free.

No thanks to Aaron Gold, who was just now coming up the steps toward us.

"Hey, Mike, good to see you," he said.

The two men shook hands, and I noticed that Mike did a smooth job of not reacting to the scar. But Aaron noticed too and quickly moved past the moment by looking at me and snickering.

"Nice outfit, Stretch."

I glanced down at the sweatpants and loafers, and then up at him. Scar or not, he was looking cocky, complacent, and worst of all, well rested.

"Where the hell were you last night?" I demanded. "You said you were going straight to bed!"

I should have known that would put his hackles up. He said crossly, "I took a walk and had a couple of drinks, so what?"

"I was counting on you and you let me down, that's what. Didn't you get any of your messages?"

"Yeah, I got a message to go see someone named Orozco at the cop shop." He shrugged. "So here I am, going to see him."

"Aaron, I was in *jail* all night. Orozco wanted to talk to you about my alibi."

"How the hell was I supposed to know that?" He did a double take. "Your alibi for what?"

"Better let the lieutenant explain," said Mike hastily. "Just ask for him at the front desk."

Aaron stared at each of us, then shrugged again and continued up the steps.

"Carnegie, be honest," said Mike, once we were alone. "Are you sure you don't need to postpone the wedding? You sound kind of ragged."

"Of course I'm sure! I'm fine, and you're getting married in the morning, mister." A thought struck me. "Unless you think it's not safe for Lily and the boys to be here, with a murderer loose?"

He shook his head with that world-weary look that sometimes made him seem older than his years.

"Do you think there aren't criminals loose in Seattle? Nowhere is absolutely safe. We do the best we can and press on."

"That's the spirit." I did kiss him now, just on the cheek but with enthusiasm. "Thanks so much for standing up for me, Mike. Am I released to your custody or something?"

"Not at all. My vouching for you might have helped a little, but basically there wasn't enough evidence to justify holding you." He dropped his voice. "The gun was a throwaway twenty-two with the number filed off, very professional. And you're no professional. Now, go get cleaned up and try to forget all this. I need to talk with Orozco some more."

"I thought you were on vacation?"

"I am, starting the minute Lily gets here. I'll see you at the ferry dock."

He patted my shoulder and went back inside the courthouse. Only when I reached the sidewalk did it occur to me, with an unpleasant little flinch of remorse, what a shock Aaron was in for when he heard the news about India's death.

*Oh, hell,* I thought. *At least he slept all night. He can handle it.* 

Then I continued to the parking lot—where I ran smack into the opening minutes of Friday Harbor's weekly farmers' market.

The market was a festive little affair, a cluster of stalls and tables thronged by locals and visitors alike. Who would have guessed, I thought as I glanced around, that so many wonderful things could originate from one small island? Scented soaps and flavored vinegars, homespun hats and handmade vases, dahlia tubers and take 'n' bake lasagnas.

The early-bird crowd buzzed with talk and laughter as they examined these wares, while excited children and inquisitive dogs wove in and out around their legs. The awnings flapped in the breeze, the blossoms showed gay in the sunshine, and someone was picking out a sprightly tune on a banjo. And there was even more to come: a flyer taped up everywhere announced the Art & Nature Fest tomorrow at the sculpture garden. No doubt about it, San Juan Island was tourist heaven.

Too bad I was a badly dressed jailbird instead of a tourist. I could see Scarlet straight across the parking lot, so I made a beeline for her, trying to will myself into invisibility. Time to get out of Dodge and into a hot shower. I might even manage a nap before it was time to meet Lily at the ferry dock.

"Hi, Carnegie!"

Peggy Nickles waved at me from a table where she was setting up a display of glass jars. She wore ultra-cool sunglasses and a bright pink skirt that started well below her hipbones and ended a few inches later. I tried a "Hi there, see you later" kind of gesture, but she called my name again and beckoned urgently. I sighed and went over, my feet slopping in the borrowed loafers. The jars were barbecue sauce from ZZ's kitchen, and by the time I reached the table Peggy already had her first sale.

"Would you like the Extra-Hot or the Super-Combustible?" she was saying brightly to a middle-aged couple. Then she glanced at me as she made change. "Carnegie, can I talk to you real quick?"

"What is it?"

"I had this idea for a frosting design-"

She was interrupted by the arrival of more customers, crowding around the table with money in hand. Barbecue sauce was a big seller this morning.

"I'll call you later at the bakery," I said, turning away.

"No, wait! I need your OK so I can get started. ZZ will be here soon, if you could just wait fifteen minutes or so?"

"Well—" I thought it over. If Peggy had "hooked up" with Guy Price, and Guy was dealing drugs, then maybe Peggy would knew something about Brenda Bronson. Something that might point the way to India's killer. "All right. Fifteen minutes."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Killing time at a farmers' market on a glorious September day, with the gulls wheeling overhead and the water sparkling in the harbor down below, should hardly have been a chore. But given my current preoccupations, and my need for a shower, I couldn't fully appreciate this one.

I tried, though. Keeping one eye on Peggy, I wandered among the awnings and the big umbrellas, from the ruby pyramids of local tomatoes to the golden blocks of local honeycombs to the bursting bouquets of local flowers. And after a while I got into the spirit of things. No one seemed to care about my hygiene, and everyone I met wore a smile. Besides, I was hungry, and there was food everywhere.

"Have a taste?" asked a bearded young fellow selling sausage, as he cooked up his first batch of samples on a sizzling hot plate. "It's all homemade."

I nibbled the smoky, anise-scented morsel he presented to me on a toothpick, and after that a teenage girl at a bakery stall offered me a slice of crusty, fine-crumbed bread with fresh cool butter. I munched it while admiring some lovely handwoven items being laid out on a trestle table by a fair-haired woman with merry blue eyes.

"I spin the yarn myself," she said, nodding at a scrapbook that lay open beside her. The photos showed a group of women in matching T-shirts clustered around a small wooden loom. "Last year my team won the Sheep-to-Shawl competition at the county fair."

And here all I do is plan weddings and find corpses. I complimented the weaver on her work and pressed on with my circuit. When I looped back to the barbecue display again, ZZ had arrived at last. I waited while he and Peggy conferred about the cash box, then she drew me over to a bench away from the crowd.

"So," I asked her as we sat down, "what's your design idea?"

"Lace," said Peggy. She pulled a scrap of paper from her purse and handed it to me. "You know that Norwegian lace they sell at the lavender farm? What if I tinted the frosting a pale, pale purple, like lavender, then piped on white frosting in a design like Norwegian lace?"

"That's a good thought," I said, looking over the sketch she had made. With some brides I wouldn't dare change the appearance of the cake at the last minute, but Lily trusted my judgment. "Peggy, this is very good. Let's do it."

"Terrific!"

She began to get up, but I detained her with a hand on her arm.

"Now I have a question for you. What do you know about Brenda Bronson?"

Peggy went very still. The sun was growing warm this morning, and her musky perfume was stronger than ever. She took a long, slow breath, and then she looked me straight in the eye and said, "I never heard of her."

It was a flat-out lie, I could tell, and that in itself was interesting.

"Are you sure?" I pressed her. "Because you seem to have

known Guy Price pretty well, and I hear that Guy used to do business with Brenda. Drug business."

"That's not true!" she said, her pretty mouth curling in defiance. "Who told you that?"

"India Doyle did, and now India is dead." I shook her arm gently. "Come on, Peggy, get real. There's something dangerous going on here, and I'm trying to find out what it is. What was the connection between Guy and Brenda, if it wasn't drugs? Were they lovers?"

That hit a nerve, and the violence of Peggy's reaction was startling.

"You shut up!" she snapped, springing to her feet and wrenching her arm away. Pain and jealousy were naked in her face. "Guy wanted me and nobody else. *Nobody*. You hear me?"

"I hear you," I said, standing up as well. "But—"

"If you want to know about Brenda, why don't you ask your friend Jeff Austin? The two of them used to be real tight."

Then she stalked away, leaving me staring after her. *Jeff?* Could he possibly be the crooked cop that India had heard about? If he was, and if he had learned that India was close to exposing him.... It occurred to me to wonder, with an uneasy shiver, how Jeff just happened to show up at the mausoleum right after Guy was killed. Had I been eating pizza with a double murderer last night?

No, that was impossible. I simply refused to believe it. I closed my eyes, queasy with fatigue and disgusted by my grubby state and, most of all, sick of this tangle of lies and suspicion. *Mike was right*, I told myself, *I should try to forget all this*. *I should concentrate on Lily's wedding, on innocent people and normal events and*—

Suddenly a bundle of innocence and normality grabbed me around the knees and hung on tight.

"Aunt Carrie!" shrieked my little savior, turning a beaming brown face up to me. "I found Aunt Carrie!"

"So you did, Ethan. Good job!" I held out my arms to Lily's four-year-old son and hoisted him gratefully into the air. Then I toted him in the direction that his chubby finger was pointing, to find Lily herself.

She was standing by my SUV, tending a pile of luggage and frantically scanning the crowd. At her side was her older boy, Marcus, who wore a T-shirt with front and rear views of a Tyrannosaurus rex on his narrow little chest and back. Lily wore a purple sundress and an expression of motherly rage.

"Ethan *James*," she flared, "how many times today have I told you to stay right by me? I swear, I'm going to put you on a leash like a puppy dog. Hi, Carnegie."

"Puppy!" Ethan cried. "I'm a puppy!"

Giggling delightedly, he launched into high-pitched barking just inches from my ear. I set him down hastily to preserve my hearing and had a friendly little tussle of greeting with Marcus. Ethan's features were still bland and plump, but Marcus had matured into a distinctive little rogue with a pugnacious chin and his mother's eyes.

"You ready to carry your ring?" I asked him, and he straightened up and saluted.

"Ready!"

"Good man." Then I hugged Lily, hoping I smelled all right, and asked, "Did I have the time wrong for your ferry? I wasn't expecting you yet. Have you talked to Mike?"

"He's around here somewhere," she said, "searching for this little escape artist. Ethan never goes far, but he goes, and if he's squatting down looking at a bug or something he's hard to spot. Anyway, we caught an earlier ferry, and when I called Mike he said your car was still parked out here, so we came to find you."

"I'm glad you did. It's so good to see you, Lily."

She gave me an anxious look. "Mike told me about the ... the recent events, but he says we shouldn't change our plans."

"I agree, one hundred percent. So what would you like to do with your extra time this morning?"

"Well, Mike offered to take the boys off my hands for a while so you and I can go over the details one last time."

"I bet he didn't phrase it that way," I said, trying to tease a smile out of her. "I bet it was something like 'So you two can obsess about the wedding some more.'"

That got more than a smile. Lily let out her wonderful throaty laugh and retorted, "No, he said so we could get right down to playing bride!"

We were both still laughing when Mike appeared to claim his soon-to-be stepsons, both of whom adored him. And why not, when he offered them ice cream so soon after breakfast?

All three gentlemen helped Lily load the luggage, including the garment bags holding our gowns. Then they set off in search of their treat, with Ethan perched on Mike's shoulders and Marcus hanging on one hand, regaling him with the wonders of boat rides. We watched them go until they disappeared around the corner.

"Looks like a family to me," I murmured.

Lily sighed. "I can hardly believe this is happening. I've been catastrophizing about ferry schedules and which shoes to wear and a million other things, and then Mike smiles at me and I'm so happy I feel like I've got light shining out of my pores. You know that feeling?"

Not lately, I wanted to say, and not consistently. But of course I didn't. I just rocked my shoulder against hers—we're both

women of height, my best friend and me—and said, "You deserve him, Lily. And he deserves you, and the boys deserve to be spoiled rotten. But what do you mean, which shoes? The lace flats are perfect."

She said, "But the heels are sexier, don't you think?" and we settled into playing bride with a vengeance, right there beside the SUV.

"Sure they're sexier, but I'm sticking with my satin slippers. We're walking on gravel and grass, remember. I don't want to teeter right into the pond...."

Lily had just decided in favor of the flats, the ones that matched her diaphanous shoulder wrap, when a familiar truck drew up across the street and the Nyquists got out. Sigrid wore the same dress as when I'd met her, and the same circlet of braids, but also a starched white pinafore edged with lace and a charming little corsage of lavender flowers. Erik, though dressed more somberly, had a spray of lavender in his alpine-style hat.

"How nice to see you," I greeted them, cringing a little at the thought of my own ensemble. "I didn't realize you had a table at the market. But it's perfect timing. Sigrid and Erik Nyquist, this is Lily James, Michael's bride."

Erik was in front, so Lily turned to him with her highwattage smile and held out her hand. But the smile froze at the sight of his reaction. He stopped so abruptly that his sister almost bumped into him, and he offered Lily nothing but an affronted glare.

Lily's hand remained suspended for what seemed like a very long time. Finally Erik took it stiffly and then dropped it immediately, as if the touch of her skin was physically painful. Behind him Sigrid stood rooted, her lips pinched together in a stiff, tight, unmistakable expression of distaste. For one baffled moment, I honestly didn't know what was wrong. There was a hideous little silence, and then Lily broke it.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you both and seeing the farm," she said warmly, as if she hadn't noticed a thing. "You just missed Mike, but we'll both come out there after lunch, if that's all right?"

Sigrid nodded, then found her voice. "We will be there all the afternoon today. Just now we are late, we must set up our table...."

I filled in with some hasty remarks about not keeping them from their business, and then they were gone. Erik hadn't said one single word.

"Damn them!" I said, as Lily and I climbed into Scarlet. I slammed my door. "Damn them both. Of all the—"

"Let it go, Carnegie." Lily drew a deep, uneven breath. "Mike does that sometimes."

"Does what?"

She bit her lower lip, blinking fast, and then made herself smile. "He forgets to tell people that I'm black."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"I'll find you somewhere else for the ceremony," I repeated obstinately. My outrage at Sigrid and Erik had congealed into a stubborn determination to move the wedding. "This island is swarming with romantic venues. Just say the word."

"The word is no."

As she said it, Lily dropped a pebble into the glass-clear water lapping softly against the dock in front of the Owl's Roost. We were seated side by side with our feet dangling over, the way we'd sat on the deck of my houseboat just a week ago, and the afternoon sun was drying my blissfully clean hair.

I'd taken my longed-for shower the minute we reached my room—after taking a minute to try and reach Aaron at his hotel. I wanted to apologize for pouncing on him back on the courthouse steps, but just like last night there was no answer. He might as well be three thousand miles away again, not answering his e-mail.

I'd also called Mom to see how she and Owen were taking the news about India. They were distressed, of course, so to spare her feelings I revised my night in the pokey into "I spent some time talking it over with the police." She accepted that, so now I was feeling better about her, a little uneasy about Aaron, and a lot pissed off about Sigrid and Erik. "Listen, Lily-"

"You listen, please. We took the Nyquists by surprise, that's all. Maybe they'll get used to . . . to the situation."

"And if they don't?"

"Then they don't." She shrugged angrily. "Pick your battles, I learned that a long time ago. I refuse to let these people diminish my wedding."

I tossed a pebble myself, chucking it as far as I could in the general direction of Canada. I have a lousy pitching arm.

"Mike's going to be furious about how they acted," I said.

"Not if we don't tell him." Lily caught my look and said, "I mean it! I will *not* allow this business to cause Mike any grief. I know they're old friends of his, but after tomorrow I never have to see them again. I'm sure we can all be civil for one afternoon. Back me up on this, girl."

"Well, all right. If that's what you want."

"That's what I want. And right now I want to show you the negligee I bought for tomorrow night. Come on."

As we went back inside the A-frame and down the hall to my room, I shook my head in admiration for Lily. Not at the way she was handling the Nyquists, because I would rather have fought it out with them somehow. But then I was safely Caucasian, and what did I know about these kinds of battles?

No, I was marveling at Lily's plans for her nuptial weekend. We'd been revising them out on the dock, now that I had private quarters for us to play in instead of a guest room at Owen's house.

They were excellent plans. Lily was a woman who understood her own needs and took care to meet them. Tonight, she had decreed, she would be a mom first and a bride second. Her own parents had passed away years ago, and this was essential to her. So tonight's shindig at ZZ's would be a family affair, with Marcus and Ethan sharing the guest-of-honor role with herself and Mike. Afterward she would take them back to the Hotel de Haro, where we'd already gotten her registered and left her mom-type luggage, and tuck them in bed as she had every night of their lives.

But first thing tomorrow morning, with the boys under the watchful eye of their favorite sitter Francine, Lily would slip away to the Owl's Roost to wallow in utter bridetude with me.

We planned to quaff champagne with our breakfast, fuss with Lily's hair and makeup, and take our own sweet time getting dressed. Then Lily's brother Darwin would fetch her away for a scenic drive around the island and some private time together—they were very close—while I hustled over to Lavender and Lace to make all ready for the bride's arrival.

During the ceremony itself, Marcus and Ethan would play their parts and eat their cake, but afterward Francine would whisk them off on a whale-watching excursion and then back to Seattle, leaving the newlyweds on their own for the week.

"No Harry Potter on *my* honeymoon," Lily had said, soon after Mike proposed. "I didn't even have a honeymoon the first time, so this one's going to be strictly R-rated."

"More like X-rated!" I exclaimed now, as she displayed her new lingerie behind the closed door of 6C. I lifted one particular wisp of scarlet silk. "My heavens..."

"Heaven has nothing to do with it." Lily smirked. "In fact—"

She was interrupted by a hearty knock on the door and quickly tucked the wisp back into her suitcase. Our visitor was Donald Coe, bearing a florist's arrangement of roses and baby's breath.

"Just delivered," he announced merrily, "for Lily James in

care of Carnegie Kincaid. Would that be you, miss? The blushing bride?"

He grinned at Lily, whose ebony cheeks would hardly show a blush, and she grinned right back.

"You bet it is."

"I thought so," he chuckled, presenting her with the vase.

So far so good—no hint of racism here—but then Donald settled himself, quite uninvited, into a chair. "The missus said she saw you two on the dock, and I said that must be the lady for the honeymoon suite tomorrow night. Welcome to the Owl's Roost! Didja notice the islands across the channel there? The big one is Saturna. Now, Saturna is in Canada, and if you could walk on water and you kept on going—"

"Oh, look," said Lily, waving the enclosure card. "These are from my staff at the library. Where shall we put them?"

We dislodged our host from his chair as we fussed around finding a spot for the flowers, but even then he didn't take the hint.

"Guess where you'd find yourself if you kept on going?" He leaned comfortably against the wall by the room's open door and folded his arms on his paunch. "Why, you'd find yourself in downtown Vancouver, B.C.! Isn't that something?"

Lily nodded, nonplussed. I could read her mind: was her honeymoon going to be punctuated by monologues from this affable bore?

"Yessir," Donald plowed on, "and if you keep a sharp lookout on the channel, you might see a killer whale! How about that? Isn't that something?"

Happily for us the cavalry arrived at this point, with the John Wayne part taken by Pamela Coe with a good-size wrench in her hand. She could have bopped her hubby on his bald head without protest from us, but she did even better by handing him both the wrench and his marching orders.

"Now, Mr. Coe, let's not pester these girls. The drain in 3A is stopped up again, so you get yourself in there and fix it, you hear me?"

"At your service, Mrs. Miser," he grumbled, but in a jocular tone, and smiled at her complacently. "That's my missus! Never hire a plumber or a 'lectrician when you can tackle the job yourself for free. Hardly ever parts with a dime, isn't that something?"

Pamela shooed him out the door and then turned back to us, wrinkling her nose in apology.

"I'll keep him away from you and your man next week," she told Lily, and as she did I wondered what it was like being married to a professional nuisance. "And I'll have your suite all ready for— Oh! Oh, look at that!"

She was gazing over Lily's shoulder at the wedding gown, which we'd hung carefully from the back of the closet door. The gleaming purple satin and the cascade of ruffles stood out against the humdrum furnishings of the room like an orchid against crabgrass.

"Can I touch it?" asked Pamela shyly, and when Lily nodded she reached out to stroke the ruffles with one plump hand. "I've never seen anything so pretty."

Then she gave a sharp little sigh and hurried away with her face averted, closing the door softly behind her.

"Was she crying?" said Lily.

"I think so. Poor woman, being stuck with him! Not much romance in that marriage."

"None at all, it looks like."

We shared a little shudder of sympathy, and then she went

back to displaying her trousseau. As I marveled over each item, I felt a bit wistful myself. I wasn't in Pamela's middleaged rut, of course, but I wouldn't have minded picking out my own wedding gown one of these days. As it was, my date for this wedding wasn't even returning my calls. Always the bridal planner, never the bride...

As if to illustrate my lament, Lily's cell phone sounded, and from the way she lit up I knew the caller was Mike. But after a laughing exchange about the boys and their ice-cream expedition, her voice became guarded.

"Actually, Carnegie and I ran into them at the market just after you left....Yes, they seem very nice....Sure, we'll be ready to go." She said good-bye and then grimaced at me. "Showtime. He's coming to get us for lunch and a visit to the Nyquists'."

At lunch Marcus showed off his newly grown-up table manners for Aunt Carrie, but on the drive to Lavender and Lace he reverted to his usual boisterous self. I sat between him and Ethan in the back, where the three of us engaged in a hilarious bout of rock, paper, scissors.

At one point I interrupted the game to ask Mike a carefully worded question. "Tell me, how did Aaron take it when he heard what happened to India?"

"Quietly, I guess you'd say. He just gave Tony his statement and then said he was going for a long walk somewhere."

"No message for me?"

"No." Mike met my eyes in the rearview mirror. "Sorry."

"No big deal," I said. *Or is it a big deal, this constant bickering? I need to decide that pretty soon,* I thought, as we pulled up to the farm and parked by the tidy white shop. *And so does Aaron.* 

Lily was right about the Nyquists in one respect. Now that

they'd had time to absorb the fact of this mixed marriage, they made a better show of welcoming Lily. They even left the shop in the care of an assistant so they could both lead us along the winding path to the ornamental pond.

Absorbing, however, is not accepting. Sigrid's subdued courtesy was nothing at all like the joyful greeting she had given me as a friend of the unseen and presumably white bride. And Erik kept a little apart from us and once again spoke hardly a word. The Nyquists might be going through the motions but I felt the chill, and I knew that Lily did too.

"There is room here on the grass for all your friends to stand," said Sigrid, gesturing at the area around the willow tree. There was no one around except the swans, who glided toward us, leaving arrowhead ripples on the water's surface. "Does it seem satisfactory?"

"It's lovely," Lily replied, equally polite. Then she took Mike's hand and her voice grew warmer. "It's more than lovely, it's perfect."

"Just like you," said Mike, and gave her a gratified kiss on the cheek. He was still in his tourist outfit, shorts and fanny pack and all, and between the bare knees and the goofy grin of infatuation he looked about nineteen years old, and quite adorable.

He held on to Lily's hand as he turned back to Sigrid. "The place looks great. Was it a big deal, going organic?"

"It took much time, and much work." She gazed with pride at the gently undulating lavender fields around us. They stretched outward from the pond like a living patchwork quilt, in subtle shades of green and lilac and violet under the blue sky. "But our business has profited."

Sigrid talked about the process of securing organic certification, which was apparently a major undertaking for a small operation like theirs. She addressed herself solely to Mike, but if he noticed anything amiss between his old friends and his fiancée, he didn't show it. Perhaps he simply thought them shy.

Or perhaps he thought that the sedate Nyquists were taken aback by this pair of irrepressible little boys. Certainly Marcus supported that idea, having recently concluded that he was not a little boy at all but an alien from outer space. Just now he was tugging at Erik's elbow.

"I came to the earth 'bout a gazillion years ago to play with all the dinosaurs," he announced. "Then I decided to be bornded to Mommy."

"I see," said the old man gravely. Then, since the alien clearly expected more of a reaction, "And what did you and the dinosaurs live on?"

"I told you, on the earth."

A faint unwilling smile tugged at Erik's carved-oak features. "I meant, what did you eat?"

Marcus shrugged. "Plants, I guess. And maybe apple juice."

"A very good choice," said Erik. "I believe dinosaurs would like apple juice."

"Uh-huh. C'n I go swimming?"

"Not here," I said hastily, with visions of a sudden skinny dip disrupting tomorrow's proceedings. "This isn't swimming water, OK? Absolutely no swimming."

"OK, I'll just pet the ducks."

He darted toward the pond, and there followed one of those fast-forward scenes that happen so often around kids. In an eyeblink, Marcus was knee-deep in the water, the outraged swans were honking and fanning their enormous and rather menacing wings, and all five adults were rushing into the fray to restore order.

Once the scolding, soothing, and wringing out of socks

had been accomplished, all seemed to be well—until we realized that the alien's little brother was nowhere in sight.

"Ethan!" Lily shouted in exasperation. "Ethan James, you get back here right this second!"

As we peered around, I realized that some of the lavender bushes were quite tall and more than sufficiently dense to hide a small boy.

"That means now, Ethan." Mike raised his voice, but managed to sound quite calm and not at all forbidding. "Let's see you jump up and give a big yell for me, OK?"

A minute passed, then another, with no result. Mike sighed. "Selective deafness. Sigrid, would you and Erik stay here with Marcus, please? I'll run across and make sure Ethan doesn't go near the road."

"I'll go back to the shop and our car," said Lily. "Sometimes he just backtracks. Carnegie, could you check up there?"

She pointed up a slope of flowers to some fir trees, and I set off. I doubted that Ethan could have reached the trees so quickly, so as I strode along the path I looked carefully down each row of bushes.

Sure enough, I found the little fugitive not too far away, crouched out of sight behind a sheltering wall of fragrant, rustling wands of pinkish violet flowers. He lifted a ragged strip of cardboard toward me, gripping it tightly by one end and following it closely with spellbound eyes.

"I found a *ant*!" he whispered. "A little one, so don't scare him. His name is Joey."

I smothered a laugh and waved my arms to signal Lily. Then I crouched down myself. "Better say good-bye to Joey, Ethan. Your mommy's looking for you. Go ahead, put him down so he can go home." I helped to guide his little fist to the ground, and as I did so I noticed a line of incomplete text printed on the scrap of cardboard. The scrap seemed to have been torn from a container of some kind, and the words gave me something new to consider about the upright, blameless, and certifiably allnatural Nyquists.

I didn't know what illius 85 parts per million broad-spectrum fungici was exactly, but it sure as hell didn't sound organic to me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Confront the Nyquists, or suppress the evidence? It made for an interesting dilemma, and one that I was still pondering an hour or so later as we entered the Hotel de Haro.

On the way back from the farm, Mike and Lily had tried to update each other on the friends and relatives they'd be meeting tonight. But my honorary nephews were growing restless, making conversation difficult, so I offered to shepherd them through the Roche Harbor marina to look at the boats.

"Oh, could you?" said Lily, as the boys loudly voiced their enthusiasm. "Hush, you two. Inside voices, remember?"

They obeyed, at least for the moment, trooping quietly through the quaint old lobby of the hotel. The crooked wooden windows gave the place an air of romance, like a coaching inn from a Daphne du Maurier novel. And speaking of romance...

"Just give me a minute to try Aaron's room," I told Lily.

"No problem. I'll get Marcus into dry shoes. And I'll give Ethan *another* little talk about not wandering."

"I'll hang on to him, don't worry."

"I never do, girl." She gave my hand a quick squeeze. "What would I do without you? Maybe Aaron can go along."

But Aaron still didn't answer, and I wondered briefly if

something had happened to him. Then the boys came clattering downstairs, and I shook off the thought as they hustled me past the hotel gardens toward the water. Mere flowers held no allure when there were boats to be seen.

*Confront, suppress*... Keeping an eagle eye on Marcus and holding Ethan firmly by the hand, I strolled along and pondered my options. I'd been tempted to produce the evidence back at the lavender farm, just to jolt Erik and Sigrid out of their frosty reserve. But that would just be getting back at them for their attitude toward Lily, so I'd decided to take more time to think the matter over.

Now, with the scrap of cardboard burning a hole in my pocket, all I could think was that I wished I'd never seen the damn thing in the first place. Clearly Erik and Sigrid were cheating on their organic certification, but what business was that of mine? Why antagonize them even further and spoil the serenity of Lily's wedding? Why—

"That's a bad word!"

We had reached the marina and Marcus, defender of decency, stood pointing at a sign that hung over the tanks and hoses of a marine waste-pumping station. Draped with nautical flags, the sign read M.V. PHECAL PHREAK, *We Take Crap from Anyone*.

Ethan, who couldn't read, giggled anyway and chanted, "Bad word, bad word, bad word."

"It's meant as a joke, Marcus." I held out my other hand. "Come on, there's some giant boats down there. Let's go see them."

But Marcus made it clear that he disdained the holding of hands as babyish. So I let him lead us down the long narrow dock, which made a jaunty line of gray planks and white boats against the brilliant blue of the forest-ringed bay. Every slip seemed to be occupied, the smaller motorboats on our right hand and the big cabin cruisers to our left, with gull-spattered pilings every five or six yards.

I checked my watch as we went. Another twenty minutes and the boys would go back to their mother. Ethan needed a nap, and I could use one myself. I had that light-headed feeling brought on by a shortage of sleep, and there was still the party at ZZ's to get through tonight.

At least we'd have a nice evening for it. The sky above us was as clear as it could be, and the forecast looked good for tomorrow too. *Happy the bride that the sun shines upon...* 

I returned to my pondering. I was all for truth, justice, and the organic way, but was I willing to get involved in the Nyquists' situation? No, I told myself, better to mind my own business. I had my hands full anyway, between the wedding and the murders. Mike had been reassuring, but he wasn't running the investigation, so for all I knew I was still a suspect.

I was certainly still curious. India's death looked professional, as he'd pointed out, but what about Guy's? Had a drug dealer really wielded that knife, or was it a woman scorned, as my instincts suggested? Or maybe one of Guy's blackmail victims...

*Blackmail.* The thought stopped me in my tracks. What was it Erik had said when I overhead him behind the door of the lavender shop? "If this goes on we are ruined." And he mentioned Sigrid's new ideas, ideas that she claimed were good for the future of the land. Of course, the organic program!

If the Nyquists had cheated on their certification, and Guy the inveterate snoop had found out about it, maybe they really were among the victims of his blackmailing ways. And maybe they'd done something about it....

Ridiculous. These two stiff, proper old people, luring a

strong young man to a rendezvous in the darkness and then stabbing him? Ethan pulled impatiently at my hand and I continued on, thinking furiously and hardly seeing my surroundings. Instead I was seeing Afterglow Vista, the Grecian columns pale in the half-light, the ghostly stone table surrounded by empty stone chairs. Had Guy gone there to do a deal, or meet a lover, only to find Erik Nyquist lurking in the shadows?

No, it was absurd. I was turning paranoid on this little island where everyone knew everyone and half of them seemed to have motives for killing Guy Price. I was still feeling sheepish about suspecting Owen. What would Mike think if I implied the same suspicion about his old friends?

Normally I would talk over a tangle like this with Lily, but that was out of the question this time. The Nyquists wouldn't detract from her wedding, and neither would I. As for Aaron, we couldn't seem to cross paths without sex or anger or both getting in the way. I suddenly wished I had nothing to think about but dinosaurs and aliens.

"Aunt Carrie," said my little alien, "why is that man so big?"

Once again Marcus was pointing, this time at someone following us from the landward end of the dock.

"It's not polite to talk about people's looks," I said automatically, having heard Lily say it dozens of times before.

"He looks like a football player. I saw them on TV, and they're superbig just like that."

"It's still not polite."

I glanced surreptitiously behind me to see if the stranger had heard him. But the superbig man wasn't a stranger. He was Jeff Austin, in jeans and T-shirt, striding purposefully down the gray planking toward us with another casually dressed man at his side.

The second man was unkempt and unshaven, and something in both their expressions, severe and almost grim, made me stop and scoop Ethan into my arms. If Jeff was truly in league with Brenda Bronson, if he was the crooked cop...

"Marcus, come over here to me. Right now, I mean it."

But Marcus, suddenly defiant, went trotting toward the men. Jeff saw him coming and dropped to a crouch, beckoning the boy to him and holding out one massive arm. He looked immense, a solid block of muscle, and Marcus seemed so small and fragile. Should I rush over to defend him, or take Ethan out of harm's way?

If there was even any harm in the offing. I couldn't tell. I looked wildly around, hoping for other tourists, hoping that my fatigue-blurred brain was making a crisis out of nothing. How could the dock be so deserted?

No, not completely deserted. A man with a duffel bag was approaching from the far end, a man with a pale round face that looked somehow familiar. Moonface! Whether I was still under surveillance, or he really was a boater, it didn't matter. I wasn't alone.

"Officer Calhoun!" I called. That would put Jeff Austin on notice that his actions were being witnessed. "Can you help me here, please?"

Calhoun stared at me, then past me at Jeff, and then everything happened at once. Calhoun spun around and set off at a run for the end of the dock, and over the thumping of his footsteps I heard footsteps behind me. Someone shoved me roughly aside, the unshaven man went pounding past with a gun in his hand, Ethan cried his shrill surprise right into my ear, and Jeff Austin set Marcus beside me and barked, "Drop flat now!"

I dropped, covering both boys with my body as best I could. Over Ethan's startled sobbing and the hammering of my heart, I heard the sounds of a scuffle and a harsh voice saying "Lawrence J. Calhoun, you are under arrest for the murders of Guy Price and India Doyle. You have the right to remain silent..."

Then a pair of huge but careful hands was helping me to my feet and taking each of the boys gently by the shoulder. Jeff kept his body between us and the other men, as his unshaven companion hustled Calhoun away in handcuffs. Ethan, tearyeyed but silent, climbed back into my arms, and Marcus seemed to have decided that holding Aunt Carrie's hand was acceptable after all.

"Everybody all right?" asked Jeff. He watched my face, letting me decide how to handle this. "How are your..."

"Honorary nephews," I said, trying to steady my voice. "Their mother's at the hotel. We're fine. Your friend bumped into us, that's all."

"I'm sorry about that. My 'friend' was in a hurry and didn't look where he was going."

"Aunt Carrie knocked us down!" said Marcus, teetering between alarm and excitement. "Why did Aunt Carrie—"

"You know," Jeff cut in, "it looks like your aunt and your little brother could use some assistance from you. Do you think you could help them get back to your mom?"

This reminder of his big-brother status did the trick with Marcus. He nodded solemnly at Jeff, man to man, and began to escort me importantly back to land. I trailed along with Ethan curled limply against my shoulder and looked a question at Jeff. "Ask Mike Graham," he told me. "He knows the whole story."

Then he strode on ahead toward a patrol car parked up near the main road. Calhoun was in the backseat, staring daggers at me through the window. I shivered and followed Marcus into the hotel.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I've thrown bigger parties than the one at ZZ Nickles's café that night, bigger and more elaborate and certainly far more pricey. But halfway through the evening, after a visit to the kitchen, it came to me that I'd never thrown a party that was so much simple, good-natured fun. Nothing fancy, nothing trendy, just a bunch of people with big hearts and big appetites sharing a hearty meal and showing their affection for the bride and groom.

I looked around the restaurant with a critical but satisfied eye. We were serving ourselves from a buffet line tonight, and ZZ had set up the beer table at the opposite end of the room "just to keep folks cruisin'." And cruising they were—the room was full of people balancing heaped-up plates and foaming beer mugs, while the kitchen crew brought forth more and yet more platters of mouthwatering food.

"Coming through!" said a waitress, skirting around me with a small mountain of green-speckled biscuits. "You should try one of these. Honey and jalapeño."

I grabbed one, and also snagged another ear of fresh corn from where Peggy Nickles was replenishing the buffet. Peggy was looking especially yummy tonight, in a clingy pink top and black leather pants, and attracting her share of attention from the waiters and the male guests both. I smiled and resumed my place at the "head" table—actually in the middle of the room—where Lily and Mike sat with her brother Darwin and his date, the little boys, Mike's father, and the Nyquists. Smaller tables all around us, bedecked with flowers, were filled with friends and coworkers, librarians and cops, black and white, all mingling quite agreeably.

Most of the guests were simply celebrating the happy couple, but a few of us had private reasons to rejoice. Especially me—I was giddy with relief at knowing that India Doyle's murderer was behind bars and that I had dropped off Friday Harbor's Most Wanted. Mike did know the whole story, just as Jeff said, and he'd explained it to me as he drove me back to the Owl's Roost so I could change for the party.

The infamous Brenda, it seemed, really had dated Jeff Austin at one time. But not for long, once he met some of her shadier friends. She had moved on to Officer Calhoun, and that proved to be a far more profitable relationship for both parties.

The San Juan County police had begun to suspect Calhoun of taking payoffs, but they had no evidence until the State Patrol started an investigation of Brenda Bronson. Mike explained that her case set them on a trail of drugs and money that reached from Seattle back to Friday Harbor, and finally to Calhoun.

"The local guys are kicking themselves for not spotting Calhoun sooner," he told me. "Price was a dealer himself, so nobody's shedding tears for him, but the Doyle girl was kind of a local favorite. Not too good at her job, and kind of a flake, but they liked her."

"I did too," I replied. "But are you sure that Calhoun killed Guy as well? It seems like such a different murder, more personal. I've got this feeling that—" "A feeling." Mike smiled and shook his head. "Woman's intuition?"

"What's wrong with woman's intuition?"

"Carnegie, listen to me." We'd gotten out of his car by then, and Mike had placed his hands on my shoulders for emphasis. It was such an unusual gesture for him that I listened hard. "The police have their job, and you have yours. *Please* stop mixing them up."

So I'd kept my doubts to myself, and tonight the whole question of violent death was being eclipsed by all the vibrant life around me.

True, I had Sigrid on my left hand, hardly a laugh riot, but on my right was Mike's father, who was quite the character. A widowed gent with a full but tidy beard and silver hair worn rakishly long, he looked like a Civil War general. Or maybe a riverboat gambler.

"Richard Graham," he told me gravely, as introductions were made around the table. There was a distinct gleam in his eye as he added, "I am not a Dick."

"I would never have suggested that you were," I replied demurely, and he threw back his head and laughed.

So I was having a fine time, gnawing on smoky succulent ribs and chatting with Richard, when my mother and Owen stopped by the table. Owen was moving somewhat stiffly, but looking sharp in a dark suit and tie. Mom was dressed in deep blue and beaming like a bride.

"I just wanted to thank you," I heard Owen say to Mike, for including me and my daughters in the festivities. Very generous of you. Very thoughtful."

"We're both happy to have you," Mike replied, and put an arm around Lily's shoulders. "Carnegie's part of our family, you know." I noticed Sigrid watching the bride and groom closely, and I hoped she could see how very much in love Mike was and how graciously Lily was behaving to everyone in Mike's circle—unlike the groom's two rather ungracious friends.

"Louise," Lily was saying with a sly grin, "did I hear that congratulations are in order?"

Mom blushed and looked pleased. "Don't you know it's a crime against etiquette to announce your own good news at someone else's wedding? Carrie would never forgive me."

"Sure I would!" I called across the table. "Tell her, Mom."

"Tell us all," urged Richard. "Can't ever be too much good news, you know."

So Owen announced that Louise Kincaid had consented to become his wife, and the entire table toasted them variously in beer, club soda, and orange juice. Then Marcus spilled his juice in his lap, and while Lily scolded him gently, Mike rose to take him to the men's room for a cleanup.

"Not you," said Marcus stoutly. "I want him."

He pointed decisively at Erik Nyquist and stage-whispered to his mother, "I think he's a alien too."

Mike shook his head fondly and deferred to Erik, so what could the man do but extend his gnarled old hand to take Marcus's small brown one?

"He's really warmed up to your brother," I said to Sigrid, just to rub it in. "I'm so glad we could all be here together."

She nodded, warming just a little herself, and said in her careful English, "I was afraid Erik would not be well enough."

"What do you mean?"

"He has the kidney stones sometimes. I took him to the hospital not long after you came to see us on Sunday. But he is much better now."

"I'm glad to hear that." Sunday . . . the night Guy was killed. If

I'd known that before, it would have spared me all that brooding about the Nyquists' possible involvement in murder. As we chatted a bit more about Erik's health, I was busy wondering what else I'd been wrong about. On impulse, I ventured a question.

"Sigrid, I meant to ask, when you do organic farming, are there still pesticides and fungicides that you're allowed to use?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Lavender is quite sturdy most of the time, so we do not need them often. But we found rhizoctonia that is stem rot—in the pink Melissa after such a rainy June, and so we applied a fungicide that is approved for us. You are interested in organic agriculture?"

"Well... there's just so much I don't know about it."

That was putting it mildly. I made my way to the bar for another beer, to wash down the crow I was eating with my barbecue tonight. But then Kimmie Winter cut in front of me and I remembered that, in some cases at least, I was an excellent judge of character. She was hanging on the arm of Mike's best man, a detective who was both single and drop-dead handsome, and trailing a cloud of perfume and flirtation behind her.

"... could never do what *you* do. I mean, all the danger that you're in. You must have nerves of steel! I'd love to see you in your uniform ..."

"She's incorrigible," said a voice in my ear. Adrienne stood behind me, looking executive and yet almost feminine in a white silk suit. "She did jury duty last year and ended up dating the bailiff."

We shared a chuckle and then she said gruffly, "I suppose I owe you an apology about reporting your argument with India to the police."

*This is your new stepsister,* I told myself. *Play nice.* "Not at all. I'm sure you were just trying to be factual."

She smirked cynically. "Oh, like you were being factual about my watch, when you must have guessed that Guy was just repairing it? Face it, dear, we tried to screw each other. So, bygones and all that?"

"But I *didn't* guess—" For my mother's sake, I clamped my teeth against the aggravation rising up in my throat. "Bygones, Adrienne."

As I took the beer back to my table, I realized I was sweating, but it wasn't just reaction to Adrienne. The crowded room had grown uncomfortably warm, and the party's energy had peaked to the point where it would either find a new outlet or fizzle like a leaky balloon. I might have cued Lily and Mike to make their exit, but they were having such a good time that I hated to cut things short.

Then, with impeccable timing, ZZ threw open the French doors to the deck and roared out, "I bet you people want to *dance*!"

Dancing wasn't in the official plan for this party, but ZZ was a master improviser. The crowd was ready to kick up their heels, and if the music was zydeco from a boom box instead of waltzes from a string quartet, so much the better. The tide of revelers floated me out to the deck, where the night air was invigorating and the stars were bright overhead. Friday Harbor must be used to hearing commotion from ZZ's, I realized, because people going by waved and honked their horns.

It was a dance to remember. Mike and Lily started things off, the rest of us joined in, and when Richard scooped me up I went willingly. As we whirled around I saw happy faces, young and old, go flashing by as if I were on a carousel. I was tired and dizzy and I couldn't hear myself think, but that didn't matter. I'd done way too much thinking lately, and not nearly enough dancing. Richard was an excellent dancer. We swayed together through a song or two, and he said, "This is some extended family Mike brought me! I haven't had such a good time in years."

As I nodded, smiling, Darwin appeared beside us. He was tall, dark, and handsome, and a good friend of mine.

"May I cut in?"

As Dar swept me away in his muscular arms, Richard went off to dance with the bride. Partnered with Darwin and then with ZZ, I saw Mike dance with Lily's aunt from Chicago and caught sight of Ethan's curly head amid a cluster of kids. Giggling delightedly and hopping up and down like tadpoles, they were accompanied by a pair of gray-haired ladies who had shed their shoes.

I laughed aloud and pointed them out to ZZ. When you see that happen, you know you've got a terrific party going. And when I realized that one of the ladies was Sigrid Nyquist, I was astounded as well as pleased.

I also realized at that point that I was utterly exhausted, and said so.

"You go set yourself down, Sugar Pie," ZZ said. He had a sheen of perspiration on his forehead, and a grin like a wide crescent moon. "I'm going to bring out the coffee and the praline tarts. These folks are going to need their dessert."

I agreed, and as the music slowed a little he danced me back into the restaurant. Inside, some of the guests were making use of the now-uncrowded space to finish their dinners or just relax and listen to the music. I saw Kimmie and the bedazzled best man close together at the bar, and some of the smallest children dozing in their parents' arms, and ... Aaron, hunched over a beer at a table by himself.

I sank into the seat across from him, lifting my hair in both

hands to let the air cool my neck. I was still breathing hard, and half-laughing. "What a night!"

"I can see that," he said sourly. "Looks like you're having a ball."

"Why shouldn't I?"

He gulped at his beer. "I just thought it might bother you that a girl was murdered."

"Bother me?" I blazed up, planting my hands on the table and leaning forward. "Aaron, I found India's *corpse*. Don't try and tell me I'm not bothered."

"Sorry, sorry." He took one of my hands in his and shook it a little. "I've been driving around all day long thinking about her, and then to walk in here and see people dancing—"

"It seems cruel?"

"Yeah. I guess I've been getting morbid since the fire, Carnegie. Things get to me."

I touched his cheek gently. The right one, the scarred one. "Of course they do. Shall we get out of here?"

He nodded, and I went to fetch my tote bag. I was rummaging around in it as Aaron joined me, and he must have seen my face change.

"What is it, Stretch? Lost your keys?"

"N-no. No, I found something." I closed my fingers around the smooth plastic shape, the size of a checkbook only thicker. "I found this."

I drew the thing from my bag and held it out on my trembling palm. Guy Price's e-mailer.

Chapter Thirty

It glared at us from the scuffed-up desktop in my room at the Owl's Roost, a small plastic clamshell with a blank little screen like a malevolent eye. Aaron hadn't suggested turning the e-mailer over to the police, and I hadn't either, because we both knew the questions Lieutenant Orozco would ask.

Did you remove this device from the body, Ms. Kincaid? It wasn't in your possession, so perhaps you hid it somewhere. Withholding evidence is a serious business, Ms. Kincaid. What do you mean, it appeared in your purse without your knowledge? Ms. Kincaid, do you honestly expect me to believe that?

"Tell me again," said Aaron, rubbing the back of his neck as if it were sore. "Tell me exactly where your bag has been today. Take it from the top."

I sighed. We were both tired, and both baffled. Someone had planted the e-mailer on me, but who? Someone concerned with Guy's death, obviously. But was it his murderer, trying to implicate me all over again, or some other person with some other purpose in mind?

I myself had nothing in mind at the moment, nothing but stupefying fatigue. Being marooned on an island, discovering a corpse, and then spending the night wide awake in a cell was hardly the best preparation for the day I'd had today.

Aaron and I had a pot of coffee going on the room's hot

plate, so I rose wearily from the edge of the bed to refill my mug once again. The woods beyond the window were dark and silent, the other residents no doubt asleep, so I kept my voice down as I took it from the top.

"First thing this morning, they gave me my stuff back at the jail. But they'd already searched it all inch by inch, so this thing couldn't have been in my tote bag until after I left the courthouse."

"Right. Then you went to the farmers' market. Did you talk to anyone on the way?"

"I told you already, just you and Mike. Hey, maybe you two are in cahoots—"

"Very funny. Did you put the bag down anywhere at the market, or leave it with anyone?"

"No, why would I? The only one who came near it was Lily, there at the market and then when we came over here with our dresses." I closed my eyes, remembering. "After that I took it with me to Lavender and Lace. I might have set it down by the pond when I went looking for Ethan. In fact I'm pretty sure I did. But we already know that the Nyquists didn't kill Guy."

"We don't know it, we presume it." Aaron sipped at his own coffee. "I want to talk to someone at that hospital. But go on. You went directly from the farm to Roche Harbor? No stops?"

"No stops. And I know for sure that the bag was over my shoulder when I took the boys to the marina, because it got in the way when I lifted Ethan up."

"And Calhoun never got close enough to you to drop something in it? You're sure about that?"

"Absolutely. Jeff made certain that he didn't come anywhere near the boys. So if it wasn't Calhoun..." That was the crux of the matter. Not just that Larry Calhoun didn't plant the device on me, but that he might not have killed Guy Price. All along, my woman's intuition had been telling me that Guy's murder was a crime of passion, not an execution. And if I was right, a murderer was still at large on the island.

"If it wasn't Calhoun who put it there," said Aaron, bringing me back to the question at hand, "then it must have been someone at the party. That's what, forty or fifty people? Terrific. Was your bag out in plain sight?"

"Well, not exactly plain, but it was lying on the floor under my chair. With all the comings and goings, anyone could have stopped there for a minute or two, just long enough to drop that thing in it."

We stared at the little device in silence, stumped. We hadn't read Guy's messages yet—we hadn't even turned it on—but my fingers were getting itchy.

"Presumably," I said, getting up and setting my mug on the desk, "presumably the messages in here don't include any from the killer, or else he wouldn't have left it with me."

"He or she. Unless it wasn't the killer who put it there, but someone who wanted the killer identified without coming forward themselves."

"But why use me for that? Why not give it straight to the police?" I sent him a look over my shoulder. "Enough speculating. Let's read the damn thing."

"Stretch," Aaron said, with his first smile of the night, "I like the way you think."

Twenty minutes later my mug was cold and we were back to staring at the damn thing. It was demanding an eightletter password, and rejecting our guesses with maddening monotony. First I tried GUYPRICE.

Invalid Password. Enter Password.

PRICEGUY?

Invalid Password. Enter Password.

Aaron tapped in CARETAKE and AFTERGLO.

Invalid Password. Enter Password.

We even tried PASSWORD. Same infuriating result.

"This is either going to be ridiculously easy or completely impossible." Aaron flopped back on the bed and spoke to the ceiling. "What do people use for passwords?"

"Lots of times it's the names of their pets, but Price didn't have any."

"You don't either," he said, "so what do you use?"

"Wedding phrases, or sometimes my dad's name. Or Gene Kelly." He cocked an eyebrow at me. "I *like* Gene Kelly. How about you?"

"Baseball players, mostly. Batting averages."

"That's no help. We don't know Guy's birthday or parents, and I don't think he was a sports fan, so— Wait a minute, his car! I rode in his sports car." I took the e-mailer in my lap and Aaron sat up to watch. I typed in CORVETTE—and got the *Invalid* message again. "Damn."

"Good try, Stretch. What year was it?"

"What do you mean, what year? I rode in it a couple of days ago."

He rolled his eyes. "What year was the Corvette?"

"Oh. How should I know? It was . . . purple."

"Jeez, you girls. Did it look vintage? Were the headlights covered or open?"

"Open?" Was it me, or was this conversation becoming surreal? "I didn't know you could close headlights."

"Never mind, let me try."

He tried A53VETTE, and A54VETTE, and then I flopped back on the bed myself while he ran through the rest of the century. The tapping of the tiny keys was hypnotic, and my eyelids kept fluttering down...

"Hey, Stretch!" Aaron bounced the mattress to rouse me. "Stay with me here. You said Price was a ladies' man?"

I hauled myself upright. "Ladies and gentlemen both, from what I could tell."

He keyed in LOTHARIO. No dice. "Probably too literary for someone like him."

"Not really. Guy was quite articulate. He just dealt drugs and slept around a lot." Either hobby could have gotten him killed, but I was betting on the latter. "Try CASANOVA."

Aaron tried it. Nothing.

"So what's another word for a man who sleeps around?"

"Men get all the good words," I complained. "He's a womanizer, she's a slut. He's Don Juan, she's a whore. He's... he's...Give it to me."

I grabbed the e-mailer and typed in HOROLOGY—and up popped Guy Price's in-box, just like that.

"Clocks?" Aaron muttered, as we squinted at the screen. "He collected clocks?"

"Repaired them. It was his hobby, and he probably did it for spare cash too. Remember I told you about Adrienne's wristwatch?" I clicked through the folder menu with unsteady fingers. The coffee was making me jittery without waking me up. "Guy used to come over here and work on Pamela's hideous cuckoo clocks, too. OK, I found Sent Messages. See, there's the ones I wrote to Lily and Mike. And the deleted ones I saw that day..."

There was Katy, whose message called You must be kidding

conveyed the fact that in her considered opinion, Guy was a totally heinous bullshitter. AnnJ, in more tasteful phrases, implored Guy to come to her party next week, which was now this week. And various other correspondents, male and female, gave us a sense of Guy's amorous adventures.

But there was nothing that suggested criminal activities, and nothing about a Sunday-night tryst—until we reached the final message, from Penny.

Meet me tonight??? she pleaded. I won't ask you about other women ever again. I want you to take me tonight. I want you to ...

Penny wanted quite a lot, some of it semiviolent, and she was so graphic about her wishes that I turned away. Aaron, reading to the end, seemed to have no such scruples, but I noticed that he closed the message when he was done instead of leaving it on the screen.

"Well, well," he said. "We may have a winner. So who's this Penny? Ring any bells?"

I shook my head. "I haven't heard the name since I've been here. Penny... is that short for Penelope? Not that I've heard that either."

"It's also a nickname for redheads," Aaron pointed out. "Any coppertops around here besides you?"

"Not that I know of, but I haven't met that many locals, remember. And no sexy young women except Kimmie and ZZ's granddaughter. This could be from anyone on the island."

"Yeah, I suppose so." Aaron drummed his fingers on the plastic clamshell. "What's the granddaughter called? You said Price was sniffing around her."

"I'm sure they were lovers, but her name's Peggy."

"Close but no cigar."

"No. Except..." We looked at each other, mouths gaping. Tired minds think alike. "Except her last name is Nickles!"

"Penny Nickles, *yes!*" said Aaron, and hugged me. "The perfect nickname. I bet she sent this."

"Maybe." My weary head sagged against his shoulder. "But that doesn't make her the killer. Who'd want a romantic tryst at a mausoleum?"

"True. Price probably met her somewhere else, like a motel, and then ended up dead in the woods sometime afterward. Maybe your woman's intuition is wrong and it was a drug hit after all."

"Maybe," I said into his shoulder. The excitement of unlocking the e-mailer's secrets had fizzled away into a dull weariness. "But it still seems like a crime of passion to me. What do we do next?"

Aaron kissed the top of my head and said, "Nothing tonight, Sleeping Beauty. But tomorrow morning we'll talk to this Peggy and see if she knows where Price was heading after he left her."

I sagged further. "I can't. Lily's coming here first thing to get dressed for the wedding."

"All right, then, I'll talk to her. Meanwhile," he murmured into the back of my neck, "we appear to be in a bed. Now, I know you prefer islands"—he lowered me onto the pillow and began grazing on my lips—"but you have to admit it's an awfully nice bed."

When the racier women's magazines draw up their lists of Ten Torrid Tricks to Drive Him Wild, they almost never include dozing off under a man as he's trying to make love to you. It's not much of a compliment to him, somehow.

But Aaron didn't take it too badly. I know this because I came half awake—or maybe only a quarter—as he pulled the

covers over me and kissed me lightly on the forehead, then turned out the light and let himself out the porch door. I thought I heard him whisper something before he left. I thought it might have been "I love you."

But I couldn't tell, dammit, because I was deep asleep.

Chapter Thirty-One

Sometime during the night, my soft-focus dream of Aaron became a hard-edged nightmare about Afterglow Vista. Once again I was walking in the hush of dawn, once again I stepped through the dim silent forest of evergreens and madronas and saw the stone columns rising like tree trunks in the dappled sunlight. But this time my awed curiosity was replaced by the sickening foreknowledge of what I would find beyond them.

Unwillingly, inevitably, I peered over the edge of the platform and saw the sprawled figure of a man facedown among the leaves. In slow-motion terror I tried not to go to him, I tried to wake up, but the dream dragged me to his side to kneel in his blood, to crouch close and listen as the forlorn thread of a voice rose from pallid lips.

"Pen..." he pleaded. "Pen!"

"Penny!"

I wrenched myself upright, out of the nightmare and into the darkness of my bedroom. *Guy wasn't pleading for a pen, he was pleading with Penny. He was begging her not to leave him there to die.* 

I curled into a ball under the covers, hiding from the horror of it all, reliving the horror of it... *Stop right now*. I forced my arms and legs to straighten. *Stop imagining and think*. *Think*! Peggy Nickles could easily have slipped the e-mailer into my bag. She was at ZZ's throughout the party, moving from kitchen to buffet and back again, stopping to talk with guests at various tables. But why do it, when she knew about the message that would incriminate her?

Unless Peggy assumed that her message was deleted and therefore irretrievable. But surely that was too naive. Almost everyone knows by now that data can be salvaged from computers after a simple erasure. And Peggy seemed more savvy than most.

I thought some more. Suppose it wasn't Peggy who planted the evidence. Suppose, as Aaron had said, it was someone who wanted to point an accusing finger at her without the police knowing they'd done so. But why? I could understand remaining anonymous if the killer was a dangerous criminal who might seek retribution. Was Peggy all that dangerous? A young woman who waitressed in her grandfather's café...

*Her grandfather.* ZZ was a fiercely religious man who frowned on Peggy's minor flirtations, let alone her possible affair with a notorious sinner like Guy Price. ZZ would never turn a blind eye to murder—but maybe he couldn't bear the idea of Peggy knowing that he had informed on her.

So when ZZ needed a way to convey this evidence to the police, he'd thought of me. Why not, when he'd come upon me dining with a police officer? He probably knew, via the island's highly effective grapevine, that I was a witness to one death and a suspect in another. Who better to plant Guy's e-mailer on than someone with a vested interest in solving the crime his granddaughter had committed?

I went over this line of thought again—and again, and wearily yet again. The logic seemed solid, but I might not be

seeing things clearly, as late as it was and as tired as I'd been for what seemed like weeks now. Maybe there was another way of looking at the situation. Maybe...

I drifted off again, and after a tumbled sequence of dreams I was back in the woods at dawn. All was silent, and then a woodpecker began to hammer on the broken column at Afterglow Vista. *Bang...bang bang...bang bang bang...* Which was odd, because wasn't the column made of stone? Why would a woodpecker...*BANG*!

"Carnegie? Carnegie, are you there? No fooling, girl."

Lily sounded very joyful and very tense—a mixture I didn't hear from her often. I fumbled myself into my travel robe and stumbled my way to the door. Wrong door. I stared blankly at the empty hallway for a moment, then did a groggy 180 and let her in from the porch, still half asleep.

"You look awful!" she said gaily, slipping off her jacket. It was early, and the September sun hadn't reached into the woods yet, so the air from outside was moist and cool. "But this should help."

She stepped back outside to fetch what she'd left on the porch: four croissants in a bakery box, a bottle of chilled champagne, orange juice to mix with the champagne for mimosas, and two of the most enormous lattes I have ever seen.

"My hero," I croaked out, and let her set the drinks down before I hugged her. The curlers in her hair scratched my cheek, and beneath her T-shirt I could smell the body lotion I'd given her for Christmas. "Don't you know that brides are the ones who get waited on? You're supposed to act bitchy and demanding and throw hissy fits. What's wrong with you?"

She laughed. "Guess I didn't get the memo. I figured with all you've been through lately, you could use a little spoiling."

"Could I ever." I yawned so hard I heard my jaw click. "Gosh, it felt good to sleep."

I began to make space for our breakfast and realized that Guy's e-mailer was gone from the desk. Suddenly, every word of last night's discussion with Aaron came flooding back, and so did my midnight brainstorm. *Peggy*! I didn't want to darken Lily's morning, but I had to warn Aaron to stay away from Peggy Nickles. The more I thought about Peggy's violent jealousy, the more convinced I was that she was the killer.

"Lily, I need to make a quick phone call. Why don't you open the champagne on the porch in case it erupts? Better close the door, there's mosquitoes around."

Aaron was in his room at the hotel for once, and still asleep by the sound of him. I spoke quickly.

"Listen, Peggy didn't put the e-mailer in my bag."

"Huh? What time is it?"

"Never mind that. I think I know who did put it there. I think it was ZZ."

"ZZ... the grandfather?"

"It makes sense." I began to explain why, but Aaron was awake now and took my point immediately.

"Got it, Stretch. He wants to point a finger at her but doesn't want her to know it. You're right, it does make sense."

"So you see why I had to catch you before you went off to question Peggy about Guy."

"Oh, yeah. She'd either stab me too or else skip town. Or both. Don't worry, I'll steer clear. In fact, I think I'd better report all this to Mike."

"You can't do that!"

"Why not? If I go to Orozco he'll suspect you again. Mike will listen."

"On his wedding day? Aaron, if you get him involved and ruin Lily's honeymoon I'll—"

"All right, all right! Look, we'll talk about it at the lavender farm. If the girl hasn't run off yet, she'll keep a few more hours."

"OK. I'll come find you at the reception."

Not exactly the romantic scene I'd envisioned, but what else could I say? Lily was coming back inside with the bottle, laughing and shaking champagne from her fingers. The droplets sparkled in the morning sun, and her eyes were shining.

"I've got to go now," I said. "No, wait!"

"What?"

"Aaron, I'm sorry about last night."

"So am I," he said. "Believe me, Stretch, so am I."

I put down the phone. Lily paused in her mimosa-making and looked at me quizzically.

"That was a really sorry 'sorry,' " she said. "None of my business, I'm just the demanding bride, but what's up?"

"Well, Aaron was here last night..." I didn't mention the e-mailer, but I did describe the finale of my evening—Aaron amorous, me slumberous.

"You're kidding!"

When Lily laughs, the air around her dances, and it's damn hard not to laugh along. This time she laughed so hard that a curler came loose.

"It's not *that* funny," I said, beginning to chuckle. "Aaron must have been so...so...OK, I guess it is that funny. The poor guy!"

We lost it then, snorting and hooting and carrying on, and we hadn't even started on the champagne. Mostly weddingmorning nerves on Lily's part and reaction to stress on mine, but still it was a good, good laugh, and I felt vastly the better for it. Let the police do their job, as Mike had said. I had my own job today, and it was a joyous one.

So my best friend and I dried our eyes and raised our glasses for a toast. I had a million good wishes to offer Lily, and I'd muster up a few of them later at Lavender and Lace. But for now I kept it simple, and said what we always said.

"Cheers, dear."

"Cheers."

The glass rims made a merry little clink, and the mimosa tasted sweet and cold and exhilarating. We savored our coffee and our croissants and chatted about Mike and the boys and the goodness of life in general. We didn't talk any more about Aaron, or about my matrimonial prospects, and that was fine with me. It was Lily's day. Then when breakfast was done we washed every iota of butter from our hands and began to dress the bride.

Brides have always wanted to look their best, but to my mind a lot of them were going overboard these days. A manicure is one thing, emergency liposuction is another. Botox, nose jobs, crash diets—inflamed by celebrity weddings and hounded by magazine covers, some brides were approaching the wedding day less as a happy ritual and more as a terrifying test of physical perfection. Not a celebration, but a photo op.

Lily James, I'm happy to say, was not one of those brides. She fussed mildly about her hair as we wound it into an elegant upsweep, and she swore like a sailor when the champagne bottle wobbled off the table and she cracked a fingernail saving it. But she giggled as we fixed the nail with superglue, and when a few stray curls kept escaping, she decided to let them escape.

"Mike won't care," she said serenely, as she fastened the

amethyst earrings that were his wedding gift. "I bet if I ask him tomorrow he won't remember what color my dress was."

"Believe me, this dress with you in it is unforgettable. Watch out for the hem." I held the folds of royal purple satin aside as she stepped into her gown, and fastened it up the back as she adjusted herself into the bodice. Then I stepped aside to survey the result. "Hum *baby*! You're magnificent, Lily. Take a look."

The mirror inside the closet door threw back Lily's image, tall and statuesque, her lush curves caressed by the silk and outlined by the fall of satin ruffles down one hip. With her hair swept up and her stately shoulders bare, she looked like royalty.

"Oh," she said weakly. "Oh, my."

I slipped on my own slender column of peach-colored silk, gave my hair a shake, and took my place beside her. The narrow glass barely held us both, and we moved back to view ourselves head to foot.

"Peace on earth," I said, "and good tall women. As Marcus would say, we rock. Now, where's your stole? Don't move, I'll find it."

But the gossamer stole, when I found it, was in sad shape. It had slipped from the hanger and been kicked into a corner, probably by Aaron as he made his exit last night. I held the length of violet gauze up to the window. Not torn or soiled, thank goodness, but sadly twisted and crumpled.

"I'm so sorry, Lily! But it's OK, it just needs ironing."

"Are you sure?" The first sign of worry appeared in her eyes. "Have you got an iron?"

"No, but the Coes must have one I can borrow. Back in a sec. Here, have some more champagne. Yikes, did we really go through the whole bottle?"

I tipped the last fizzing drops into her glass and hastened out the door into the morning sunshine, realizing as I went that I was just a tad tipsy. The path through the trees seemed bumpy underfoot, and I heard myself humming "Here Comes the Bride" a little off-key. *Steady, there*. I cleared my throat and trod more carefully, enjoying the liquid flutter of the long skirt around my legs.

The Coes were out, but their cottage door was unlocked. I left it ajar as I went in and gave a wide berth to Lampus Horribilus where it frowned from the end of the reception counter. I peeked into the laundry room beyond. Industrial-sized washer and dryer, shelves of linens, a clutter of cleaning products—and at the back, an ironing board and a big battered steam iron with a heavy-duty cord. *Thank you, Pamela*.

I took the iron but left the board after a doubtful examination of its scorch-marked cloth cover. Better to use a bath towel on the floor than risk a stain on Lily's stole, and anyway it was getting late. I rushed back though the office, humming double-time.

"Tum tum ta tum, tum tum ta—ack!"

As I rounded the counter, my toe caught in a loose edge of carpet and I nearly went flying. Instinctively, I grabbed for the counter's edge with my right hand. But that hand held the iron, which clanged heavily against the ceramic owl.

"Dammit!"

I managed to stay upright but lost my hold on the iron. It went skidding away to disappear behind the counter, the cord whipping behind it like a startled snake. Meanwhile, the tall cylinder of the lamp rocked on its base and then toppled over, a hideous tree surrendering to the ax. Timberrr...The owl plunged to the office floor and smashed into a jagged mess of green and brown shards. "Oh, hell."

I gazed at the wreckage and giggled, torn between chagrin at destroying Pamela's property, dismay at the delay this would cause, and a certain primitive glee at killing a creature that was too ugly to live. Then I heard voices from outside that erased the glee: Donald and Pamela, approaching the cottage door.

With the forlorn hope of salvaging something, I knelt beside the debris. The owl's face was still mostly intact, one malicious black eye staring up at me accusingly as I lifted it. But then a glitter of reflected light caught my attention and I tossed the fragment aside.

The glitter came from the long blade of a knife that had been concealed within the lamp. And the blade showed faint brown traces that looked very much like dried blood.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"We should had that transmission looked at before." Donald's voice, coming through the half-open door, was childishly petulant. "Now there's a tow truck to pay for on top of the mechanic. Didn't I say we should had it looked at?"

I heard Pamela's softer tones, but the words weren't clear. Nothing was clear, nothing but that long wicked blade winking up at me from the carpet. With my wits dulled by the champagne and the shock, all I could think was *Don't let them see it.* 

I was slow to sort out the implications of the weapon and its hiding place, but that much at least seemed plain. So I hurried to the doorway with no conclusion, no plan, and not much of a coherent thought in my head.

"Hey there, Carnegie," said Donald from the foot of the porch steps. He flipped up his flip-up sunglasses and put his hands in the pockets of his appallingly plaid Bermuda shorts. "Why aincha at the arts fair? Everybody else is. They got painting and carving and all sorts of stuff..."

As he burbled on, it came to me that I hadn't heard the voices of the other Owl's Roost guests since earlier this morning. That must be why. Did that mean Lily and I were alone with the Coes, here at the end of the road? If only Donald would shut up so I could think. If only I hadn't drunk that champagne.

"... even a blacksmithing demo, isn't that something? You oughta drive over there, it isn't far. Watch out for our buggy, though, it's dead in the water right there where the driveway turns."

Pamela, behind him, sent me an amused and apologetic smile. "She's not going to the fair, Mr. Coe. Today's her friend's wedding."

"Hey, that's right, Pen! Don't know how I forgot." He blinked up at me from behind his fish-tank lenses. "Shoes and rice, huh?"

"What a lovely dress," Pamela continued, coming up the steps to stand beside me. "Is it silk?"

"Thanks," I said reflexively. "Yes, it's...did he call you Pen?"

"Nickname from way back," said Donald. "Penny-Pinching Pamela, 'cause she never spends a dime. Penny for short, Pen for even shorter! Isn't that something?"

I stared at Pamela as if for the first time, at her lush figure and dark eyes and rich auburn hair. She wore baggy khakis today and a matronly blouse, but she was an attractive woman, perhaps a sensual woman. It all clicked. I had told Aaron I didn't know many sexy young women on the island, but what about a handsome woman of forty?

*Pen. Penny.* Just as I had with my mother, I'd let my preconceptions about middle-aged decorum get in the way and never considered Pamela Coe. Pamela, trapped here with a tedious husband, and a good-looking womanizer like Guy Price just up the road. The memories rushed in: Pamela blushing when her husband called the caretaker queer, and the mention of Guy's repeated visits to fix her clocks, and how upset she had been on Monday morning.

But was she upset because her lover was dead, or because she herself had killed him? Did she go to that rendezvous with a knife, to avenge herself for Guy's infidelity, or did Donald bring it when he trailed along behind her in the darkness? And which of them used a master key to plant the e-mailer in my purse while I was out on the dock with Lily yesterday?

The questions were colliding in my mind while my feet stayed rooted to the doorstep. What should I do? I could run back to my room and call Orozco, but the minute they came inside and found the lamp, whichever one was the killer would realize that I'd seen the knife—and the other would be left at the killer's mercy.

"Folks," I managed to say, "could the two of you come over to 6C just for a minute?"

Pamela frowned gently at me with her usual mild solicitude. "Why, what's wrong, Carnegie?"

"Ya need something fixed?" Donald trotted up the steps and slipped into the office before I could stop him. "Let me just get my— What in the wide world?"

Pamela followed him inside and I did too, but whether to protect husband or wife I still couldn't decide. Then, as the door swung shut behind us, I thought I had my answer. Donald was squatting on his haunches, looking at the knife with a baffled expression on his pudgy features.

"What's this doing here? It's from our kitchen, isn't it?" He glanced up at me, and then around him at the office, where nothing else was out of order. "I don't get it. Were you trying to fix the lamp or something? I got all kinds of screwdrivers in the back there." "No, Donald," I said gently. "I wasn't fixing anything. That knife was hidden inside the lamp. I think it's the one that killed Guy Price, and I think we'd better call the police."

Pamela made a whimpering sound in her throat. I looked over at her, and as our gazes met and locked, a silent understanding passed between us. She sensed at once that I knew about her and her lover, and I sensed—or thought I did—the emotion in her widening eyes. Guilt and shame, but not rage, not violence. When the police came, Pamela would go quietly.

"But..." Donald rose to his feet, bewildered and pitiful. "What's a murder weapon doing here, missus? What's Price got to do with us? My lord, did *you* kill him?"

"Of course not," she whispered, as if her voice had fled. "Why would I hurt him? I loved him!"

"What? You loved that queer?" Donald kept licking his lips, over and over, like an anxious dog. "You mean he wasn't queer? Were you sleeping with him? Were you cheating on me? You betrayed me!"

His voice wobbled as bewilderment yielded quickly to fury—much too quickly, I realized, and with a false note sounding in every stilted phrase. No wonder the knife's sudden appearance had taken him aback. He was the one who hid it away in the first place, to be produced in just the right incriminating circumstances.

Donald Coe was trying to frame his wife.

"So that's why Price kept coming over here when I was out," he went on abruptly, like an actor suddenly remembering his lines. "How could you do that to me, missus? How could you? And then you murdered him!"

It's an age-old role, the cuckolded husband, but Donald Coe overplayed it badly. As he railed at his wife for my benefit, I knew I'd been a fool to believe, however briefly, that the woman who shed a sentimental tear over Lily's wedding gown had brutally slain her own lover. Donald was just setting things up to look that way, and my breaking the lamp had simply accelerated his cumbersome scheme. But now he was rushing his performance.

"You sent Price that message to lure him to the mausoleum," he said, sounding more and more scripted, "and then you killed him."

That was Donald's big mistake, mentioning the e-mail. But then, stupefied by champagne and adrenaline, I made mine.

"How would you know about the message," I wondered aloud, "unless you sent it yourself?"

Donald turned his head slowly and stared at me. "No  $\ldots$  no  $\ldots$  "

I edged toward the door. No telling what this incompetent schemer would decide what to do next. But suddenly Pamela stooped into my path and snatched up the knife. She waved it wildly and I reared back, bumping into the macramé owl and setting it swinging like a pendulum.

"Guy made me happy!" she cried out in anguish. "He made me feel like a woman. You stole him from me..."

With a howl of pain, Pamela raised the knife and lunged toward Donald. She was moving blindly, and with no real force, but it was enough to frighten her husband. He skipped nimbly out of the way, reached behind the counter—and produced a handgun.

I gasped aloud, and Donald pointed the weapon at me. It was small, but the dark hole of its muzzle looked enormous.

"Surprised?" he asked in a swaggering tone, blue eyes bulging behind the thick lenses. "Out here in the woods, a man needs to protect himself. It's loaded too, don't think it isn't, so you stay right where you are. You put that knife down, missus. I was gonna get your fingerprints on it somehow, you know, so now that's done."

He nodded busily, a man checking off his Things to Do list. Pamela dropped the knife and stood weeping softly, her face in her hands. Instinctively I moved to comfort her, but that set Donald off again.

"Stand still!" he snapped. "Just stand still and let me think."

He had a lot to think about. He had the murder weapon with his wife's prints on it, and an incriminating e-mail signed with her name, but he also had me to deal with. I would have bet money that Donald had seen some movie about a man framing his wife for murder. But in the movies these plots go smoothly, and if they don't the plotter knows how to improvise. Clearly, improvisation was not his strong suit.

"Let's see," he muttered to himself, and began to lick his lips again. He was sweating now, and the smell was rank in the room. "Let's see..."

"Donald, listen," I said. "Don't make this worse than it already is. If we go to the police right now—"

"Shut up!" he shrieked. "Shut up or I'll make you!"

He looked from me to Pamela, round-eyed and panting, close to panic, and I knew I'd been wrong to try and reason with him. The smallest incident could push Donald over the edge, the least little spark could set him off....Just then, footsteps sounded on the porch.

"Carnegie, what's taking so long?"

The three of us froze as the cottage door banged open and Lily walked in.

Chapter Thirty-Three

We see what we expect to see. Resplendent in her purple gown and preoccupied with her wedding, Lily didn't even notice the gun. She just smiled and nodded at the Coes and then focused on me, asking what was up and where the heck was that iron?

At least that's what she tried to ask, but Donald yelped in alarm and swung the pistol in her direction. Pamela leapt at him to spoil his aim, but they ended up grappling and falling heavily to the floor among the remains of the owl.

As they went over I tried to shove Lily out of the way, but then Pamela's flailing legs caught the hem of my long dress and I too went crashing down. I cried out as my hand ground painfully onto a bit of pottery, I heard Donald grunting and Pamela sobbing aloud, Lily rushed forward to help me—and then the gun went off.

"Carnegie, no!"

I rolled free of the others, stunned by the sound, and as Lily called my name and lifted me to my feet I was trembling in shock. She patted me all over, the way you do a child who's taken a tumble to see if he's broken anything, and I couldn't catch my breath to tell her to leave me and run for the police. By the time I did, it was too late.

"Sit on the floor, both of you." Donald rose to his knees

beside Pamela, the gun still firmly in his grasp. "Swear to God, I'll shoot you. Sit on the floor!"

We obeyed, and with his free hand he shook his wife roughly by the shoulder. No response. Pamela had collapsed facedown, one arm twisted beneath her, one cheek pressed to the carpet, and her eyes hidden by that lovely auburn hair. As we watched, a rivulet of blood slid from under her hair to pool around Donald's eyeglasses, which lay nearby among the fragments of the lamp.

Blinking and squinting his small, naked eyes, Donald patted the carpet till he found the glasses and held them up just inches from his face. One lens was cracked, but he wiped them on his shirt, leaving a bloody smear, and put them on. He was breathing hard, almost panting, but the pistol stayed steady.

"OK, then," he said, his voice breaking like a teenage boy's. He licked his lips and tried again. "OK, then. This is what we're gonna do..."

We took the SUV, with me at the wheel and Lily right behind me in the backseat with Donald close beside her. The few cars that passed us saw two formally dressed women and their male companion, probably out to pick up a second gentleman for some Sunday event. Nothing unusual, nothing out of the ordinary.

Our captor wasn't much for strategy—surely he'd be safer at the Owl's Roost than out on the road—but his tactics were sound. He had forbidden us to speak to each other, and I didn't dare speed or swerve or do anything else to attract the attention of other drivers. Not with a gun jammed into Lily's ribs. For her part, Lily's only hope was to keep still.

At least she was keeping her cool, and she knew that I would as well. We weren't screamers, Lily and I. I could see her face in the rearview mirror, eye shadow and mascara still unsmudged, and when she caught my look she gave me a tremulous wink. I nodded, and without a word we'd said a lot. We're going to stay calm. We're going to deal with this. It's going to be all right.

Looking into Lily's eyes, I almost believed it.

Donald Coe was anything but calm. He shifted in the seat, muttering to himself, and the first time I slowed for an intersection he almost lost it.

"What are you stopping for?"

"It's a stop sign, Donald."

"I can see that. You think I can't see that? OK, now keep going."

That's when I realized that he didn't have a strategy at all he was just trying to put distance between himself and Pamela. Donald hadn't meant to kill her, I was sure of that, and when push came to shove he might even have abandoned his half-baked scheme to frame her for Guy's death. It was a wonder he'd had the nerve to kill Guy in the first place.

There I go judging by appearances again, I chided myself. Donald looked and sounded like a fool, a nerd, an ineffectual man of no account. But when I recalled the nasty details of that e-mail he had forged, the sexual violence it spelled out, my mouth went dry and my foot slipped on the gas pedal.

"Watch it! Drive right or I'll kill her."

Slowly, carefully, I turned left onto Roche Harbor Road. That took us toward Friday Harbor, more cars and more people, and maybe more chances for escape. We passed the turnoff for Lavender and Lace, and I could read Lily's thoughts as she watched it go by. Mike would be there soon, and so would her little boys. Would she ever see them again? Would I ever see Aaron?

My knuckles went white on the steering wheel, and I made

myself take a slow breath. Time to think, not feel. I was still buzzed from the champagne, but now the caffeine was kicking in—a potent combination. *So use it. Think...* 

Darwin would be showing up at the Owl's Roost sometime soon to fetch Lily. He'd find us gone, but would he realize that my vehicle was absent as well? No, he'd never seen Scarlet. So what would he do? Try Lily's cell phone, and mine, but both were lying useless inside 6C. He'd knock at the office, but Donald had locked that door when we left. Would Dar look inside and see Pamela's body? I couldn't recall if those windows were curtained—

"Why'd ya go this way?" Donald, unfortunately, had also calmed down and begun to think. "I didn't say to drive into town! Turn here. Turn!"

I turned, onto something called Egg Lake Road. We went through some woods and then passed a little fishing dock, a sign for Amity Gardens, another sign for some kind of herb farm. Traffic was sparse along here, more bicycles than cars, and no one gave us a second glance.

Eventually Lily and I would be late for the wedding, and Mike would get worried, but how could he possibly find us? How long would it be before he asked the county police to put out a bulletin for this car, and how long would Donald's nerve last? *Maybe quite a while*, I told myself, trying to summon up some optimism. *If we don't provoke him, if we don't do anything to*—

"Donald, please listen to me." Lily used the composed and respectful tone she took with difficult library patrons. "The shooting was an accident. Carnegie and I were both witnesses, and we'll both testify to that."

*Oh, my God,* I thought. *She doesn't know.* Lily didn't know that she was sitting next to Guy Price's murderer. And even if

she suspected, she hadn't read that e-mail, she couldn't guess at the poisonous rage that roiled and burned inside Donald Coe. I tried to catch her eye in the rearview mirror, but she was looking downward with a little frown, concentrating, moving from one phrase to the next like stepping-stones across a dangerous current.

"If you take us back right now," she said, "then you haven't committed any kind of crime. Do you understand? The shooting was just—"

"Shut up!" he squealed. "Just shut up and let me think!"

He must have prodded her hard with the gun barrel, because Lily gave a startled moan.

"Which way?" I said quickly. "There's an intersection coming up. Donald, please tell me which way to go."

That distracted him, and just as I hoped, it seemed to give him more sense of control.

"Take a right, and then a left on Boyce Road. That's it ... left here. We'll stay on the back roads and then ..."

And then what? That was the crux of the matter. We couldn't drive around the island forever. Sooner or later Donald would have to chance the ferry dock, but he must know how risky that would be. Or would he try to steal a boat?

The possibilities ran through my brain as they must be running through his, while we rolled down one shady lane and then another, emerging into sunshine and then plunging into shade again, passing farms and shops and country inns, circling the interior of the island and then transversing it north and south until it felt like we'd been driving forever.

Except for Donald's clipped directions, none of us said a word. And eventually even the directions ceased. I watched him in the mirror as he chewed on his lower lip, lost in thought. Glad enough to have him quiet, I just kept driving. I watched Lily too, and as I watched a tear brimmed in each eye and ran silently down her cheeks. I knew, just as though I could read her mind, that she was thinking about Marcus and Ethan. Then she looked up and saw me. I made myself smile, and she gave me a brave smile back and blinked the tears away.

*Hang on, girl,* I was telling her, and she was telling me the same thing. *Hang on.* 

By this time I'd completely lost track of our location. We were on Cattle Point Road, which sounded familiar though I wasn't sure why. Trees went by, sunlight flickered, more trees, and then the road began to rise as we left the woods behind. We climbed onto a wide windy plateau of golden grassland, and I recognized the prairie landscape of American Camp.

The road was empty, though, and the visitor center up ahead and the open fields around it looked deserted. Where were all the tourists? My heart sank as I remembered: closed for renovations. And this was Sunday. Not even construction crews would be out on a Sunday morning.

"Whadja come here for?" said Donald, suddenly coming out of his funk. "Go back north. I don't want—what's that? What's that noise?"

The dashboard was dinging at me. I searched the indicators and almost laughed aloud, though it would have been a panicky laugh. India had been right about the SUV.

"Donald, we're running out of gas."

"What? Oh, damn. Oh, dammit!" He peered frantically around, paralyzed with indecision. "What...where..."

"There's a grove of trees ahead," I said soothingly. "Why don't I drive in there, so no one can see the car?"

Concealing Scarlet was the last thing I wanted to do, but

pulling Donald back from the brink of hysteria seemed more important. And who would search for us here anyway?

Donald nodded eagerly. "Yeah, OK, drive in."

I eased the car off the road, bumping along on the tussocky ground, and crept into the dappled shade along the fringe of the grove. Then I carefully set the parking brake and willed my hand to be steady as I turned off the engine. This might be our only chance.

"Donald, I have really got to pee, and I bet Lily does too. Would you please let us get out for a minute? Please."

"Well..." More lip-chewing. "Well, all right."

"Thank you."

I looked into the rearview mirror as I said it, but I keep my expression blank. Lily, returning my gaze, did the same. I gazed deep into her eyes, and it was as close to mental telepathy as I'll ever get. We were ready.

Moving slowly, keeping my hands in view, I climbed out of the driver's seat and stood passively beside it, acting the compliant hostage as best I could. The morning was still, the leaves hanging motionless, and I could hear the dry grass rustling under my peach-colored slippers. Lily emerged from the backseat, also on the driver's side, so that her door hung open between me and Donald as he scooted across to follow her.

Lily tugged her purple ruffles clear of the car....Donald put one foot on the ground and brought his gun hand into the open....The muzzle wavered away from her just for an instant...

*"Go!"* I screamed as I shoved at the door with all my strength, slamming it into Donald and briefly pinning his arm against Scarlet's side. *"Go!"* 

Chapter Thirty-Four

It almost worked. When the door hit him Donald yelled in surprise and pain, and dropped the pistol. I snatched it up triumphantly, the grip still sweaty from his hand. I didn't know how to shoot it, exactly, but with Pamela's fate in mind I did know enough to put a safe distance between me and Donald before I threatened him with it.

My slippers crunched on the dry turf as I backed away. Donald grunted and freed himself from the car, nursing his arm but apparently uninjured. His eyes were fixed, just as mine had been back at the office, on the muzzle of the gun.

"Just stay...right there...." I panted, feeling cold and almost sick from the adrenaline rush.

I gave a fast glance sideways, out of the grove toward the open field, where Lily had hiked up her skirts and gone sprinting for the safety of a little white farmhouse. It made quite a picture, that glorious purple satin rippling across the burnt gold of the meadow, with a white picket fence stretching out between her and the farmhouse.

A picket fence and a flagpole. So intent had I been on driving, and on Donald, that I hadn't realized we were so close to the officers' quarters. And Lily had never been to American Camp, so she didn't know she was fleeing to an empty building. "Never mind!" I shouted to her. "You can come back, I've got the g—*aaagh*!"

My right foot plunged into a rabbit hole, my right arm windmilled, and somehow the gun went flying right back at Donald, to land in the weeds near his feet. He had it leveled at me before I even regained my balance.

At first he was too angry to speak, his eyes bulging ominously and his mouth working without a sound. I brushed the grass stems off my silk backside and waited, afraid he would read my thoughts in my eyes.

If he doesn't know the house is empty, I thought, if Lily stays inside there and he thinks she found a phone, I could bluff him....

But Donald knew. He lived on the island, he probably sent his guests to this park all the time. He knew.

"Go after her," he said, and motioned with the pistol. "Stay in front of me with your hands stretched out sideways. Walk real slow, damn you."

Lily saw us coming from the porch of the house, saw that I was once again Donald's prisoner, and for my sake she obeyed his next instructions and went inside.

He wanted to tie us up this time, I could tell. But the interior, dim and musty and lit only by dazzling splinters of sunlight from the shuttered windows, offered him nothing to work with. No rope or twine, not even an electrical cord, just a long table with some antique-looking tools, a row of quaint uniforms hanging on hooks—for historic reenactments? and a few incongruously up-to-date folding chairs.

One of the tools was a coarse iron blade with wooden hand grips on either end, for making oxen yokes or barrel staves or whatever the hell they made in the 1850s. Donald saw me eyeing it and suddenly shoved me away from the table.

"Take a chair over there and sit. You too," he said to Lily,

indicating a spot a few yards away. "Sit on your hands, both of you."

That shove was the first time Donald had touched me, and I desperately wanted it to be the last. An image formed in my mind of him picking up that tool himself, to use the blade on one of us, and I had to clench my teeth to keep from retching.

Lily and I sat on our hands, in our beautiful new gowns, and Donald retreated to stand near the door and contemplate his hostages. We looked at him, at the space between him and our chairs, and then across at each other.

The deep purple satin of Lily's dress was swallowed by the darkness, but the whites of her eyes showed clear, as mine must have. Once again we exchanged thoughts without words. We could rush for the gun, but by the time we crossed that open space to the door one of us would die trying. Or maybe both. Probably both.

So we sat, and went on sitting while Donald Coe tried to decide what to do next. After a time the wind came up, whining and growling in the rickety old timbers of the building. The sun was still bright, but a squall must be coming across the strait. I could hear it in the hissing of the high meadow grasses, and in the way the flag on its pole crumpled and cracked like the sail of a boat.

The wind made Donald restless. He fidgeted and muttered and even paced a little, back and forth at his end of the room, as if he were the captive and not the captor. His pudgy features were mostly in shadow, but the random lines of sunlight from the gaps in the shutters sometimes glinted off his glasses or slipped along his pale legs in their ridiculous plaid shorts.

After a while the muttering grew louder, though no more understandable, and between that and the noise of the wind I

risked a whisper. I should have voiced some plan for escape, but I didn't have one, and this was more important.

"I love you, Lily."

"I love you, girl." She swallowed hard and held her head high. "Mike will take care of the boys."

"You and Mike together. You'll see."

She opened her lips to reply, then pressed them tight and turned her face away as Donald strode suddenly toward us. He raised the gun, its muzzle seeking first Lily as a target, and then me, and then Lily again, like the head of a snake uncertain where to strike.

"All right!" he said, angry and indignant, as if we'd been arguing with him. "All right, I'm leaving the island. But not with both of you. I only need one."

Donald's eyes slid back and forth from Lily's face to mine. He'd stabbed Guy in the back, in the darkness, and he hadn't meant to kill Pamela. But two innocent women, sitting helpless...

"It wasn't supposed to happen this way, was it?" I said gently. "No one was supposed to die except Guy Price."

"He deserved it! Sneaking around, ruining everything. I'm telling ya, he had it coming!"

"But we don't." I didn't mention Pamela, for fear he'd kill us all in his despair. "We haven't hurt you, Donald, and you don't have to hurt us. We could help you get away and then—"

A stronger gust of wind buffeted the side of the house, rattling the windows, and all three of us started.

"You did too hurt me!" Donald stamped his foot like some grotesque overgrown child. "You hurt me with the car! You shouldn't have done that. You're too much trouble and I'm not taking both of you." Slowly, hypnotically, the snake's head swayed side to side in the air. Then it paused, to hover at a point in between us.

"No!" said Donald, as if the word had been torn from his chest. "No, I won't pick. You two pick. Which one of you is coming with me? You have to say."

"We *won't* say." Lily's face was roused and fierce. "We're not going to help you do this."

"Yes, we are."

She looked at me in furious disbelief. "Carnegie, you're not-"

"Take Lily with you, Donald." I had to raise my voice to override her protest—and the drumbeat of my own heart. "She has two little boys. You can't leave them without their mother. And there's another reason. Her fiancé—"

"Stop it!" Lily cried.

"Her fiancé is a police officer. He'll make sure that you get away, Donald, just to save her. But if you kill her, Mike will hunt you for the rest of your life. Quiet now, Lily. I mean it."

As I was speaking I began to stand up, moving gradually and deliberately. My mouth was like sand, but at least I wasn't weeping. The drumbeat grew so loud that I was deafened, and the fear was so great that it flooded through me, pouring outward from my heart to push against every inch of my skin like air in an overfilled balloon.

The drumbeat became a roar, an overpowering roar in my ears, growing louder and louder until I thought it would shake me to pieces. But then, I don't know how or why, the fear vanished. It simply evaporated, leaving nothing behind but the resolve to stand tall and get this finished before Lily could stop me.

I was on my feet now. Donald lifted the pistol and pointed it at my chest. I took a long step forward, then drew a tremulous breath and held it. I closed my eyes.

And that's when we heard the voice on the bullhorn.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Donald Coe! This is Detective Lieutenant Anthony Orozco of the Washington State Patrol. Let the women go so we can talk."

I thought Donald was going to pass out. Even in the dimness I could see his face go scarlet. Then the blood drained away, leaving him pale and queasy-looking, and he gnawed his lip so hard it made me queasy myself. The gusting and blustering of the wind must have masked the sound of engines, and now there was no telling how many police cars were out there. Or how many guns.

"The house is surrounded, Donald. Let the women go."

"Oh, no," he muttered to himself. "Oh, no. No sirree."

"Listen to me, Donald. Your wife is still alive. She's been taken to the hospital, but she's going to be all right."

Donald's head whipped toward the door, and his voice came out a whimper. "Pamela?"

Behind me I could sense Lily standing up, but she didn't make a sound.

"Now let me see the women so that I know they're alive. Let them come to the door."

Donald seemed to reach a decision, because the gnawing stopped. He moved to one side of the door, keeping the pistol leveled at us.

"You, Lily," he said. "You get out there."

She walked forward tentatively, and as she passed through a narrow plane of sunlight one amethyst earring danced and sparkled.

"Can I talk to them?" she asked quietly.

"Of course ya can!" snapped Donald. "I said get out. Go find your fiancé and tell him I didn't lay a finger on you. Go on!"

Lily turned pleading eyes to me. "But, Carnegie-"

"Go," I told her. "Just go."

She went, and Donald closed the door quickly behind her. He kept it open just a crack, though, and watched her while glancing back at me every few seconds, the gun still raised. I could tell by the way his shoulders dropped that Lily had reached Orozco, and I imagined Mike embracing her.

"Thank you," I said. "Her sons will—"

"Never mind that. Come over here and do exactly what I tell you. Now listen ...."

The sunshine was blinding after the gloom inside. Donald, using me as a shield before him, moved the two us full into the open doorway and halted. He had yanked my arms behind me and slid his own left arm through my crooked elbows, leaving his right hand free to press the muzzle of the gun to the base of my skull. His hand was trembling, and so was I.

"Tell them," he said.

I squinted at the police cars and the ambulance that were drawn up on the other side of the picket fence. There was no storm after all, just the wind rushing and roaring out of a sky that was blue right down to the horizon.

Once my eyes adjusted I could see the dark barrels of weapons bristling over the roofs and hoods of the cars, and

here and there the top of a helmet or the edge of a bulky riot vest. But I couldn't see faces.

"Is Mike Graham with you?" I shouted.

The rear door of the ambulance swung open, and a voice came from behind it.

"I'm here. Carnegie, are you hurt?"

"No, I'm all right. But Donald wants to talk to you. Only you, face to face. He... he's going to keep me right here."

No answer for a moment, just the slamming of the ambulance door and a sense of movement among the cars that I thought must be Mike conferring with Orozco. The flag was making a commotion in the wind, but still I could hear the labored breathing at my back. Then Mike came out from behind the cars, and I heard a deep sigh.

"Come up close," Donald called, "and keep your hands out so's I can see 'em."

Mike hadn't changed for the wedding yet. He was still in his dorky tourist clothes, looking strangely vulnerable and out of place against the assembled might of the police. But his face was utterly calm, and his eyes were still. He walked deliberately toward us, empty hands at waist level, palms lifted. The picture of reason.

"What do you want, Donald?" he asked, the way you'd ask a neighbor who came to your door. "Let's talk about this."

"I gave you back your girlfriend," said Donald. "I didn't hurt her. Did she tell you that?"

"Yes, she did. And I can see that you haven't hurt Carnegie either, so that's all in your favor. Now take the next step and let her go too. Just put the gun down and let her go. Nobody's going to shoot."

"You think I believe that?" Donald's voice was wobbly with

strain. "You think I'm stupid? You think because you're a cop I'm just going to believe you?"

"Of course not. But tell you what." Mike's hands drifted downward, but he kept his open palms showing. "You let Carnegie go and take me instead. I can get you anywhere you want to go with no trouble. Do you want to see Pamela?"

That was a mistake. At the sound of his wife's name Donald cried out and his whole body jerked. His grip on my elbows loosened, but the muzzle of the gun was still jittering at the back of my neck.

I sobbed aloud. The strain was telling on me too. It was one thing to coldly choose to sacrifice myself for Lily's sake. It was quite another to stand here with my elbows pinned while this head case worked himself into hysteria.

"I don't want to see that lying bitch!" Donald was hyperventilating now, and the muzzle bumped down between my shoulder blades. "I didn't mean to shoot her, but I don't...I don't...No!"

A dark streak of speed had blurred through the air somewhere off to our right, and a high-pitched screeching cut through Donald's shout as he waved his gun toward it. His motion swung me slightly to the left and I added all my weight to the swing, throwing myself to the ground.

I hit hard, all the breath driven out of me. But even as my ears were ringing with the lack of air, my eyes stayed open and I saw exactly what happened next. Everything seemed to unfold in slow motion, and with a bizarre clarity.

Ever so clearly, I saw the hawk grapple with the rabbit it had pounced upon and then release it to go flapping away. At the same instant, I saw Mike's left hand yank open the fanny pack at his belt and his right hand pull a pistol from it.

"No!"

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Donald screamed and flailed his gun hand at Mike, a shot boomed out like an explosion, and a scorching agony seared itself into my breastbone.

I lifted my arm, trying to clutch at the pain, but I was already blacking out.

Chapter Thirty-Six

A whirling darkness, and the sound of a siren fading into the distance. This was followed by sunlight filtering red through my eyelids and someone's hands on me. Then they were pushed away by hands that belonged to someone else. To Aaron.

"Is she dead? Oh, God, she can't be dead!"

His arm slid beneath my shoulders, his face came close to mine. I couldn't see him, but his body blotted out the sunlight and I could feel his warm breath on my cheek.

"Carnegie, darling, no. Please, I love you! Don't die. I love you."

"I...I love you too." I tried to raise my head and winced. "But—ow! You're kneeling on my hair. Could you move just a...There, that's better." He drew back a little and I sat up, blinking in bewilderment at the ring of people crouched around me on the grass. "What happened?"

"Looks like you fainted," said Lieutenant Orozco. "It's understandable. No, don't try to get up yet. The ambulance had to take Coe, but we called in a doctor. He's over with your friend now."

"But Donald shot me!" I stroked the front of my gown and then examined my fingertips in disbelief. There was still a stinging pain between my breasts, but no blood anywhere. "Didn't he?"

Orozco's smile was white against his olive skin. "That was an ejected cartridge from Graham's pistol. He said to tell you he's sorry."

"Hurts like a bitch, doesn't it?" This was my friend Officer Henniman, patting my shoulder. "You never know how far they're going to fly. I got one stuck in my bra once, and it was so hot it left a scar. Yours rolled out pretty quick, though, so your dress wasn't messed up. That's a beautiful dress."

"Thanks," I said weakly, brushing at my skirt. "I just hope it isn't soiled."

"Would you quit about the dress?" Aaron rubbed a hand over his eyes and up through his hair, leaving cowlicks every which way. "You sure you're OK? You're not—"

"No, I'm not. Thanks for asking, though." I shouldn't have teased him, because I'd seen the tears before he rubbed them away. I also saw a raw scrape on his cheek. "What happened to your face?"

Aaron flushed and muttered something I didn't catch, then he got up and moved a few feet away, rolling his shoulders and sticking his hands in his back pockets.

"The gentleman followed us out here," said Orozco sternly, but with a glint in his eye, "and had to be physically restrained from entering the siege area."

"Oh." I blushed myself. Then a thought struck me. "How did you even know where to find us?"

"We put a bird dog on your vehicle," said a voice from behind me, and I craned around and looked upward. Even kneeling down, Jeff Austin was tall. "A tracking device, to keep tabs on you when you were a suspect. Good thing too." "A damn good thing." I shuddered. "Is Donald ...?"

"He'll live," said Orozco, and that was the last we spoke of Donald Coe that day. "Ah, Dr. Morland. How is Ms. James?"

"Quite satisfactory," said a gray-haired fellow in golf clothes, kneeling down and peering into my face. "Once I disentangled her from her fiancé. Now you, young lady, are you feeling any nausea? Double vision? Good. Follow my finger with your eyes...."

Once Dr. Morland pronounced me unconcussed, Lieutenant Orozco directed me up the road to Mike's rental car. Lily broke away from him—the doc was right, they were tangled tight—and then she and I spent some time embracing each other and messing up our makeup while Mike and Aaron looked on.

I wanted some time alone with Aaron, but first I wanted to listen as Mike explained how our rescue came about. Darwin had indeed called the police, after seeing Pamela's fallen body through the office window at the Owl's Roost.

"He broke the door down," said Mike, and traced his fingertips along Lily's arm. "I'm marrying into a strong family."

"You bet you are," she retorted. "I just don't want to have to be this strong ever again."

"Did you know about his fanny pack?" I asked her.

"Of course I did."

"I usually use an ankle holster," said Mike. "But it's nice to wear shorts sometimes."

I shook my head in wonder. "Nice is right."

Darwin himself drove up at this point, wearing his suit for the wedding and a mile-wide smile for his sister.

"What about the boys?" Lily asked him, once we'd finished the next round of hugs. "I have to call them, they must be frantic. Where are they, what did you tell them?" "They're fine," said Darwin. "They're at the lavender farm. I didn't want to get people upset, so I asked Mr. Nyquist to announce that the bride was still getting ready. He may have told a couple of people, but not the boys. So everyone's still there waiting for you."

Lily laughed, a little wildly. "Waiting for us?"

"Well, bride," said Mike, taking both her hands in his, "what shall we do now?"

"Well, groom," she answered, drawing herself up in her gorgeous purple gown, "I think we should go get married."

So they did.

I must say, the union of Lily Jolene James and Michael Richard Graham was far and away the finest wedding of my entire career. And the guests seemed to agree. True, they had to wait nearly an hour for the bride's arrival, but it was a golden September afternoon and there were pleasant ways to fill the time.

Erik Nyquist, for example, conducted personal tours of the lavender fields, and Sigrid gave an impromptu talk about Norwegian lace-making. What really saved the day, though, was quick-thinking ZZ Nickles. He had his waitresses—including the utterly innocent Peggy—pop the corks ahead of schedule and commence pouring with a generous hand.

So by the time the bride did arrive, to slip through the back door of the shop and prepare for her processional, everyone was feeling just as bubbly as the champagne. And no one noticed that the wedding planner had shown up late as well and was dashing back and forth through the wandering guests to check on the corsages and the rings and the napkin supply and the license....

Almost no one, anyway. I was concluding my hasty conference with the soloist about her cue to begin when Adrienne Winter strolled by. She wore a navy blue suit today, very smart, with spectator pumps and a white straw boater with a red band that matched her glasses.

"Is this how you usually run your business?" she inquired sardonically. "It doesn't seem very efficient."

"Special circumstances," I said with a smile. "We'll be starting in just a minute."

Believe it or not, it was a genuine smile. I was in love with the whole world today, even Dree. Even Kimmie, my other stepsister-to-be, who came hip-swiveling over in a hot pink dress. It was short to the point of scandal, with a heart-shaped cutout over the cleavage. Matching pink stilettos completed the traditional garb of the simple island lass.

"I just thought I should tell you, Carrie," she purred, "that you have grass stains on your butt."

I wasn't feeling *that* friendly. But my unsisterly reply was interrupted by Aaron, who caught Kimmie's remark as he approached bearing a champagne flute in each hand.

"I'll let you in on a secret about that," he stage-whispered, and both women leaned close to listen. "Carnegie and I find weddings such a turn-on that...well, you know how it goes...."

The Bitch Sisters beat a red-faced retreat after that, and Aaron chortled as he handed me my champagne.

"You bum!" I said. "They believed you, you know."

"Relax, Stretch. The whole island's going to be talking about Donald Coe by dinnertime. They'll find out what really happened to your dress at American Camp."

"I suppose so."

Never mind the dress, I wanted to say, what really happened between you and me at American Camp? But I couldn't quite think how to raise the issue, and anyway my mother and Owen joined us just then. They were holding hands, and I could picture them at their own wedding sometime in the future. It was a nice picture.

"Should we take our seats, dear?" said Mom.

"Yes, I guess it's time. Aaron, could you help Darwin herd people toward the pond? They're scattered all over."

"Sure, in a minute." He was looking oddly preoccupied. "I have to take care of something first. Where's Lily?"

"In the shop with Darwin and the boys. Wait, you can't go in there—"

But Aaron was already striding up the porch steps and knocking on the shop door. I took a step after him, but was stopped by a tap on the shoulder from Peggy Nickles. She'd been grinning like a little girl over all the compliments about her cake, and I blushed to think that I'd ever suspected her of murder.

"Would you like me to take the top layer back to ZZ's afterward?" she asked me, gesturing at her lacy confection on its table in the display garden. "In case Lily and Mike want it for their anniversary, I mean. They won't have a freezer at the bedand-breakfast."

The question brought me up short. The bed-and-breakfast?

"Um, yes, freeze the top for them. Thanks, Peggy."

I was thinking hard as I headed for the shop. It hadn't even occurred to me, but Mike could hardly take Lily to the Owl's Roost for their wedding night. Where were they going to honeymoon?

Inside the shop, where Aaron had left but Sigrid was still hovering helpfully, more immediate questions took precedence over the honeymoon site. Questions like, was Lily's eyeliner on straight, and could I retie Darwin's tie, and did Ethan really call Marcus a poopy-head and should he therefore be banished from the proceedings. This last point raised by Marcus, of course.

"You're both going," I told them firmly. "Side by side, just like we practiced. When the lady starts singing, you walk down the path to the pond where Mike is. And not one toe near that water, OK?"

They nodded, excited and solemn, and I turned my attention back to Lily. She was excited too, clutching her bouquet of roses and lavender, and there were goose bumps on her bare arms.

"You don't have your shawl, Lily! I forgot all about it."

"Doesn't matter," she said. "I'm fine without."

"But you need something. It's nice out, but it's not really—"

"Will this do?" Sigrid had raised the carved wooden lid of a chest in the corner and now lifted out a stole of delicate ivorycolored lace, exquisitely patterned and cobweb-fine. "It was my great-grandmother's. I would like it to be yours, as Michael's bride."

"Oh, *Sigrid*," breathed Lily. "Carnegie, it matches the wedding cake!"

"So it does. Don't cry, girl, you'll mess your mascara." I handed her a hankie and helped Sigrid arrange the shawl around her shoulders. "There, it's perfect. Are we ready, Dar?"

Darwin looked over from his station at the door. "Ready."

The haunting strains of "Ave Maria" rose into the air. I sent the boys down the porch steps and along the path with their matching ring pillows, and they marched in perfect tandem to the amused delight of the assembled guests. Then I set off myself, holding my own peach-colored roses and sprays of lavender, and smiled into the beaming faces that greeted me along the way. My mother, holding Owen's hand. Mike's father Richard, proud and happy. And Aaron, dropping me a broad wink as I went by. In the gold- and green-dappled sunlight under the willow tree, Mike himself was almost trembling with happiness, and I blew him a kiss as I took my place opposite the best man.

Then, my own journey completed, I watched Lily coming toward us on Darwin's arm in her purple satin and her ivory lace. And the relief and gratitude and love that I felt made me watch her say "I do" through a blur of tears.

But then the ceremony was over, Mike took Lily in his arms, and I laughed along with everyone else when "You may now kiss the bride" became a clinch that went on outrageously long. Ethan broke it up at last by shrilling "Mommy, kiss me too!" and the gathering blossomed into laughter and applause and slices of lavender-scented cake.

The reception was brief, since the guests had been there so long already, and since I was in a pleasant daze anyway it seemed only moments before it was time for the bridegroom to escort his bride away.

"Mike," I said quietly, drawing him aside, "what about the honeymoon? Where are you planning to—"

"Rosario," he said, looking a bit stunned. "Your mother's friend Owen rented us a bridal suite for a week, all meals, everything. Tony Orozco picked up our luggage from the Owl's Roost, and now Owen's got a seaplane waiting for us."

Rosario is a fabulous, deluxe resort across the San Juan Channel on Orcas Island, and a honeymooners' dream. I was a little stunned myself.

"Mike, that's wonderful! And that's so generous of him."

"He said it was the least he could do, to thank me for helping you." Mike bent to kiss me on the cheek. "Thank *you* for helping Lily, Carnegie. I can never—" "Never mind," I said, giving him a little push. "Go fetch your wife."

But Lily, in the midst of the lavender garden with her guests all around her, wasn't quite ready to leave yet.

"Gather round, I'm going to throw my bouquet!" she declared, and everyone hushed.

A bouquet toss wasn't in our plans. But then, neither was the way she tossed it. Without even letting the women guests assemble, Lily gave a throaty laugh and a very deliberate fling of her hand. The cluster of lavender and roses trailed its long streamers against the blue sky and then came tumbling downward—directly into the upraised and waiting hands of Aaron Gold.

There must have been some reaction from the other guests, laughter or puzzled questions or comments called out from the crowd. But I didn't hear them, because Aaron bore the bouquet straight to me and I could only hear my heart.

"I think this means you're next," he said, handing me the flowers with laughter in his eyes. "Marry me, Stretch?"

"Yes," I said. I looked into Aaron's eyes and I said, "Yes."

About the Author

DEBORAH DONNELLY's inspiration for the Carnegie Kincaid series came when she was planning her best friend's wedding and her own at the same time. (Both turned out beautifully.) A longtime resident of Seattle, Donnelly now lives in Boise, Idaho, with her writer husband and their two Welsh corgis.

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed You May Now Kill the Bride. If you have comments for me, I'd love to read them; just go to <u>www.deborah donnelly.org</u> and click on "Drop Me a Line." Send me your wedding stories, too—good, bad, or hilarious. Some readers' stories have inspired incidents in my books, so you never know!

After that, I invite you to watch for the next book in the Wedding Planner Mysteries, **Bride and Doom**. Because when a wedding planner plans her own wedding, everything's bound to unfold perfectly. Isn't it?

It's autumn in Seattle, and Made in Heaven has a most unusual client: against everyone else's better judgment, Carnegie Kincaid is managing her own wedding to Aaron Gold. Determined to fix every bridal mistake she's ever seen and employ every stylish idea she's ever had, Carnegie's shopping for gowns with Lily James and concocting menus with Joe Solveto in a blissful whirl of nuptial nuttiness.

She's even found a way to pay for the big event, by assisting her old nemesis Beau Paliére with a celebrity wedding. Home-run-hitting superstar Gordo Gutierrez is marrying a punk rocker who calls herself Honeysuckle Hell, and the baseball-themed festivities turn up some familiar faces. Who knew that Buck Buckmeister was a minority owner of the team, or that cake baker Juice Nugent was an old pal of the bride's?

But two barriers arise between Carnegie and her perfect wedding. First, Aaron is a baseball fanatic, so while she's dreaming of lilies and lace, he's busy fretting over fastballs and fielding errors. And second, Gordo's engagement party is suddenly minus one guest when a much-hated sportswriter is murdered—and Boris the Mad Russian Florist, Carnegie's former beau, becomes the prime suspect.

Will Carnegie's passionate defense of Boris give Aaron second thoughts? Can she corner the killer before she turns into Bridezilla? And heaven help us, is there a tactful way to keep her mom's future stepdaughters, AKA the Bitch Sisters, from muscling in as bridesmaids?

That's just the beginning of **Bride and Doom**. Look for it in bookstores in spring 2007. If you send me an e-mail at <u>www.deborahdonnelly.org</u>, I'll add you to my mailing list for the publication announcement. Thanks for reading!

> Cheers Debrah Douvelle

Don't miss any of Deborah Donnelly's mysteries in the coast-to-coast-adored series that's

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I LOVE THIS MOMENT. YOUNG AND TREMBLING OR CALM and not-so-young, seed pearls or tie-dye, intimate ceremony or extravaganza, this first public appearance of the bride always makes me misty. There's all the romance that Western culture can bestow: the idea of the fairy princess, Cinderella, the one and only true love. Not to mention the sheer theater of making a solo entrance in a knockout costume. But it was the courage that caught at my never-married heart. To publicly say, He's the one; I pledge my life to his life. All the divorce statistics in the world can't tarnish that moment. That's the real reason why I help people get married. I'm a sucker for romance.

So I lingered while Diane, bright as a sunrise, took her place beside her chosen man. The candlelight gleamed on her gown and in her eyes, and Jeffrey looked, as all bridegrooms should, like the luckiest fellow on earth. I sighed, dabbed at a tear, and slipped back through the fine old oak-floored dining room into the mansion's kitchen. I had to track down a pair of antique crystal goblets sent over by the groom's grandmother this morning, thus setting off the old lady's tantrum. And I had to ask Joe Solveto, the caterer, where the hell that third waiter was.

The kitchen was crammed with hors d'oeuvres but empty of Joe or anyone else. My stomach growled fiercely at the fans of prosciutto-wrapped asparagus, ranks of crisp snow pea pods piped with velvety salmon mousse, and clusters of green grapes rolled in Roquefort. The wedding cake, three tiers of chocolate hazelnut glory, was already in the dining room, but the old marble countertop along the kitchen wall held a parade of cut-glass dishes piled with petit fours and chocolate-dipped apricots. Surely I could pluck just one apricot from its dish, one tiny cream puff from its pyramid, one oyster from its bed of crushed ice, without disturbing Joe's fearful symmetry...

But no, first things first. I stepped out to the back porch and squinted into the drizzly night, hoping to see the waiter's headlights. Parked cars were lined up nose-to-tail the whole length of the steep drive leading down to the highway, where a mossy old brick wall bordered the property. I could see my modest white van, nicknamed Vanna White, just uphill from Nickie Parry's candy-apple-red '66 Mustang.

The car had been a college graduation gift from Nickie's father. Douglas Parry owned several department stores, a few Alaskan fish canneries, and a good chunk of downtown Seattle. He was so very fond of Nickie that he'd said the three magic words about her wedding: Money No Object. Fifteen percent of Money No Object was going to put me firmly in the black, for the first time since I'd started Made in Heaven.

Someone else was out in the rain, though: a heavyset figure was striding downhill just beyond the Mustang. His long raincoat flapped as though he were shoving something into a pocket. Car keys, probably. But he was heading away from the house, not toward it, so he couldn't be my waiter. Well, we'd have to manage with only two. I turned my back on the hissing of the rain and went inside to find Grandmother's goblets. I had better luck on this count. The crystal in question, facets winking in the light, had been unwrapped and set on a high shelf out of harm's way. Also out of reach, even for me, so I pulled over a wooden chair and stood on tiptoe. Just another inch...A startling blast of damp air lifted my skirt. Already off balance, I turned abruptly to see a handsome, frowning man enter through the porch door and shake the rain from his windbreaker. My third waiter. The chair wobbled, then tipped over with a clatter, sending me in a harmless but ungraceful leap to the checkerboard tile floor. I saved myself from sprawling flat at the cost of a cracked fingernail and my dignity.

He reached out a hand. "Are you all right?"

"Of course I am," I snapped, brushing off my dress. The broken nail launched a run in my left stocking. Damn, damn, damn. "But you just barely made it. Where's your tie?"

He looked down at his heathery sweater, and then down at me. I'm over six feet tall in dress shoes, but he was six four, with wavy chestnut hair and the most distinctive green eyes I'd ever seen on a waiter or anyone else, the glass green of a breaking wave.

"This was the best I could do," he said coolly. "I just came from the airport."

"The best you could do!" I kept my voice low, but green eyes or not I was angry. "Black slacks, white shirt, black bow tie. I was very specific! Look, I need those glasses up there."

"Yes, *ma'am*." He mounted the chair, reached up, and handed the goblets down to me. He had broad, tanned hands, still chilly from the rain where they brushed my fingers.

"Thanks," I said. "Now let's find the others."

"Right here, Carnegie." Joe Solveto's cunningly mussed sandy hair and narrow, theatrical face appeared in the stairwell leading up from the basement-level pantry. He brandished an unopened champagne bottle. "We're popping the corks downstairs, but this is the special stuff for the happy pair. I see you found the goblets. Excuse me, sir."

*Sir*? Joe relieved me of the glasses and pressed on into the dining room, quickly followed by all three waiters, in their white shirts and black bow ties. Number Three must have arrived during Susie's sneezing attack. I felt a blush rising from the asymmetrical neckline of my jade silk dress.

"You're a guest. I'm very sorry. I—"

"My fault." He had a light tenor voice, surprising in such a large man, and slightly crooked front teeth that showed when he smiled and saved him from being male-model perfect. Not that one objects to perfect strangers. "Obviously I came in the wrong door," he was saying. "Have I missed everything?"

"Yes. No." Deep breath. "The ceremony is almost over, but you can slip in the back if you go through the dining room and to your right. I am sorry."

"No problem," he said, smiling as he walked by. "You can order me around anytime."

I stood bemused for a moment, muttering "Who was that masked man?"

Then I got back to work.

Died to Match

on sale now

Luke Skywalker was juggling martini glasses. Albert Einstein was dirty-dancing with Monica Lewinsky. And Zorro was arguing with Death himself. For wedding planner Carnegie Kincaid, it was just another night on the job: a coed bachelor party thrown by one of Seattle's hippest couples. But what started as the perfect evening ended in disaster: one beautiful bridesmaid was dead, and another had thrown herself into Elliot Bay.

With families to please, dresses to hem, and headlines to grab, Carnegie is discovering the dark side of love and marriage amid high and low Seattle society—and that while some passions may be forever, some are a motive for murder...

"WHAT EXACTLY DID YOU DO BETWEEN ELEVEN O'CLOCK and the time you discovered the body?"

I described my circuit through the party, my dance with Zack, the people I recalled seeing on the dance floor, and then meeting Aaron on the stairs and going out on the pier with him. All the while, Officer Lee scribbled away. Graham seemed unsurprised by Corinne's fall into the harbor; maybe it happened all the time at waterfront parties. I continued on, explaining about my final walk-through routine, and mentioning Aaron's departure. This time I managed to describe the corpse without tears.

I thought we were finally finished, but instead, the detective began to skip around in the chronology of the party, repeating questions he'd already asked, probing at my memory like a man with a poker stirring at a fire. It's surprising what you can remember if someone asks the right way. Graham coaxed out details I hadn't even registered at the time, like the damp patch of drool on Tommy's leprechaun jacket.

"Would you assume that Mr. Barry had been lying by the pillar for some time?"

"Well, long enough to sit down and then pass out, but it might not have taken long. I expect he was pretty well plowed when he first arrived. Marvin was at the front entrance, he could tell you."

"He already has. I'm double-checking. Mr. Breen gave us the guest list, and we'll be interviewing everyone on it, as well as the staff from Solveto's and the cleaning firm and so forth." The lieutenant smiled sorrowfully. "Too bad it wasn't a smaller party. Let's go back to your encounter with Ms. Montoya in the rest room. Was she taking drugs?"

"What?!"

"It's a simple question." Graham sat remarkably still and composed, as if he could do this all day. I suppose he often did. Outside, the rain went on raining, a muffled drumroll against the windows.

"I... didn't see her doing anything like that." Of course, I suspected that Mercedes blabbed about Talbot only because she was high. But suspicions aren't facts. "Why do you ask? Were there drugs in her system?"

As before, he ignored me. "You said the two of you talked a bit. What about, exactly?"

I was dreading this question. I'd deliberately glossed over the conversation in my step-by-step account. Mercedes had confided in me—I thought of her now as one of my brides—and it seemed cruel to expose her private life. But facts *are* facts. And murder is murder.

"She told me she was engaged to be married. To Roger Talbot."

Graham was startled, though he hid it well, merely elevating one eyebrow a millimeter or two. "That's...quite a piece of news." "She said it was a secret, no one knew about it yet."

"Did you believe her?"

"Well, I didn't think she bought that ring herself."

"Which ring? She was wearing several."

"That was all costume jewelry. She had a diamond ring on a long chain around her neck. She waved it at me and then hid it down her blouse...."

Lightning struck both of us at once. Graham leaned forward. "There was no diamond ring on the corpse."

"Oh, my God." I pictured again the bloody rent in Mercedes' skull, the vulnerable nape of her neck. "No. No, it was gone. I should have realized that last night—"

"Never mind. Can you describe it?"

I closed my eyes and took a breath to steady myself. "A marquise diamond, between two and three-quarter and three carats. Six-prong setting. Pear-cut side stones. Platinum band engraved with leaves. I'm not sure of the size on the side stones, maybe half a carat apiece."

"Ginny, call that in. And find out if Talbot's in his office today." She went to the window and spoke quietly into her cell phone. Graham was looking at me curiously. "She *waved* it at you and you saw all that?"

I shrugged. "It's my business."

"So she asked you to plan her wedding. Was she happy about this secret engagement? Any anger at Talbot for keeping it secret?"

"She seemed fine with it, as far as I could tell. She was kind of . . . excitable."

"Excitable. What was she excited about?" Graham's tired brown eyes were expressionless, but I could sense the active intelligence behind them as he weighed my words.

"Well, about Talbot's running for mayor, and about their wedding. She was very insistent that I agree to work for her. She even gave me some cash as a deposit." This brought both eyebrows up. "Cash? How much cash?"

"I don't really know. I didn't want to take it out and count it during the party, and then after I found her I forgot all about it. It's still in the pocket of my costume."

Another sigh. First the ring, now this. I was definitely flunking Witness 101. "Ms. Kincaid, we'll need to take the money in as evidence. You'll be given a receipt. All right?"

"Of course." But still, she meant to hire me. She meant to be my bride.

"Let's go back to Mr. Barry. Tell me again what he said."

I shifted in my chair. Wicker's not that comfortable. "Tommy said 'Stop it.' I think he said that twice. And then he said 'You're killing her!'"

"So he believed that you had killed Ms. Montoya?"

"Is that what he told you? Lieutenant, Tommy couldn't even focus his eyes at that point, he was dead drunk! I think he must have been repeating something he'd said earlier, during the murder."

"And yet if he had spoken out earlier, the killer would hardly have left him alive as a witness."

"Well, maybe he didn't say it out loud, except later, to me, only he didn't know it was me, he was just raving! Look, I know you're supposed to be cagey about testimony, but *please* tell me, who did Tommy see? Did he recognize the murderer?"

Graham stood up. "We'd very much like to know that ourselves. Unfortunately, after leaving the crime scene, Mr. Barry drove his car into a concrete abutment under the Alaskan Way Viaduct. He's currently in intensive care at Harborview. In a coma."

May the Best Man Die

on sale now

Carnegie Kincaid plans weddings, not stag parties. When a client asks Carnegie to manage a pre-wedding blow-out—complete with a stripper—she tactfully refuses the job. So why is Carnegie peering through binoculars across the Seattle Ship Canal, watching a shapely Santa Claus turn naked inside a hip dockside bistro?

Because her own significant other—with whom she is having some significant differences—is at the party too. And so, it turns out, is a killer...

THE MINUTE I PUT DOWN THE PHONE, I GRABBED THE BINOCulars and focused on the Hot Spot for a second look. Not that I cared whether Aaron was inside. Not that I cared about Aaron at all.

Not that I could see him, either. Santa had left the lighted window, and the revelers milled aimlessly inside, as if the party were winding down. I spotted Mr. Garlic, but no one else familiar—until a flurry of movement drew my attention to the grassy slope below the deck.

There in the silvery frost and the tilted shadows, two longlimbed figures were struggling together, dodging and flailing in clumsy counterpoint. I had no trouble recognizing them as the best man and Lily's baby brother. Jason Kraye was obviously drunk; maybe Darwin was the designated driver, trying to take his car keys away?

But you don't punch people to get their car keys, I thought. And

then, *Maybe you do, if you're young and male.* It was hard to tell if this was a ritual scuffle—elk clashing their antlers—or a serious fight. Either way, I can't say it bothered me to see the supercilious Jason getting knocked around a little.

The third figure was less ambiguous: Frank Sanjek, the bridegroom, was kneeling on the grass near the two combatants and vomiting hideously, his head jerking and lolling. *Another male ritual.* I smiled ruefully. Time for me to go home.

But once I went downstairs and gathered up my things, a nagging doubt stopped me from walking out the door. I had assured Lily that her brother was fine, and now he was apparently in the middle of a fistfight. Shouldn't I check on the outcome?

For that matter, shouldn't I make sure that the amiable, sensible bridegroom wasn't unconscious and abandoned by his drunken friends, out in the freezing night? Eddie tells me I fuss too much about our clients, and maybe it's true. But I was eager to see Sally Tyler walk down the aisle and out of my life on New Year's Eve, and to that end, I needed Frank Sanjek safe and sound.

So I dashed up to the storeroom, hurried over to the worktable, and raised the binoculars to my eyes for the third and last time.

There was even less to see than before. Some of the café's windows had gone dark, making it hard to get a clear view into the shrubbery. But at least Frank was on his feet; I watched him stagger to the sliding door and wrench it open. I didn't spot Darwin, or Jason either, but they might have already left.

The stripper was just leaving, striding briskly up the sidewalk, head up and shoulders back after a job well done. And someone else was working his way down through the bushes toward the bike path, but I couldn't make out his face, or whether he had a bicycle waiting for him. The guys were supposed to take cabs or buses home instead of driving, but even a bike could be dangerous"Bird-watching?"

I jumped, and Eddie's binoculars slipped from my suddenly clumsy fingers, to land in the silver punch bowl with an enormous and resounding *gonnng*.

I was shocked, and not just because a man had suddenly materialized in the doorway. I was shocked by who it was. Aaron Gold.

"No birds at night," he said, shaking his head sagely. A lock of hair flopped down into his eyes. "I know! S' Christmas. You're gonna find out who's naughty or nice. Merry Christmas, Stretch."

I stood with my back to the reverberating punch bowl and took a deep, shaky breath. I didn't know how long Aaron had been watching me, or whether he guessed that I'd been spying on Santa's striptease earlier. I also didn't know how I felt about him, after the last few weeks of angry silence and unwilling tears.

And what neither of us knew, and wouldn't learn until the next day, was this: of the three young men I had observed on the grass behind the Hot Spot Café, only two were still alive.

Death Takes a Honeymoon

on sale now

Wedding planner Carnegie Kincaid can feel the heat when she reunites with an old flame in Sun Valley. But with a star-studded ceremony to pull off Carnegie has no time for carnal urges—especially once murder joins the party. The victim was a local hero who leapt from planes to fight fire. But was his impromptu skydive a smoke screen for something sinister? It's up to Carnegie to grill the guests and unmask the killer... or watch her glitzy job go up in flames.

As THE GROUP DISPERSED, WITH AL ISSUING CURT BUT EVENtempered orders, Aaron paused to give me a quick kiss. At least he meant it to be quick, but I held on to his arms.

"Are you *insane*?" I said, keeping my voice down. "Do you know how fast a fire can travel uphill? This is a crazy idea—"

"This was your idea, Stretch," he said mildly. "And I'm going."

"It's too dangerous," I pleaded. "Don't go. I mean it. Don't."

"Carnegie, listen." It struck me for the first time that Aaron only used my proper name during his rare solemn moments. "Remember what I told you before, that firefighting is like war? I've never been in a war, and nobody ever should, and I hope to God I never will be. But this is my chance, don't you see? My chance to do something, I don't know, something good. I have to do this."

"Your chance to get killed, you mean." I held on tighter. We

were alone now by the steps, smoke stinging our eyes. "Don't be a fool, Aaron. Don't do this."

He cocked his head. "So you don't mind if Jack Packard goes?" he said.

"Of course not! I mean, I do, but it's his job. It's not yours, and I want you safe."

"That's nice to hear." His smile was still lopsided. "Now let me go, Stretch. See you soon, I promise."

He got in the Jeep. Jack kissed Tracy through the window and drove them away. I watched them go, streaming with tears, until the road was empty.

And then, galumphing up the empty road toward me, came the only creature in the world who could end my weeping at a moment like this.

"Gorka! Oh, Gorka, you dear idiot. Come here, boy,"

And come he did, his rope leash flying as he tore up the hill at full speed. He had something clamped in his huge drooling jaws as usual, and as usual he dropped his trophy at my feet and barked in triumph.

I had to wipe the tears away to see properly, but even then I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Gorka's trophy, covered in ashes and soot, was pale gray and roughly spherical, the size of a stone you could hold in your two cupped hands. But stones don't have eye sockets, or a gaping darkness where a nose had once been, or a few teeth still attached to what remained of the upper jaw. There was another, smaller hole on one side, and I thought I knew what had caused it. In fact the only thing that kept me from fainting in horror was curiosity about whether I was right.

If I was right, Gorka's trophy was a human skull with a bullet hole through the temple.