

The Ransom

Port Chatham, Washington

June 6, 1890

Her satin shoes left damning footprints in the pearlescent dew on the moonlit garden path. The herb beds she fled past announced their presence in cloying waves—the spice of mint here, the pungency of rosemary there. Under the spreading branches of a magnolia tree, she paused, trembling, and glanced over her shoulder. Shadows danced on the breeze, chasing a shower of blossoms across the empty garden.

He hadn't followed her.

Before long, though, she'd be missed. And once Seavey discovered her absence, he'd hunt her down. No one would stop him, she realized bitterly—he was above the law.

I mustn't think about that now. I'm Charlotte's only hope.

Taking a deep breath, she slipped through the hedge at the back of the garden and crossed to the street, walking rapidly toward the bluff.

An onshore wind flattened the waves on Admiralty Inlet, blowing the clouds from the sky and chilling her soul. On any other evening, she could've counted on Port Chatham's mercurial weather to camouflage her escape. But not tonight.

Beneath the brilliance of the stars, the town's waterfront stretched below her. A

dozen schooners anchored in the harbor, rocking gently on a sea of silver, rigging draped from their masts like black filigree. Once upon a time, the stately ships had called out to her, whispering of romance and adventure. Now, she couldn't stand to look at them.

She turned right at the next corner, breaking into a run before forcing herself to drop back to a more sedate pace. *I must act natural. I must look as if I haven't a care in the world.*

Her neighbors' cottages stood dark and silent behind picket fences and tidy gardens, their owners still in attendance at the soirée. Though she was more than a block away, she could hear the laughter and music spilling from the Canby mansion, the syncopated rhythms of Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" pulsing along her raw nerves.

For the other guests, the party had been an opportunity to share an evening with Port Chatham's social elite, its powerful politicians and businessmen. But for her, the dinner had turned into an agonizing game of nerves, each course of rich food an obstacle to overcome. And Seavey had relished in her discomfort, leaning back with savage grace in his chair, his pale gray eyes watching her swallow her terror with every bite of salmon in dill sauce, every spoonful of Floating Island Meringue.

God *damn* his soul. Had his men beaten Charlotte, or worse? Was Charlotte lying right this moment, bound and gagged, in the filth and pitch-black terrors of the tunnels?

Reaching into the hidden pocket she'd sown into her skirt, her hand clutched the roll of money. She couldn't let her imagination run wild with possibilities—she knew what she had to do.

At the top of the bluff, she stepped onto the footbridge that would take her down to the waterfront, treading carefully on dew-slick wood. The wind howled, buffeting the trestle. A gust tore at the silk skirts of her evening gown as if it were trying to drag her back from an unknown precipice. *Drunken sailors and soiled doves are the denizens of*

the waterfront, it seemed to scream, *not decent people like you*.

Leaving the footbridge behind, she quickly crossed the two blocks to the bay. She chose the muddy streets over the louder boardwalks that fronted the business establishments, using the faint illumination of the occasional gaslight lantern to light her way.

Honky-tonk and laughter spilled from a saloon, and she avoided the pool of light from its open doors. At the end of the wharf, a six-masted schooner towered over her, armed thugs patrolling its decks to keep the crew from deserting. When a guard stopped and stared down at her, shifting his rifle, she quickened her pace.

She darted past abandoned buildings charred by fire, all too aware she was most exposed in this recently leveled stretch of waterfront. The stench of scorched wood and damp ash assaulted her, forcing her to breathe through her mouth. The tragedy marked the beginning of her nightmare, she realized. *If only I'd stayed home that night*.

The odor of brackish salt water was stronger now. Out on the bay, the oars of an unseen Whitehall slapped the water rhythmically. She could make out dark, prone forms on the beach, revelers blinded or passed out from one too many glasses of the corn liquor served by saloons and houses of ill repute. A shadowy figure moved among them, rifling through pockets. Further down, two people lay entwined, groping silently and urgently. Heat warmed her cheeks, and she averted her gaze.

Turning away from the water, she slipped past a deserted City Hall, clinging to the shadows of buildings. When a group of sailors approached, shouting and staggering, she ducked into the alley. Catching a glimpse of their faces in the moonlight, she had to stop herself from gasping. They were so young, their faces still unlined in the innocence of youth. Just boys, perhaps thrilled to taste their first hint of danger, heedless of what could happen to them.

A shoe scraped on gravel, and she whirled, peering into the darkness. Had Seavey followed her after all? Had he tracked her down like an animal, hoping to corner her in the darkened alley? Oh, how he'd like that. She'd seen it in his eyes every time he'd looked at her. She was his prey—she'd known that since they'd first met.

A shadow shifted.

She leapt across the alley, into the pool of green light at the rear entrance of Port Chatham's most infamous house of ill repute. Her pursuer's footsteps quickened until he was directly behind her.

Raising her fists, Hattie Longren pounded on the door, her screams rending the hushed violence of the night.

Chapter 1

Port Chatham, Washington

June, Present Day

Jordan Marsh stood in the middle of the street, staring aghast at her new home. Across twelve feet of uneven pavement and a weed-choked patch of lawn sat Longren House, the nineteenth century Queen Anne she'd bought on what could only be described as—though she normally tried to avoid the term—an *insane* whim.

Crisp air, washed clean from last night's rain, brought into sharp relief decorative tracery hanging askew from the domed turret. Bright sun highlighted chunks of paint peeling from the columns of the wrap-around porch that—she tilted her head—sagged. Behind a railing missing every third baluster, a broken swing had been shoved against the front bay window, the window that sported a crack running diagonally its entire length.

Holy God. I don't even own a hammer.

While she'd been going through the inevitable hassles of closing down her therapy practice in Los Angeles and packing to move, Longren House had been a daily reminder of the new life she'd planned for herself. A simpler, quieter life—an antidote to the hell she'd lived through for the last year. A fantasy of peaceful, solitary days spent wallpapering a few rooms, perhaps re-hanging the porch swing she'd always dreamed of

owning.

What on earth had she been thinking? That watching a few reruns of *This Old House* qualified her to handle a historic home remodel?

She counted the faded colors gracing the exterior, punctuating each numeral with a fingertip pointed midair at a section of siding, or what was left of it. “Thirteen goddamn colors of paint!” Just the thought of matching such a color scheme in modern paints had her light-headed.

A huge, shaggy dog lying in front of the door raised its head and grinned at her, tail thumping, looking for all the world as if it belonged there. And for a brief moment, she could envision the house as she’d dreamed it would look after it was refurbished. “Like a real home,” she murmured. “With a front porch swing for visiting neighbors and a friendly dog.”

A door slammed down the block, and a dark-haired man wearing a cable-knit sweater and jeans jogged down the front steps of the house on the corner. Zeroing in on the tray of coffee cups he balanced in one hand, she remembered that in her haste to hit the road that morning, she hadn’t stopped for her requisite morning cup.

LOCAL MAN ASSAULTED BY CAFFEINE-DEPRIVED LUNATIC

If she gave into impulse, that’s what tomorrow morning’s newspaper headlines would read. Not, she reminded herself firmly, that she was a person who typically gave in to impulses.

Caffeinated beverages notwithstanding, though, he looked...interesting. Broad shoulders, and a confident, ground-eating stride, definitely...

She gave herself a shake. Nope. Gazing was *not* in the cards. According to her Four Point Plan to Personal Renewal, gazing was on hold for at least six months. Then she could look but not touch for another six. She’d laid it all out, written it all down. She had

a plan, and she was sticking to it. Remodel first.

As soon as she bought a hammer. And a paintbrush or three.

She forced her attention back to her house. Leaning forward on her toes, she squinted to see whether lack of focus improved it. The driver of an approaching car tapped its horn, evidently afraid she would fling herself into its oncoming path.

The idea had merit.

Okay, so the house needed a little work. But she'd fallen in love with that crazy witch's cap perched atop the turret, the arched entryway and the gingerbread trim, the utter *wackiness* of its architecture. She didn't care whether it fell down around her—for the first time in her life, she had a real home.

Complete with a dog, it seemed.

"Nice bones."

Her head whipped around. Her new neighbor now stood just a few feet away.

He gestured with the tray. "The house," he clarified in a deep baritone, smiling slightly, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. "One of the few examples of stick-built Queen Anne architecture left standing in Port Chatham. She's a real beauty, isn't she?"

Jordan frowned. Even with the aid of fuzzy focus, the house wasn't yet close to a 'beauty.' But hey, maybe he was an architect who recognized potential.

The aroma of fresh-roasted coffee and steamed milk wafted over her, and her eyes crossed.

"Can I ask what your interest is in her?" he asked.

"What? Oh." Jordan cleared her throat. "I bought her."

"Ah." He looked squarely at her, not concealing his curiosity. Up close, his face was rugged and lived-in...and appealing. "You must be the psychologist from Los Angeles."

Her surprise must have shown on her face.

“Sorry.” He shrugged, smiling sheepishly. “Small towns and all that.” He extended a hand. “Jase Cunningham.”

“Jordan Marsh.” His grip was warm and firm.

“So you’ll be setting up shop here in town?”

“No, at least, not right away.” Perhaps not ever, though she wasn’t admitting that yet, even to herself. “I’m taking a year off to work on the house.”

“You’re planning to fix her up?”

She nodded.

“Good.”

“I need to buy a hammer,” she blurted out.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “The purchase of a hammer is a symbolic act, not to be taken lightly.”

She narrowed her gaze. Okay, scratch architect. Maybe he was one of those artisans who worked on historic homes. Maybe he had a lot of hammers. Maybe he named them.

He came to some kind of conclusion with a nod. “Talk to Ed at Renovation Hardware out on the highway, and tell him I sent you. He’ll get you set up properly.”

“Um, thanks.”

He pried one of the cups from its holder and handed it to her. She clutched it with both hands, giving him a look of such profound gratitude that he grinned. “You seem a little shell-shocked—it’s the least I can do. Welcome to the neighborhood.”

“Thanks again.”

He waved a hand as he started down the street.

“Hey,” she yelled, and he turned back, raising an eyebrow. “Do you know who owns the dog?”

“Nope. Never seen him before.”

Jordan watched for a moment longer, then shook her head. *Four Point Plan to Personal Renewal*. Time to unpack her BlackBerry and review the salient points.

As she walked over to her Toyota Prius, she took a sip of the coffee, which she discovered was an excellent latté. The man obviously knew his java. Shifting the cup to her left hand, she opened the trunk and hauled out her bag.

The hairs on the back of her neck suddenly rose, and she glanced around. Her neighborhood of turn-of-the-century Victorians was unusually deserted for such a fine summer day, the street empty and desolate with its cracked pavement and faded markings.

She studied the vacant windows of the surrounding houses, keeping her expression nonchalant. No doubt a neighbor was watching her from inside one of them. After all, it was a small town—people were bound to be curious about the recently widowed psychologist moving to their neighborhood.

From the foliage of the maple tree, a songbird trilled loudly, mocking her uneasiness. Shrugging, she gripped the handle of her bag and rolled it across the uneven lawn, banging it up the front steps.

The dog scrambled to its feet, ears perked. It had the black and tan coloring of a German Shepherd, but its blocky build and thick, shaggy hair reminded her of a much larger breed. Definitely a classic mutt. A very *large* male mutt. She held out her hand for him to sniff.

Setting her bag down, she hunted through her pockets for the key the real estate agent had given her. After several tries, the lock gave with a screech and the beveled glass door swung inward.

She looked down at the dog. “Excuse me.”

He cocked his head.

“Shoo?” She wiggled her fingers, and when that had no effect, managed to look stern. “Go home!”

He didn’t budge.

She sighed. “I absolutely *cannot* get attached to you—someone owns you, I’m sure of it. I’m not letting you inside.”

He barked, and she jumped a foot. Then he trotted into the foyer.

“Right,” she muttered.

She set her bag inside the door and slowly turned in a semi-circle. The carved mahogany staircase that had made her hyperventilate when she’d first laid eyes on it rose in a graceful curve to the second floor, its risers covered by a faded, robin’s egg blue runner worn through at the front edges. To her right stood the parlor with its bay window looking onto the front porch, to her left, the library that had been the second reason she’d lost her mind and written an obscenely large check.

“God.” She leaned against the arched doorway to the library, staring at the cream-colored area rug. “That may be an Aubusson. Did I even notice that when I was here before?”

Nails clicking on the oak parquet flooring, the dog came to stand next to her, sniffing the stale air. She rubbed his head. “If you pee on that rug,” she warned, “we’ll have words. No marking your territory, even if it is the male imperative.”

He looked insulted and returned to lie down by the front door.

The house had the empty silence of disuse, as if it had been waiting far too long for her arrival. She climbed the stairs, brushing cobwebs off the dusty railing. High up in the stairwell, sun shone through a small dormer window, turning the tracks her fingers made a burnished gold. Dust motes spiraled upward, floating on air currents warmed by shafts

of sunlight.

She walked into the front bedroom, a giant, dimly lit cavern, the formality of its frescoed ceiling relieved by the cozy window seat in the turret. The room stood empty, its wide-planked floor scratched and bare, and the air was even staler than it had been downstairs.

After three tries, she found a window that wasn't painted shut. Fresh air blew in on a cool breeze, banishing the odors of must and mildew. She'd start cleaning in here first, so that she wouldn't have to put her sleeping bag down in the dust. She'd packed only the essentials for the trip—casual clothes, an espresso maker, books to read. The movers wouldn't be here for another day or two, so she'd be roughing it until then.

Bracing her knee on the worn velvet seat cushion, she gazed down at the street through the leafy boughs of the maple tree. The neighborhood was quiet, filled with quaint, carefully tended houses and mature trees, reminiscent of small-town America from a bygone era. Ryland would have hated this place, she mused, as much as she was drawn to it.

The dog trotted up the stairs but stopped short of coming into the room, watching her hopefully with soft, liquid brown eyes. She straightened, sighing. "You really *do* need to go home."

Walking over to him, she rubbed his head some more, then ran a hand down his back. She could feel every joint of his spine, she realized in horror. Whoever owned him certainly didn't deserve him. "Come on, fella. Let's find you something to eat."

She took the stairs two at a time. Glancing into the library as she walked past, she noted what she estimated to be a few thousand books stacked in random piles and jammed into glass-fronted bookcases. A wingback chair sat in the center of the room, flanked by a rickety pedestal table and a floor lamp with a leaded glass shade. Across the

room, a huge oak desk sat stacked with more books and yellowed newspapers. But it was the French doors on the opposite wall that beckoned.

She held up a hand to the dog. "I'll only be a moment..."

The doors swung open onto a stone patio overrun with weeds. An intoxicatingly sweet scent blew in, and she ventured out a few steps and looked up, trying to locate its source. She gasped. Wisteria covered the entire side of the house, its cascading lilac flowers drowning her in fragrance.

"Oh...*oh!*" She knelt and wrapped her arms around the dog's neck.

In her mind's eye, she could see the garden as it would be when she cleaned it up—overflowing with flowers, bounded by bentwood fencing covered with climbing roses blooming in a riot of pink and white. What she'd felt the first time she'd seen the house had been a serious crush, but this...this was love.

"I'll be okay," she sniffed, burying her face in the dog's fur and pushing back the grief. "We'll be just fine."

"Hello?" The call came from the front hall.

"Coming!" She stood, swiping at tears, and crossed the library. Through the window, she spied a police cruiser parked at the front curb. *Damn.*

A woman stood inside the door, her gaze as sharp as the razor cut of her chin-length ash blond hair. She spied Jordan. "Oh, good. I was afraid Sandy—the real estate agent—had left the door open. You must be the psychologist."

Though dressed casually in pressed jeans and a tailored jacket, she reminded Jordan of a Scandinavian Valkyrie—around six feet tall, she estimated, athletic and imposing as hell. She'd had her fill of cops in the last few months, asking questions for which she had no answers, treating her as if she were a criminal.

The Valkyrie thrust out a hand nearly twice the size of her own. "Darcy Moran, Port

Chatham Chief of Police.”

Chief of police. Even worse. Jordan reluctantly introduced herself. “What can I do for you, Chief Moran?”

“Make it Darcy. Stopped by to welcome you to the neighborhood.”

Jordan relaxed marginally. “Thanks.”

Darcy jerked her head toward the front door. “Looks like you could use some help carrying boxes.”

“That’s okay. You don’t—” She was talking to empty space. The woman was already at the curb, pulling boxes from the Prius’s trunk.

Jordan followed at a more leisurely pace. “Slow day?” she asked wryly.

“Waiting for the tourists to wake up and hit the streets.” Darcy shoved a box into her arms, then picked up two more. “Where do you want these?”

“Um, the kitchen?”

They carried the boxes down the hall to the roomy country kitchen at the back of the house.

“When did you hit town?” Darcy asked over her shoulder as she deposited her boxes on the warped linoleum counter and headed back outside.

Jordan had to trot to keep up. “This morning. I’m a bit overwhelmed.”

“Buyer’s remorse.” Darcy handed her another box. “You’ll get over it.”

“The wisteria’s helping.”

“Yeah, it’s cool. Bit of a pain to keep in check, though.”

It took only two more trips to empty the car. “See?” Darcy dusted off her hands. “Much easier when someone helps.”

Jordan eyed her, trying to catch her breath. “Anyone ever compare you to a human cyclone?”

“I may have heard similar comments a time or two. Got anything to drink?”

Jordan rummaged in the ice chest they’d brought in, coming up with a soda. Then she found a bowl and headed for the sink. Nothing but a hiss of air came out when she turned the faucet handle, so she uncapped a bottle of Evian and poured it into the bowl for the dog. Unwrapping the all-natural chicken breast she’d been saving for a sandwich, she held it out to him. He scarfed it down in one gulp and looked at her expectantly.

“I’ve been trying to catch up with that dog all week.” Darcy flipped open her mobile phone. “Let me put in a call Animal Control—”

He lowered his head and whined.

“*NO!*”

Darcy paused, her finger poised over the keypad, brows raised.

“He’s mine,” Jordan improvised.

“Uh-huh. Didn’t you say you just drove in this morning?”

“Minor technicality,” she said brightly. “Why don’t we take our drinks and go sit out front? I’ve always wanted a front stoop to sit on.” Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed Darcy’s soda can, leaving her to follow.

“So what made you decide on Port Chatham?” Darcy asked once they were settled on the porch steps.

“An acquaintance of mine gave me tickets to last year’s jazz concert. A few days in town was all it took to hook me on the idea of moving up here. Are you familiar with the Ted Rawlins Trio?”

Darcy nodded. “Rawlins is the friend? I’ve heard him play—he’s very good. I think he purchased a summer home south of town on the golf course, didn’t he?”

“He comes up every summer, as far as I know.”

“How long are you planning to stay in town? Will Longren House be your vacation

home, or your primary residence?”

She was grilling—and not all that subtly, either. Jordan kept her answers friendly. “I’ll be here at least a year, maybe more, depending on how the remodel goes. And no, I don’t plan to split my time—I’m gone from L.A. for good, I think.” She shrugged. “We’ll see. I want to research the house’s history, plan the remodel right. Got any suggestions on where to start?”

“County. They might even have a copy of the original plans.” Darcy propped an elbow on the top step. “If memory serves, a Captain Charles Longren built the place for his bride, Hattie, in the late 1800s. She didn’t live here all that long, though. There’ve been a number of owners over the years—”

Her mobile phone wailed, startling Jordan.

After a quick conversation, Darcy hung up, sighing. “I’ve got to head back to the station.”

“Your phone is programmed to Miles Davis?”

“Of course. We take our jazz seriously around here.” Darcy drained her soda and stood, then studied Jordan for a moment. “So I’m betting you weren’t the one who cut the brake lines on your husband’s Beemer.”

Jordan managed to keep her tone matter-of-fact. “No, I wasn’t.”

Darcy nodded. “Needed to ask.”

“I can give you the name of the detective in L.A. who is handling the case. I’m sure he’ll be glad to fill you in.”

“Not necessary. They’ve already been in contact to say you’re part of an ongoing investigation. It got me curious, so I asked a few questions.”

Jordan didn’t respond—she’d learned over the past few months not to volunteer information.

They walked to the curb, Darcy in the lead. “Listen, why don’t you drop by the pub tonight? I’ll introduce you around.”

“Pub?”

“The neighborhood hangout, over on the main drag. Come to think of it, your buddy Rawlins is slated to perform there tomorrow night. It’s a laid back place—the food is good, and Jase doesn’t water the drinks.”

So he owned a pub. “I met him a bit ago, I think. Dark, wavy hair, killer blue eyes—”

“—and sexy as all hell? Yep, that’s Jase.” She flashed a grin, and Jordan relented, smiling back. “Seeing as how you don’t strike me as a black widow in training,” Darcy added, “I’ll also mention that Jase is unattached.”

Jordan held up a hand like a traffic cop. “Not on the agenda any time soon.”

“Good thing you’ve adopted a dog to keep you company then.” Darcy opened the door of the police cruiser. “Hey, do you like to hike? I’m always looking for new blood, and there’s a great trek out on Dungeness Spit if we time the tides right.”

Jordan had a sudden vision of being dragged, breathless, along a boulder-strewn promontory. “We’ll see.”

“Wise to be cautious.” Darcy grinned again. “Talk to Jase—he’ll tell you I don’t lose too many of my hiking buddies. Well, just the uncoordinated ones.”

Jordan shook her head, amused in spite of herself. “Thanks for the help unpacking the car.”

“No problem. We tend to do for each other around here. Give it a couple of days and you’ll be buried in food from the various welcoming committees.”

“You live here in the neighborhood?”

“Two streets over—the Gothic Revival in the middle of the block.”

Jordan must have looked perplexed.

“Blue with white trim, clean, symmetrical lines, a couple of Adirondacks on the porch,” Darcy elaborated. “None of those frilly cottage garden flowers. You can’t miss it.”

She started to climb into the driver’s seat, then paused, angling her head to look up at the second floor of Longren House. “So which bedroom are you planning to commandeering?”

“The front one. It’s the largest, and the window seat in the turret is pretty hard to resist.”

“You might want to reassess if you plan on getting a good night’s sleep.”

“Why?”

“You mean Sandy didn’t tell you?” Darcy shook her head in apparent disgust. “Back around the turn of the century, Hattie Longren was bludgeoned to death in that very room.”

Chapter 2

As the police cruiser disappeared around the corner, Jordan closed her eyes.

“Okay,” she muttered. “Murder definitely constitutes a giant checkmark in the buyer’s remorse column.”

But now that she thought about it, she’d been able to buy Longren House for a lot less than other Victorians for sale in town. Not that writing the amount on the check hadn’t caused her serious heartburn at the time, but still, she remembered having one of those niggling feelings...

She sat down abruptly on the curb and scrubbed her face with both hands. When it came to dealing with the unintended consequences of impulsive acts, murder—even one a century old—bumped the thirteen colors of paint and sagging porch all the way down to the white noise level. She was a therapist, for chrissakes. She strongly believed in—and practiced—Rational Therapy. So how in God’s name had she considered it *rational* to act so impulsively?

A small, hysterical laugh escaped. And what were the damn odds that she would buy a house tainted by murder? No one would believe it was mere coincidence. She had no problem envisioning *that* headline:

**SUSPECTED BLACK WIDOW FASCINATED BY MURDER
BUYS LONGREN HOUSE**

No wonder the Chief of Police had shown up on her doorstep a half hour after she'd hit town.

She really needed to work on the gullibility issue. Not that this would be the first time she'd fallen prey—witness her seven-year marriage to one of L.A.'s smoothest operators. She'd had no clue of the double life he'd led—she'd actually believed him when he'd said he had to work late all those evenings.

She sighed. No matter what Ryland's faults had been—and they'd turned out to be legion—he hadn't deserved to die. And though she might've fantasized a time or two about wringing his neck, she hadn't actually given into impulse, regardless of what the L.A. cops believed.

The dog sat next to her, whining, and licked the side of her face. She threw an arm around his neck and hugged him. "I'm okay," she reassured him. "But thanks for asking."

She rolled her eyes. "Great," she muttered. "I'm thanking a dog."

Definitely time to take charge. She couldn't do anything about the past, but the future...well, she'd keep a low profile, work on the house, and pray the L.A.P.D. would look at other suspects. As far as they knew, she didn't have a strong motive to kill Ryland, what with the divorce almost final. They'd bought her reasoning.

At least, she thought they had.

And as for the murder that had taken place in Longren House, she'd simply ignore it. It had nothing to do with her.

As she used to tell her patients, *Focus on today, and tomorrow will take care of itself. Ignore the little voice inside your head whispering they're out to get you. Avoid the urge to put foil on your windows.*

Unpack. Review the Four Point Plan. In light of the day's events, consider modification of the F.P.P. Make a list for the hardware store.

“An ancient murder will *not* stop me from loving this place,” she told the dog, “and it will *not* make me start obsessing again.”

“Raaooooow.”

“After all, it was a really long time ago, right?”

“Rooooo.”

“Precisely.”

She dragged a bucket of cleaning supplies from the back seat of the Prius and headed inside.

* * *

It took her a half hour, crawling among the brambles along the back kitchen wall, to locate the water main and turn it on, then flip the circuit breaker on the electric panel. While she waited for hot water, she grabbed a packet of dust cloths and a bottle of lemon oil and headed back upstairs.

She hesitated at the door to the front bedroom, then scolded herself for being ridiculous. The fantasy of whiling away the hours in the window seat with a good book definitely trumped an old murder.

First thing in the morning, though, she'd head over to the county offices, maybe even check the local newspaper archives. She had to admit, she was curious about what had happened to Hattie Longren.

Had the murder been a random act by a drifter? Or committed in a moment of passion by someone close to her? Had she known she would die beforehand? For that matter, had Ryland known—in those last seconds as his car plunged into the ravine—that *he* would die?

Jordan halted halfway across the room, shuddering at the morbid direction of her thoughts. Forcing herself to focus on the present, she waited to see whether she felt anything from the room, like old, malevolent vibes. People always said they could feel the remnants of the violence—even decades later—in a room where a crime had occurred.

She cocked her head. . . .Nope, nothing. All she felt was that she'd finally come home, that *this* was the house she belonged in, not in the ultra-modern condominium in Malibu Ryland had talked her into buying.

After securing her shoulder-length hair with claw clips, she grabbed a dust cloth and got down to work, chasing away personal demons along with the cobwebs. The dog lay down in the doorway to watch her.

It took her awhile to notice that he wasn't coming into the room. She paused in the act of unrolling her sleeping bag in front of the window seat and bending over, slapped her hands on her knees. "C'mere, sweetie."

He lowered his ears and thumped his tail on the floor.

She injected a firm note into her voice. "*Come.*"

He stood and disappeared down the hall.

"Clearly I have a bright future ahead of me as a dog trainer," she muttered, rising to follow.

She found him sitting in the middle of the bedroom at the back of the house. When she entered, he barked and grinned, his tongue lolling.

The room was full of light and charming with its angled ceilings and faded floral wallpaper, some of it even still hanging. The dormer window that looked down on the overgrown backyard opened without much protest.

In the winter when the leaves had fallen from the trees, the view of Admiralty Inlet

and the shipping lanes would be stunning. She couldn't help but wonder if Hattie Longren had stood in this very spot over a century ago, watching for her husband's ship on the horizon.

Directly below, through the boughs of a magnolia tree, she could still see the faint outline of the garden's original beds, which would've been filled with herbs and flowers and veggies. The debris-covered remains of a flagstone path led around to the side, probably to the patio off the library. Once restored to its original design...

The dog whined, capturing her attention. He stood at the door to a closet, scratching. Walking over, she opened it, revealing a funky, oddly shaped triangle built into the corner of the room. After sniffing excitedly, the dog started scratching the inside back wall, so she dropped to her knees to see what had captured his interest. Prying away a loose board, she spied a tattered edge of lace and reached for it. The lace was attached to an old porcelain doll.

"Well, well," she murmured, carefully removing the doll from of its hiding place. "How did you know it was there, fella?"

Sitting on the floor, she smoothed its dress yellowed by time, using her thumb to wipe a smudge off the doll's chipped, rosy cheek. Had this been Hattie's daughter's room? If so, what had happened to her after Hattie's death?

"Yoooo-hooooo?"

The trill came from downstairs, startling Jordan, and she scowled. Where was that peace and quiet she'd moved to a small town to find? She eyed the closet with the hope of squeezing inside.

"Anybody home?" The voice was closer and more insistent now, at the foot of the stairs.

Sighing, she set the doll on the lower shelf and stood. Heading for the hall, she

looked back for the dog, but he'd disappeared. "Smart," she muttered under her breath.

At the top of the stairs, she skidded to a halt, gaping.

Two women stood in the lower hall, dressed in vintage clothing. One, in her forties, wore a full-length, forest green silk dress with a fitted velvet bodice that dropped into a curved vee over her slim hips. Her narrow shoulders were covered by a cape of the same velvet trimmed in black, and she'd pinned her brown hair up in an elaborately coiffed style that Jordan figured had to be historically accurate. The second woman, fair-haired and younger by perhaps a decade, was dressed less sedately in a pale blue silk gown sporting a small bustle and a daring neckline.

"There you are." The older of the two smiled up at her. "I hope we're not disturbing?" When Jordan continued to stare slack-jawed, the woman laughed self-consciously. "I'm Nora, and this is my sister Delia. We're docents at the Port Chatham Historical Society. We must have given you quite a shock."

"Ah. Um, no. Sorry." Jordan loped down the stairs. "Your costumes are fabulous." They glanced at each other, smiling.

"Thank you." Nora smoothed her skirts with slender, pale hands. "It's best to look the part, we always say. Don't we, Delia?"

Delia turned in a circle to show off her gown. "What do you think?" Her eyes, which were a perfect match for her dress, gleamed with mischief. "I'm trying to convince Nora that fashion had nothing to do with comfort in those days. She's been reading about the Rational Dress Movement that was touted back then by a few radical old stick-in-the-muds."

"Hmmp." Nora looked down her nose. "The Rational Dress Movement was very forward-thinking. Women actually damaged their internal organs by wearing corsets and carrying around so much weight in all those bustles and petticoats."

“Most women were looking for a husband and wanted to display their assets to best advantage. Just because a few old biddies were lecturing on the dangers of corsets—”

“The new, less restrictive styles were just as flattering—”

“Bull!”

Jordan, fearing the onset of whiplash, cleared her throat. “Um, I’d offer you ladies some refreshments, but I’m afraid all I have is—”

“Who would want to look *that* straight-laced?” Delia snapped, rolling right over her. “Men weren’t looking for *sedate*.” She sniffed, turning her attention to Jordan. “You don’t happen to have any *Vanity Fair* magazines, do you?”

Jordan hesitated, flummoxed by the question.

“Can’t you see she hasn’t even moved in yet?” Nora chided. “Magazines would be the very last thing she’d unpack.”

“Nonsense. Anyone who keeps up on fashion would have one or two magazines with them for the long trip up here, now wouldn’t they? And she did travel all the way from California.”

“Ah, well—”

Nora ignored Jordan’s attempted reply. “Delia. Quit harassing the poor girl.”

Delia pouted.

Jordan couldn’t remember the last time anyone had referred to her as a ‘girl’, but she had to admit it beat ‘black widow’ hands down. She pasted an apologetic smile on her face. “I’m afraid I really don’t pay much attention to fashion,” she said, gesturing at her jeans that looked ‘vintage’ only because of the number of washings they’d suffered.

“About those refreshments—”

“We brought treats!” Delia lit up, her moods fluctuating at the speed of a teenager’s.

“A chocolate cake! We put it in the kitchen.”

“How kind of you. Let me find some paper plates. But first, would you like a tour of the house?”

“Don’t go to the trouble,” Nora said firmly. “We’ve seen it many times.”

“That makes sense.” Jordan led the way toward the kitchen. “I suppose Port Chatham has a historic homes tour, right? And the prior owners would’ve had the place on the tour, what with the murder and all.”

She heard a gasp behind her and turned to find Delia halted, tears in her eyes.

“There, there.” Nora rushed to put an arm around her sister’s shoulders. “She’s very sensitive,” she confided to Jordan. “She cries over the sad stories associated with some of the homes here in town.”

“I’m so sorry. Can I get anything? Perhaps some water?”

“No, we’re fine. Your comment took us by surprise, that’s all.”

“So you know all about the murder?”

“Of course. Poor Hattie. Such a tragedy it was. Killed by the man she loved, they say...” Nora handed Delia a handkerchief, her own expression bereft, then she blinked.

“But we never really believed the official story, now did we?”

“*No.*” Delia blew her nose loudly. “Frank loved Hattie. He *never* would have killed her.”

“Though it’s true we don’t really know for sure—”

“*I do!* He was a *wonderful* man. He didn’t have a violent bone in his body.”

Nora sent her sister a sharp look. “Well perhaps, though it would hardly seem so from the newspaper accounts.” Her hand sliced through the air impatiently. “The fact is, I’ve always suspected Seavey.”

“Who is—was—Seavey?” Jordan asked, curious.

“Well, I don’t think he did it,” Delia insisted. “Even if he was a bad man.”

“He was a *vile* man. Anyone can see that from—”

“But he worshipped Hattie—”

“He most certainly did not!”

“Cake,” Jordan said grimly. “In the kitchen. Now.”

Nora jumped. “We have to be going.” She pointed Delia in the direction of the front door.

“No—wait,” Jordan said quickly. *Right. Scare off the sweet little local ladies. That’ll endear you to the neighborhood.* “I’m sorry for sounding abrupt—it’s just that I’ve already had a long drive and...Please stay.”

“No, we mustn’t keep you.” Nora nudged her sister forward. “We just stopped by to bring you a few historical documents we thought you might enjoy. They’re on the counter next to the cake. You’ll return them to us at the Society when you’re through with them, won’t you?”

“Of course. How thoughtful of you. In fact, I’m eager to visit and go through your collection.” Jordan waved a hand. “I’m determined to fix the old place up. I’d love to see some pictures from when it was new, plus any articles that might have been written at the time in the local newspapers.”

Evidently she’d said the right thing, because both women beamed at her.

“And we’d love to be of help!” Delia gushed. “It’s so important to preserve our heritage, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely.” Relieved, Jordan walked them to the door. “Are you sure I can’t interest you in some cake? I can’t possibly eat it all by myself.”

“No, we’ll...get out of your hair!” Delia giggled, looking pleased with herself, and Nora chuckled indulgently.

Jordan looked from one to the other, not getting their joke. Did her hair look that

bad? She resisted the urge to raise a hand and check, instead smiling politely. “Well, thanks again. I’ll stop by tomorrow. What time do you open?”

“Around ten,” Nora replied. “Do you know where the research center is?”

“I have a map—I’ll find it.”

Jordan closed the door behind them, leaning against it and shaking her head, amused. Given their argumentative communication style, she’d wager her Prius that they’d been living together for a *very* long time.

Walking back to the kitchen, she spied a cake box on the counter next to a jumble of newspaper clippings and papers. Peeking inside, she swiped a bit of frosting and tasted it. “Oh. Yum.” Devil’s food with cream cheese fudge frosting.

One side of the cake was smashed—she wondered whether they’d dropped it on the way over. She shrugged, smiling, and licked more frosting off her finger.

As she walked back down the hallway to the foot of the stairs, she looked up. “You can come out now,” she called. “They’re gone.”

The dog stuck his head around the banister, unrepentant.

“Traitor.”

* * *

Jordan spent the next several hours hauling, sweeping, and mopping. By late afternoon, she had generated a recycle pile of respectable size and felt the need for sustenance that didn’t contain sugar.

After explaining the concept of leash laws to the dog, who sat and listened with exaggerated patience, she tied a piece of rope she’d found in the butler’s pantry around his neck. He barked at her, no matter how firmly she tugged on the rope, until she folded

it and held it out. Taking it gently from her, he held it in his mouth and trotted out the front door, pausing to look over his shoulder. She shook her head and hurried obediently after him.

“We need to have a discussion regarding names,” she said as they proceeded down the sidewalk. “I refuse to call you Dog—it’s demeaning. What about...hmmm...Spike?”

“Raaomph!”

“Hey, he’s a great director—you could do worse. But I’ll keep thinking.”

The afternoon had turned warm, and she tugged off her sweatshirt and tied it around her waist. As she walked, she soaked up the atmosphere along with the rays.

Port Chatham sat on a bluff on the northernmost tip of the Olympic Peninsula, surrounded by the glistening waters of Puget Sound. The town’s historic waterfront faced Port Chatham Bay on a narrow strip of low-lying land only a few blocks wide. The rest of the town—the majority of its residential areas—had been built on the bluffs overlooking downtown.

Around each corner, Jordan was confronted with yet a different view of the shipping lanes and the islands that dotted Puget Sound. To the east, a few blocks off the brow of the hill, she could see the ferry making its way across Admiralty Inlet to Whidbey Island.

Her neighborhood consisted of blocks of historic homes surrounding a small, satellite business district that spread from a central intersection along two intersecting arterial streets. As always, she was struck by the clash of old and new—lovingly tended homes that made her feel as though she’d stepped back a hundred years in time, juxtaposed by the jarring presence of modern businesses, telephone poles and parked cars.

A block down, a young man sat on a sagging couch on the front porch of a small cottage, playing jazz on his guitar—a song that combined elements of blues and fusion. A

young girl wearing a vintage children's dress sat at his feet, softly humming her own tune while she played with an antique doll.

Just beyond the cottage stood a lovingly tended old home, painted lemon yellow with aubergine accents and surrounded by a white picket fence smothered in pink climbing roses. Jordan smiled and waved at the elderly couple sitting in the gently swaying porch swing, holding hands. The man put out his foot to halt the swing, surprise showing on his face, but his wife returned Jordan's smile with a nod.

The grocery was one block up and two over, and it seemed to be a neighborhood hub of sorts. She'd discovered the small business district when she'd stayed at a bed and breakfast down the block, on her trip to town the prior summer. Between jazz performances at the local taverns, she'd sat outside the bakery and had coffee, then wandered down the quiet back streets, exchanging greetings with friendly locals who'd been out watering their lawns or walking their dogs. She remembered thinking at the time that she'd possibly found a community that could be her salvation. Her impression hadn't changed.

The dog sat down to wait outside the grocery, his leash still in his mouth. She didn't even attempt to tie him to the bicycle stand.

Though the building was new, the grocery fit into the neighborhood with its homey atmosphere, appealing displays of organic produce and quaint, hand-lettered signs. Leaded glass windows of abstract design flooded the interior with light, and customers sat in a loft over the deli, reading the newspaper while they ate their sandwiches.

The aisles were stocked with standard fare plus an impressive selection of gourmet and organic foods that promised to do serious damage to Jordan's monthly budget. She dumped canned, organic dog food, a box of whole grain cereal, milk, and a bag of coffee into her basket, plus a deli-packed serving of vegetarian lasagna for dinner. Snagging a

bottle of Pinot Noir, she headed for the checkout.

Halfway there she halted and backtracked to add a wedge of imported French, triple-cream Brie, fancy crackers, and more sliced chicken breast, muttering to herself the entire time about a lack of self-discipline. After a chat with the checkout clerk about the fire a few years back that had destroyed the original historic building, she and the dog headed back home.

Pulling paper plates from one of the boxes on the kitchen counter, Jordan fixed a sandwich, dividing the chicken breast heavily in favor of the dog. Opening a can of dog food that looked more appealing than her own recipe for beef stew, she added its contents to the plate, placing it on the floor. The food disappeared with alarming speed.

While she munched on her own sandwich, she rifled through the stack of papers left by Nora and Delia. The ladies had provided a mix of old newspaper articles about the murder and what appeared to be pages from a diary. She wedged the papers under one elbow, picked up a book on Port Chatham's history she'd bought at a local bookstore during her last trip to town, and headed outside to sit on the front stoop. Though she felt more exposed than she liked—as if someone were still watching her—she'd be damned if anyone would stop her from enjoying her own porch.

According to the clerk at the grocery, fire had played an important role in the town's history. Torn over what to read first, she finally set aside the ladies' papers and propped the book on her knees, flipping through until she found a chapter on historic fires. The author had interspersed text with pictures of the valiant fire crews, standing somberly in their old-fashioned uniforms and helmets.

A photocopied newspaper article on a huge waterfront fire caught her eye, and she settled down to read, the dog snoozing in the sun at her feet.

The Great Fire

May 25, 1890, two weeks earlier

“They say an entire block is already in flames,” Hattie Longren murmured to Eleanor Canby. “Five are dead, with more to be found.”

Though midnight had come and gone, they stood next to the bell tower at the top of the bluff with their neighbors, watching as the inferno raged below them on the waterfront. Orange flames leapt high against a smoke-filled, black sky, writhing and reaching out on the wind.

“Good riddance, I say.” Eleanor folded her arms over her ample bosom. Tall and matronly, she wore her gray serge as if it were a suit of armor in a war against loose morals. “We both know that area was nothing but saloons and brothels.”

As the owner of Port Chatham’s newspaper, Eleanor frequently wrote editorials with strong views regarding the lawlessness and temptations of the waterfront. Rigid, old-fashioned views, in Hattie’s opinion.

She shivered, holding the folds of her cape tightly closed against the damp night air. “No one deserves to die that way.”

The bell had begun ringing at ten, a full half hour after the first spiral of smoke had been spotted, according to one neighbor. The blaze had quickly spread. Hattie suspected

the fire was no accident, and that the initial report had been intentionally delayed. Someone had been sending a message: *Do as we say, or see your business destroyed*. But whoever had started the fire hadn't counted on the strong wind from the south, and other businesses were now at risk.

A murmur rose from the crowd as several adjoining buildings, black silhouettes half-eaten through, teetered then fell, instantly consumed in a roiling mass of crimson sparks. A silver stream of salt water arced from a tugboat anchored in the harbor, dousing roofs and flooding the streets. Hattie could see the dark shapes of men, racing to and fro in a desperate attempt to save the records from City Hall. Working to save City Hall, she thought in disgust, but making no effort to save the people in buildings facing the waterfront.

"Will the fire spread up here?" Charlotte asked, her delicate features pale from anxiety.

"No." Hattie placed a hand on her sister's trembling shoulder. "There's no chance of that. They'll have it under control before then."

"Don't be too sure," Eleanor retorted. "Sparks could find their way to us."

"If they do, we'll extinguish them," Hattie said firmly. At the impressionable age of fifteen, Charlotte was prone to wild mood swings. Hattie didn't need her frightened by Eleanor's tendency toward dour predictions.

After their parents died in a carriage accident in Boston, Charlotte and her beloved ladies maid, Tabitha, had come to live with Hattie. Charlotte had proven to be more of a handful than Hattie had anticipated. *Charlotte yearns for adventure as you once did*, their mother had written in a letter to be delivered upon the event of her death, *but she hasn't your innate good judgment. We're counting on you to keep her safe*.

Innate good judgment. Hattie sighed. If only her mother knew the truth about her

short marriage. The tension between her and Charles had driven him to sea, where he perished at the hands of a mutinous crew, leaving her with a struggling shipping business she was ill prepared to manage. And now she had Charlotte depending on her as well. A familiar sense of panic threatened to overwhelm her.

“That fire was started by a drunken prostitute, mark my words.” Eleanor’s voice brought her back to the present. “I can find no sympathy for those of her ilk. Painted harlots, flaunting their wares and infatuating our decent young men, plying them with corn liquor until they don’t know their own minds!”

“Bull,” Hattie said, earning herself a sharp look from Eleanor. But Hattie knew well the intertwined cycles of poverty and cruelty—her mother had run a clinic in Boston’s Back Bay. “It’s the supposedly decent men of this town who are preying on helpless women.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

Hattie shrugged off Eleanor’s look of condemnation. “What about Jessie? Hasn’t he been seen in the Green Light?”

Eleanor’s mouth thinned at the mention of her youngest. Young, handsome, and possessing an easy charm he couldn’t have inherited from his mother, Jessie was well known around town for his wild ways.

“Jessie is no longer welcome in our home, and the Green Light is nothing but a stench in the nostrils of decent citizens,” she replied.

“But don’t you worry that among the dead tonight might be other sons of prominent families?” Hattie asked quietly. “That fire was deliberately set.”

“Sssshh!” Eleanor glanced over her shoulder. “You can’t make statements like that in public.”

“Why not? You know it’s true.”

Eleanor's spine, if anything, became more rigid. "My reporters have already determined that the fire started in a house of ill repute. May they all reap what they sow!"

Hattie raised an eyebrow. "You sound like a Temperance lecturer."

"And what of it? John Gough and his disciples have much to say that is worth listening to." Eleanor's voice had risen, and several in the crowd nodded their agreement. She looked gratified, as if the fire were proof of her belief that the waterfront was populated by the devil's own.

Hattie shook her head but dropped the subject, knowing it was futile to think she could change Eleanor's mind.

Mayor Payton's buckboard clattered to a halt behind them, its matched pair of bays wild-eyed from the smoke. Short and barrel-chested, Payton struggled to control the lunging horses.

"We need every able-bodied man!" he shouted, his silver handlebar mustache streaked with soot. "Customs House and City Hall are threatened!"

Hattie turned to Charlotte. "Go quickly and rouse Tabitha."

"What do you think you're doing?" Eleanor hissed as Charlotte dashed off. "Women like us don't go to the waterfront—not if we want our reputations to remain intact."

"Nonsense," Hattie replied. "I need to check on my sailing crews, some of whom could be trapped inside burning buildings. They're my responsibility now." Though she felt a twinge of foreboding, she kept her voice confident. "We'll be perfectly safe. The police are standing guard throughout the area."

"But think what you'll be subjecting the girls to!"

"They'll be fine—I'll be there to chaperone them. And it will be an excellent learning experience for them, helping those less fortunate than themselves."

Eleanor huffed. "This is outrageous behavior for a widow so recently in mourning."

“No one will think ill of me if I go down to help.” Hattie stared Eleanor down. “Will you do nothing, then?”

“I’ve dispatched a reporter and photographer to the scene—I have no intention of personally mingling with the criminal elements.”

“Many of those *criminal elements* are men regularly invited into the better homes in this town, men who don’t admit to having their hands dirtied by the proceeds of the very saloons and brothels they rail against.”

“Talk like that will not endear you to your neighbors,” Eleanor admonished in a low voice.

Charlotte and Tabitha ran toward them, buckets in their hands. Resolute, Hattie turned her back on Eleanor and went to meet the girls by the buckboard, taking hold of the extra buckets.

“Help us up,” she ordered the man sitting closest to them.

* * *

Huge, glowing cinders flew overhead as the buckboard rolled to a stop in front of City Hall. Across the street, flames shot through the roofs of several two-story, wooden buildings, and the window frames of others were already smoking. Every few moments, Hattie heard the sound of plate glass shattering. It was hot, so hot that even from where she sat, her dress felt on fire next to her skin.

Men begrimed with smoke and soot dragged boxes from City Hall, while policemen pulled furniture from the adjacent courthouse. The town’s new hose cart stopped next to their buckboard, pulled by a huge, black draft horse and several runners. Firemen raced to unwind the hose.

In front of the Green Light, a man in a preacher's frock coat held up a bible and cried, "This fire was visited upon us by the wrath of God!"

A policeman headed in his direction, looking irritated. *Good*, Hattie thought as she climbed down.

Her first order of business was to find her manager, Clive Johnson. "This way, girls."

They ran toward the harbor, their long skirts dragging through blackened puddles of water. Men rushed past them, shouting at them to get out of the way. As they rounded the corner, Hattie thrust out her arm to stop Charlotte and Tabitha.

Fire roared the length of the block. Dozens of half-dressed women stood crying in groups on the beach below the wharf, their white chemises now soot-streaked and torn, their hair falling in disarray around their faces. Others ran to the water's edge with buckets, then back to fling water onto the burning structures. Sailors dragged crates of corn liquor from a burning saloon, while more men used axes to break the front windows of the general store and retrieve clothing and tins of food.

"Those women aren't dressed," Tabitha said in a low voice, glancing nervously at the prostitutes. "And the men..."

"Never mind that now." Hattie folded back her mourning veil so that she could see better.

Dear God.

At least a dozen buildings were completely engulfed. Next to where they stood, flames ate through the huge, white block letters of the words "STABLE" and "LIVERY" painted on the wooden plank siding of a building. Hattie heard the screams of horses still trapped inside their stalls, then several lunged from the smoke-filled interior.

"Get back!" She yanked the girls out of the path of the horses.

Two men ran from the building, fiery beams crashing behind them as the structure

collapsed.

Hattie took a calming breath. She scanned the crowd on the beach, spying Clive Johnson standing among them. “Wait here,” she told the girls.

As she approached, Johnson, a portly man of average height, thinning hair and unexceptional features, exclaimed, “Mrs. Longren! What’re you doin’ down here?”

“Checking on the status of my sailing crews. I trust you’ve ensured they are safe?”

He gave her an odd look, then shrugged. “I reckon.”

“Please locate them and verify their safety. Order them to assist in the firefighting, if they aren’t doing so already. And send someone out to the ships immediately. Have the First Mates bring the skeleton crews on shore to help fight the fire.”

He shook his head. “I ain’t leavin’ the ships unguarded.”

She controlled a spurt of irritation. In recent weeks, she’d come to expect his attempts to undermine her authority, but they still rankled. “And if we don’t halt this fire,” she countered in a sharp tone, “there won’t be any boardinghouses left standing to shelter the crews who sail those ships. Now do as I say.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned her back on him, pretending not to hear the derogatory comment he made under his breath, then searched the crowd for someone in authority. Her gaze landed on an older woman of imposing height, dressed in a midnight blue gown of the finest silk and brocade, standing ten yards away.

Walking over, she touched the woman’s shoulder. “Excuse me!”

The woman turned. Upon closer viewing, her features, though not beautiful, were arresting, and she exuded an air of authority. Her makeup was smudged, revealing lines caused by years of hard living, but her eyes were sharp and alert.

After looking Hattie up and down, she frowned. “Can’t you see we’re busy? We sure as hell don’t need some Temperance lecturer underfoot!”

Hattie stood her ground. “I’m Hattie Longren, and those girls—” she pointed “—are Charlotte, my sister, and her maid Tabitha. We’re here to help.”

The woman ignored her outstretched hand. “So?”

Hattie hesitated, then turned toward the crowd on the beach. “Ladies!” she shouted. “Form a line between the bay and the saloon. Two at the shore, handing full buckets up the line, and two at the front, emptying them. We can pass the empties back down the same line.”

The prostitutes stayed where they were, afraid to follow her instructions until the woman jerked her head and said grudgingly, “Do as she says.”

In no time, they were tossing water on the flames now pouring from the front door of the saloon. But they might as well have been pouring it on a teaspoon at a time—the fire devoured the water without so much as a hiss.

The woman stood next to Hattie at the front of the line, sweat creating dark patches on their dresses as they worked. After the third time Hattie’s hands brushed against the woman’s, she turned to give Hattie an assessing look. “I’m Mona Starr, proprietress of the Green Light.”

Hattie’s eyes widened. Port Chatham’s most notorious Madame. Hattie had heard it whispered that without the philanthropic efforts of the woman standing next to her, Port Chatham couldn’t boast about its grand opera hall, or even its new courthouse. Rumor was that Mona Starr also stood between her girls and any man who would abuse them—that prostitutes lined up to work under her patronage.

“I don’t imagine hoity-toity types like you should be touching my kind,” Mona observed.

“I’m not worried.” Hattie took an overflowing bucket from her, slopping some of it down the front of her dress.

Mona looked surprised, then pursed her lips. “You must be Charles Longren’s widow.”

“Yes.” Hattie noticed men hauling crates of liquor down the block. “Where are they taking those?” she asked, pointing.

“The tunnels.”

Intrigued, she followed their progress. Prior to his death, Charles had related stories of sailors imprisoned in underground caverns until shanghaiers could negotiate their passage on the next ship leaving port, and of young girls, kidnapped and sold into prostitution.

Shivering, she turned to search for Charlotte and Tabitha, relieved when she located them farther down the bucket line, near the beach. The Chief of Police, a somber, intimidating man by the name of John Greeley who had been outside City Hall when they’d arrived, now stood next to Charlotte, his expression watchful and . . . proprietary, Hattie realized. She frowned.

Mona glanced in the direction of her gaze. “Don’t you worry about your girls—Greeley will keep them safe from harm.”

“Charlotte is so young.”

“Many of my girls are younger.”

Hattie shook her head.

“Your husband was a customer at the Green Light for a time.” At her stunned look, Mona laughed. “Honey, you’d be surprised who visits my girls. I train ’em good, and the men can’t resist. They just don’t get the same kind of attention at home.”

“You must be mistaken,” Hattie said firmly.

Mona studied her for a moment before handing over an empty bucket. “Charles Longren wasn’t a nice man.”

Hattie stiffened. "I beg your pardon? My husband was well regarded."

Mona hesitated, then shrugged. "My mistake."

Hattie would have pressed the point, but a man who stood observing her across the street on the beach caught her eye. Tall and slender, he wore his evening clothes with a casual elegance at odds with his surroundings. Two burly, rough-looking men stood on either side of him, their expressions watchful. The man dipped his head in acknowledgment, staring steadily at her, a slight smile curving his lips.

"Who is that?" she asked, uneasy.

Mona spared him no more than a glance as she tossed the next bucket of water. "He owns a hotel and some boardinghouses down here."

Hattie tried to place him. "I think I've seen him before—perhaps at a dinner at someone's house."

Mona shook her head. "If you do run across him, you'd best steer clear, you hear?"

Two prostitutes burst from the front door of a brothel on the far side of the saloon, falling to their knees and coughing. Hattie ran over to pull them to safety. She heard a scream and looked up. A woman stood in the second-story window, frantically jerking at the iron bars trapping her. Her eyes pleading, she slid from sight. Lifting an arm to protect her face, Hattie ran inside.

Lung-searing heat and thick black smoke immediately enveloped her. Pulling her cloak over her head, she worked her way cautiously up the stairs, holding her skirts away from flames licking at the risers. She found the woman in the front room, crumpled below the window. When she shook the woman's shoulder, she stirred and moaned, then coughed.

"Come with me!" Hattie shouted, helping her to her feet.

They crept back along the wall to the stairs, her arm around the woman's waist for

support, chunks of burning roof crashing around them, then stumbled down the steps and outside. The woman collapsed on the front porch, her eyes rolling up into her head.

“Hattie!” Charlotte cried, starting forward, but Greeley grabbed her arms.

Hattie bent double, coughing smoke from her lungs and slapping at flames eating the hem of her dress. She tried to drag the unconscious woman away from the flames, but the woman was heavyset and limp, a dead weight.

“Help me move her,” Hattie rasped to the other prostitutes.

All three of them tugged, but at best, they moved her a few feet at a time. Fire exploded above them, hot glass raining down, and the prostitutes screamed and ran. Hattie locked her hands around the woman’s wrists and used her own weight to drag the woman backwards, stumbling and falling into the mud only to rise and try again.

Large hands gripped her waist, effortlessly picking her up and setting her down several yards away. The man she’d seen across the street stood facing her. His hands radiated warmth through the fabric of her dress, but his eyes were as pale and cold as the water in the harbor on a cloudy day. “She’s not worth it,” he said. “Come away, before you get hurt.”

“I’m not leaving her!”

He studied Hattie for a moment. “Remy, Max.” He jerked his head at the woman. “Carry her over to the beach.”

The two bodyguards picked up the woman, dumping her none too gently on the sand twenty yards away. Hattie glared at the man still holding her. “Tell your men to have a care, sir!”

He merely shrugged as if her response amused him.

She stepped away, but before she could reach the woman, a large man wearing a work shirt and overalls walked over and knelt down to examine her.

“I’ll take care of her,” he said quietly. Smoothing the woman’s hair out of her face, he placed gentle fingers against her neck, feeling for a pulse.

The man in evening attire took Hattie’s arm and led her several yards down the street, his bodyguards flanking them.

“You shouldn’t be down here, Mrs. Longren,” he said, stopping to face her. “This is no place for a woman as fine as yourself.”

She raised her chin. “You have the advantage, sir.”

“I usually do.” He bowed mockingly from the waist. “The name’s Seavey. Mike Seavey.”

Chapter 3

Later that same evening, because Jordan felt like staying home by herself, she made it a goal to put on a bit of makeup and go socialize. With the press hounding her 24/7 in L.A., she'd become increasingly isolated. Even worse, she'd gotten used to the isolation. She was in danger of becoming a certified loner, and if her treatment of the day's visitors were any indication, her social skills were rapidly deteriorating.

Not to mention the fact that she'd felt perfectly comfortable having several long, involved conversations with a dog. *That* had to stop.

"What about Duke?" she asked as they left the house and headed for the business district. "As in Duke Ellington?"

The dog gave her what she now recognized as The Look, comprised of equal parts derision and personal affront.

"Okay, okay, I'll keep working on it."

The sky to the west had faded from fuchsia to purple, creating deep shadows in the yards of the houses she passed. Down at the end of her block, at the bluff's edge, the triangular-shaped silhouette of the old wooden bell tower she'd read about partially blocked her view of the buildings downtown. Lights glowed from the buildings' windows, and she caught herself automatically thinking the illumination came from gaslight lamps.

She shivered. The evening had turned surprisingly chilly, and the cropped jean jacket she'd put on over her spaghetti strap tank top was no protection against the damp and cold coming off the water. She paused not far from the grocery and looked back in the direction from which they'd come. The dog growled low in his throat, echoing her uneasiness.

Throughout the day, she'd been unable to shake the feeling of being watched. She was beginning to believe her new neighborhood might harbor a sexual predator. Then again, perhaps the paparazzi had followed her north.

Except for a gray-haired woman dressed in a dark blue cashmere skirt and flowing cape, the street stood empty, its businesses closed for the evening. The woman glanced in Jordan's direction, but when she smiled back in greeting, the woman didn't appear to notice.

Still unsettled, Jordan placed a hand on the dog's neck. "Come on, fella. Our imaginations are in overdrive."

The pub sat midway through the first block off the main intersection of the arterial leading down to the waterfront. The building was flanked by a bakery, its wood-slatted shelves empty for the evening, and a small print shop displaying colorful greeting cards in its front window. Despite the cool temperatures, the pub's oak plank door stood open, releasing onto the sidewalk bluesy strains of piano overlaid with murmured conversation. *All That Jazz* glowed in neon in the window, and a sign beside the door declared the establishment to be smoke free. The dog trotted inside, slipping through her fingers when she tried to grab him.

"Don't worry—no one minds." Darcy waved her over to a table next to a huge fireplace constructed of rugged slabs of gray granite. Flames burned cheerfully, crackling and spitting the occasional glowing ember at the wrought iron screen.

Jordan slid into the captain's chair Darcy shoved out with a foot, and the dog collapsed on the floor between them. She took a moment to shake off her moodiness from the walk over, then glanced around the room.

Massive beams, looking well over a century old, ran perpendicular to the fireplace chimney, supporting an arched brick ceiling. Dark green leather booths sat against distressed brick walls and mixed with varnished oak tables scattered in cozy seating arrangements. The works of local artists were prominently displayed. Jordan noticed she wasn't the only one who'd brought a dog.

The pub was surprisingly full, its clientele mixed—some young enough to be college students, others closer to Jordan's age, still dressed in their work clothes and clearly tradesmen. Even the personal styles were eclectic—everything from dreadlocks to old-fashioned, elaborate French twists paired with vintage clothing.

Patrons stood at a baroque-style, mahogany bar that ran the length of the room, chatting amongst themselves with the ease of longtime acquaintance. Others crowded around tables or jammed into booths, sharing pitchers of beer over some hotly debated topic.

"Hey, everybody!" Darcy yelled. "This is Jordan. She bought Longren House. Jordan, this is everyone."

Jordan acknowledged several "hi's" with a smile, noting the curious but polite scrutiny she was receiving.

A tall, thin man with a silver ponytail and a diamond stud in his left ear came over to the table. He introduced himself as Bill, the bartender, and took her order for white wine.

"Friendly place," she noted to Darcy, relaxing into the captain's chair.

"Would I steer you wrong?" Off-duty, Darcy looked only slightly less intimidating, dressed in boot-cut jeans that emphasized her long legs and a soft, sea green sweater that

turned her hazel eyes the color of old moss. “Wait’ll you try the food.” She forked up a bit of fresh mozzarella, tomato, and basil vinaigrette from her plate for Jordan to taste.

The flavors exploded on Jordan’s tongue. “*Oh.*” She closed her eyes to savor the moment.

“Kathleen makes the mozzarella from scratch each day, and she grows the basil out back. Jase has threatened to commit suicide if she ever leaves to open her own restaurant.”

Jordan couldn’t stop herself from looking around for him. She found him seated behind a shiny black grand piano on a small stage in the back corner. Glancing up from the keyboard, he gave her a slow smile and launched into a mellow tune she recognized.

Not only did he own the pub, he played jazz piano. She did *not* need to discover that fact. “F.P.P.,” she muttered under her breath.

“What’s that?” Darcy asked.

“You have hearing like a bat’s,” Jordan complained, then sighed. “Four Point Plan. It’s my way of dealing with everything that’s happened in the past year, starting with a grief stage.”

Darcy snorted. “You’re grieving for a jerk who lost his license to practice by bedding his patients?” Catching Jordan’s wary look, she held up both hands. “Hey, don’t look at me like that. One of the guys Googled you.”

“Terrific.”

“Hell, most folks in here figure if you killed your ex, you were entitled.”

Jordan choked on her wine, and Darcy leaned over to pound on her back, nearly slamming her face-first into the table.

“So much for living a quiet life of anonymity,” Jordan rasped when she could finally talk.

“If you wanted anonymity, you should’ve moved to another city. Everyone knows everyone else’s business in a small town, and you’re the most exciting thing to happen around here in years.”

And to think she’d taken those politely curious looks at face value.

“Cheer up,” Darcy said. “Half the men in here believe that if they get involved with you, they might end up dead. The rest are turned on by the possibilities.” She took a drink from her beer mug. “Of course, the fact that you bought Longren House has them a bit twitchy, but adopting the dog helped.”

It was on the tip of Jordan’s tongue to ask which group Jase fell into. She drank down half her wine in one gulp instead.

“I don’t suppose you have any theories as to who *did* kill your hubby?” Darcy asked.

“The list of possible suspects is long,” Jordan replied wryly.

“And you being the spouse—”

“Soon-to-be ex,” Jordan corrected her, “which diluted my motive.”

Darcy shrugged. “Depends on whether you were getting screwed in the settlement.” She waited, her expression expectant, and when Jordan didn’t confirm or deny, she asked bluntly, “Were you?”

Jordan continued to hesitate. No matter how friendly Darcy seemed, Jordan couldn’t trust that anything she confided would be kept confidential. “No,” she finally said, keeping it simple.

Darcy drank more beer, her gaze still assessing. “Whatever you aren’t telling me, you can bet the cops in L.A. picked up on as well.”

Jordan remained silent, striving to look unconcerned, and Darcy shook her head.

Jase ended his song with a glissando that ran the length of the keyboard, drifting away to enthusiastic applause, then rose from the piano. A group of men at a nearby table

caught his nod, rising to carry their drinks and instruments up on stage, unpacking a bass fiddle, a sax, and two horns. Apparently, they were to be treated to live jazz. Jordan decided she could easily become addicted to evenings spent here, even if it meant putting up with a few questions from the resident cop.

“So what have the welcoming committees brought so far?” Darcy asked.

“Chocolate cake, sugar cookies, and a salmon loaf,” Jordan answered, relieved by the change of subject.

“Salmon loaf is classier than a tuna casserole. Let me guess—Betty from down the block?”

“I think so—I had trouble keeping track.” Jordan remembered a question she wanted to ask. “What’s a colorist? She—Betty—mentioned one when we were standing outside this afternoon.”

Darcy scooted around in her chair. “Yo, Tom?” A bearded, red-haired mountain of a man at the bar raised his eyebrows. “Jordan wants to know about colorists.” He nodded and headed toward their table, beer mug in hand.

“Tom’s the great-grandson of one of Port Chatham’s most famous police chiefs,” Darcy said by way of introduction.

“Really?” Jordan shook his hand. “What timeframe?”

“Late 1800s,” Tom rumbled, his soft voice at odds with his bulk. He pulled out the chair next to Darcy, settling in. “My great granddaddy was smitten with Hattie Longren’s sister Charlotte for awhile, according to the diaries he left behind. At least, until Charlotte turned to prostitution, which cooled his ardor a bit.”

“I read about her this afternoon.” The doll the dog had found evidently belonged to Charlotte, not a daughter. “She became a prostitute at The Green Light after Hattie was killed, correct?”

He nodded. “Bad luck ran in that family, that’s for sure. Charles Longren perished at sea, leaving Hattie in charge of his shipping empire, but then Hattie was murdered not too long after. Once Hattie was gone, Charlotte was too young to run the business and had no way to survive. She ended up dead on the waterfront not too many years later.”

“Tom’s a history buff, like many of the descendents of the original families here in town,” Darcy explained. She eyed Jordan curiously. “You’ve already started researching?”

“A couple of ladies brought me a stack of papers they thought I’d want to read. Newspaper accounts of the murder and so on.” Jordan shook her head. “From what I was able to glean, the man who hanged for Hattie’s murder was someone with whom she had a close relationship. Pretty sad.”

Tom leaned back, balancing his mug on the arm of his chair. “That jibes with my great granddaddy’s account.”

“The man was a union representative, correct?”

“I think so. Frank Lewis enjoyed a certain amount of fame—or notoriety, depending on your perspective—for writing about the sailors’ plight in the union magazine of the time, *The Seacoast Journal*. The union and the shanghaiers were always at odds—both vying for the same berths with the shipping lines. And, of course, the shanghaiers had a lot to lose if the union got a toe-hold in the business.”

“The opinion of the ladies who brought me the articles was that Frank Lewis might’ve been falsely accused,” Jordan said.

Tom frowned, stroking his neatly trimmed beard. “I seem to remember some speculation that he’d been framed as a way to neutralize him because of his influence on the waterfront. The shanghaiers continually looked for a way to get rid of him, that’s for sure. He was highly educated—his columns in the *Seacoast* regularly documented the

brutality and illegal practices of both the shipping masters and the shanghaiers. But as for whether he was ultimately wrongly convicted, I wouldn't know about that."

Belatedly, Jordan realized she had suggested that his relative, the police chief, might've bungled the investigation. "I didn't mean any disrespect."

Tom shrugged. "None taken. People around here love to speculate about past events. Though it certainly seems like that old murder affected the lives of a lot of people, and not in a good way. My great-granddaddy never really got over losing Charlotte, and not too long after the trial, he was killed in the line of duty. I've always wondered whether his grief had made him careless." He sat in pensive silence for a moment, then took a long drink of his beer. "You asked about colorists."

"Yes."

"We've only got two in town who specialize in color schemes for the Painted Ladies."

Jordan looked at him blankly, then the light dawned. "The Victorians?"

"Yeah. Colorists consult with you to design historically accurate colors by customizing modern paint. I'm one, and the other is Holt Stilwell, who's standing over there at the end of the bar."

She craned her neck to get a glimpse of a broad-shouldered man with a bleached buzz cut who was chatting up two young women. Aviator sunglasses hung from the neck of his wife beater t-shirt, which exposed muscles indicating he bench-pressed somewhere around a gazillion pounds. Jordan had never been attracted to big, beefy types—her taste ran more to the lean, angular builds of men like...well, Jase. Dammit.

"Best to stick with Tom," Darcy muttered. "Stilwell is one of the main reasons I contribute heavily each year to the National Organization for Women."

Tom grinned behind his beer mug. "He's a talented colorist, but he does have a

certain reputation with the ladies.”

“And it’s all bad.” Darcy scowled. “I’d love to run that son of a bitch in for being a misogynist and a womanizer, but unfortunately there’s no law against treating women like shit. And he’s too clever to get caught physically abusing anyone he lures back to his rat-infested dump.”

“So tell us what you really think.” Jase had walked up while she was talking, and he rubbed her shoulder affectionately, smiling at her.

At some point during the day, he’d exchanged the cable-knit sweater for a midnight blue Henley t-shirt that emphasized his shoulders and lean build. Pulling out the chair next to Jordan, he was careful not to hit the dog, who was sound asleep.

“Best not to encourage Darcy.” Tom winked. “Before you know it, she’ll have Stilwell face-down on the bar, handcuffed.”

“That would be police brutality,” Darcy said, her tone prim.

“Darlin’.” Tom grinned, placing a hand over his heart, and she rolled her eyes.

“Justice, perhaps, in Stilwell’s case,” Jase pointed out.

Jordan noted the easy camaraderie among the three and felt a moment of envy. In the past year, with her increasing isolation from friends and family, she’d lost any sense of comfort or intimacy she’d had with others. She missed it.

“What you really need, though, before you start thinking about painting, is a master plan for the renovation,” Tom said, bringing the conversation back on topic. “You should assess the damage to the house and come up with a prioritized list of the repairs. There could be structural or mechanical problems that should be addressed first, or possibly problems that’ll cause continued deterioration and need to be fixed immediately.”

Jordan hadn’t thought of that—he was probably right. The simple remodel she’d envisioned was becoming more complex by the moment. “Can you recommend someone

for that?”

“I can come by tomorrow and get you started in the right direction, if you want,” Tom replied. “Jase and I are both fairly knowledgeable when it comes to the old homes, and we know most of the folks here in town who work on the renovations—many are regulars here at the pub. You had an inspection done before you bought the place?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there you go—we can start with the inspector’s report. Shouldn’t be that difficult to get a handle on the work required, though with old homes like yours, there are always a few surprises along the way.”

Jase leaned in close to pick up Jordan’s empty wineglass. “Another?”

“Yes, thanks.” She smiled at him, then a thought occurred to her. “Would Holt Stilwell watch someone from afar?”

Darcy shook her head. “He’s not that subtle. Why?”

Jordan shrugged. “I felt a little creeped out today, like someone was watching me. You don’t have problems with anyone in this neighborhood, do you?”

“Not that we know of.”

Jase frowned as he set a full glass before her and returned to his seat. “Did you see anyone?”

She shook her head. “I’m probably over-reacting, given recent events.”

“Maybe.” Darcy drummed her fingers on the table. “Then again, I’m thinking you’ve got the training in abnormal behaviors to pick up on something like that before the ordinary citizen would. I’ll take a look through the incident reports and see whether anything leaps out. For now, keep the dog close.”

“And let me know when you’re ready to leave,” Jase added. “I’ll walk you home.”

“No!”

He gave her an odd look, and she felt heat color her cheeks. “I mean, no thanks, really, that’s not necessary.”

He continued to hesitate. “Then why don’t I drop by tomorrow morning with Tom and check on you? We can point you toward the right people to hire, and so on.”

“Works for me,” Tom added.

Jordan quickly agreed. “Can we make it afternoon though? I’d planned to visit the Historical Society at ten.”

“Their museum downtown is open,” Darcy said, “though it won’t do you any good—they don’t keep the archives at that location. But if you mean the place out on the airport cutoff road, it’s closed down for remodeling.”

“You must be thinking of a different place. Nora and Delia—the ones who brought me the papers?—told me to meet them there in the morning.”

The three of them exchanged perplexed looks.

“Nora and Delia are vacationing in the South of France,” Jase said. “I got a postcard from them just today.”

Jordan shrugged. “So maybe they beat the postcard home. Unless this town has two sets of sisters named Nora and Delia, they were at the house this afternoon—they brought me a chocolate cake.”

Darcy sent a silent look to Jase, and Tom rubbed his jaw.

“What?” Jordan asked.

“I stopped and checked the Historical Society building not two hours ago, on my usual rounds,” Darcy said. “It’s boarded up, and the sign says that it won’t re-open for at least three months. All the employees have been laid off for the summer, which is why Nora and Delia decided to take a long vacation...” She trailed off. “Well, hell.”

Jordan stared at them. “Nora is around 5’6” with light brown hair,” she clarified,

“and Delia is blonde with blue eyes. Right? They wear vintage clothing?”

“Nope. Nora is in her eighties,” Jase corrected, “and Delia’s not much younger. They’re both gray-haired.”

“I don’t friggin’ believe this!” Darcy grumped. “I’ve been wanting to meet up with these two for eight damn years, and *you* get to see them on your first day in town.”

Jase and Tom grinned, which seemed to make Darcy even madder.

Totally confused, Jordan said, “Clue me in here, guys.”

“You might want to drink some more of that wine,” Jase suggested, his blue eyes twinkling.

“You had a visit, all right,” Darcy said dourly, “but not from the Hapley sisters.”

“Well, then, *who*?” Jordan asked, exasperated.

“Most likely,” Jase replied, “the ghosts of Hattie Longren and Charlotte Walker.”