

The
SECRET
of
SEASIDE

A
Paige Comber MYSTERY

AGATHA BALL

The Secret of Seaside

by Agatha Ball

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SUMMARY



Welcome to Seaside! A sleepy, island village filled with sandy beaches, colorful characters... AND MURDER!

Paige Comber dreams of running off to Paris to train at the Cordon Bleu, but fresh out of college, she is stuck running her granny's coffee shop in the small town of Seaside. It looks like a lousy summer until a handsome stranger named Nate arrives.

He's here to help his Uncle Byron with his affairs, but when his uncle's body washes up on the beach and Nate is thrown into prison, it is up to Paige to find out who might have been crazy enough to do it.

[BOOK ONE in the PAIGE COMBER MYSTERY series](#)

DEDICATION



To Cori and Leslie and our lifetime of summers

Chapter One



The bell over the door tinkled to let me know I had a customer. I slammed shut the *France on a Shoestring* guidebook I had been reading and shoved it under the counter.

“Ooo! It is so cute in here!” the woman squealed to her friend.

She was in her early fifties and had perfectly bobbed and highlighted hair. From her clothes, I could tell she wasn't from around here. Everything she wore screamed high end, the kind of casual elegance you only get shopping at boutiques where a pair of flip-flops will set you back a few hundred bucks. The locals of Seaside bought things from catalogs and then, to save money on shipping, waited six weeks to get it so by the time it arrived, it was already out of fashion. Not that it was fashionable in the first place.

My name is Paige Comber. I'm not local, either. Well, sort of. My granny owns the Bitter Beans Coffee & Bookshop. It is a sweet little place housed inside of an historic wooden building with a western-y looking false-front. It has the vibe of an old-timey general store—wooden floors, wooden walls, wooden shelves, wooden tables, and wooden chairs. The shop smelled of coffee and cinnamon and new books.

Bitter Beans is located in beautiful, sunny Seaside, a small town on an abandoned stretch of coast on an all but abandoned island. You could only get here by ferry and, truth be told, aside from the mean espresso I knew how to brew, I'm not exactly sure why anyone would bother.

Back in the day, Seaside was an old fishing village. There was a cannery that closed, and then the rest of the industry moved on, too. There was some rugged backwoods, if you were into camping; a couple of places to moor your boat, if you were sailing around the world or something; and then just the little village where I was doomed to spend an unending summer. I had already been here two weeks and was about to lose my mind.

But as I looked at the two women, I knew these were bona fide tourists. The days of opening the shop and seeing no one except the other shopkeepers were at an end. It was like spotting the first crocus of spring! Tourist season was beginning!

"This is just the cutest little shop! And look at this!" said the first woman, picking up a pewter fountain pen-and-ink set.

Granny handpicked all of the knickknacks in the shop. She said she liked to "inspire dreamers." All I cared about was if I could inspire them to buy a cup of coffee so I wouldn't have to face Granny with an empty till.

"May I help you ladies with anything?" I asked.

"Ooo! This is just the CUTEST shop!" she gushed again, putting the ink set down. "I have ALWAYS wanted to have a bookshop. With a coffee bar! And in such a CUTE little town!"

"They say we make the best cinnamon buns on the island. Can I tempt you?" I pressed, going in for the hard sell with a hopeful smile.

"Oh no. We're just browsing," she replied. She picked up a book about the history of Seaside and bent the cover so far back, there was no way we were ever going to be able to offload it.

It took everything in me not to snatch that poor book out of her hands and whisper to its broken little spine that it was going to be okay. Instead, I just gritted my teeth and plastered a grin across my face. "Let me know if I can help you with anything."

She set the book back on the shelf, not even bothering to put it where it belonged, and turned to me as if the thought JUST occurred to her. "Oh! I'm TOTALLY going to buy something, but do you have a restroom?"

I pointed to the back where there was a huge sign that said restroom. She handed her purse to her friend and strolled back, touching everything on every table between her and the lavatory. Her friend stood awkwardly.

"Can I help *you* with anything?" I asked.

I could see her looking for something to say. "Um... no chance you sell sunscreen? The sun in these coastal towns is so brutal." She looked me up and down and sighed. "Although, you're so lucky. You've got such pretty olive skin. I bet you just tan. Never burn."

I tried to pretend I was commiserating. "Oh, when I have a chance to get outside, it's rough, even on me."

"Oh."

"They sell sunscreen at the general store at the end of the block," I offered, pointing off to the left.

"Oh. Well. You should carry some here," she said and then sank back into silence, shifting back and forth and staring at the ceiling.

I tried to busy myself with tidying up behind the counter. There was nothing to tidy. I had already tidied everything and tidied it again. My most recent How-To-Pass-The-Time game was to try to guess how many coffee cups I could stack on top of each other before they started to sway. I was losing.

A small "mew" came from a plaid pillow on the window ledge. The woman looked over and her face lit up. "Is that *Captain*?" she exclaimed. "THE Captain? Really?" She looked at me for confirmation. "I follow him on Instagram!"

Captain was the bookshop cat. He was a sweet, orange tabby and, I have to say, quite the celebrity. He showed up on Granny's doorstep one day and decided she was his people. What can you do?

He was the cutest little thing. When he was wee, something stunted his growth. We called him Granny's perma-kitten, and he had the personality to match. He took it upon himself to be the town's unofficial welcoming committee and had a habit of commandeering any empty lap in Bitter Beans. I'm pretty sure everyone with a cell phone who has ever visited the island has hashtagged a selfie with Granny's cat.

"That's him!" I chirped.

The woman pulled out her phone and snapped a couple pictures. That cat knew exactly how to play to the camera. He batted his paws at her lens, which elicited coos and awes, and kept her busy until her friend finally came out and walked over to the counter.

She grabbed an obligatory tin of mints to purchase and I rang her up.

"That'll be \$1.99," I said. As she dug through her purse, I asked, "Where are you visiting from?"

“Newport Beach,” she said, not finding her wallet. She began unloading wadded up tissues and lipstick tubes. “That’s in California.”

“I’ve always wanted to visit,” I replied, trying desperately to find some friendly, homespun connection we could chat about.

“Oh! You should! You should!” she stated. “It’s not as *quaint* as this place, but we get by.”

She finally found her wallet, but despite a wad of cash I could see, she pulled out her credit card. As I rang her up, she scooped the mints into her hand, unwrapped them, leaving the cellophane on the counter, and popped two into her mouth. Judging by her waist size, it was probably her version of a hearty lunch.

“Well, come back again soon!” I said as they walked out the door, giving them a friendly wave. As soon as the door closed, I collapsed against the counter. Our first customers of the day and all they bought was a package of mints. And any profit from the mints had been eaten up by card fees and toilet paper.

I walked around the counter and picked up the discarded book the woman had abused. I ran my hand along the spine, as if somehow I could smooth away the damage. But there are some things that you can never put back to the way they were. I placed it softly on the shelf, but this time face out. I patted it reassuringly. “Don’t you worry. Though you might not go home with anyone, I’m going to make sure you get all the attention.”

I rested my hands on my hips, looking around for something to do. It was the beginning of the day, but I had been up since the crack of dawn making our pastries to beat the rush from the ferry boat. I’m pretty sure those two ladies were it.

This summer wasn’t exactly what I had hoped for. Since I could remember, my mom and I spent summers in Seaside, visiting my granny. Having your own business was ingrained in me. It had taken four years to finish my associate’s business degree, but only because I split my time between the community college and a local vocational school, learning how to bake. Sure, I could have gone to the state school with my friends, but the reality was it would have cost more than I could afford. So, I graduated with a nice little nest egg, even if I didn’t have a fancy diploma to hang on the wall. I told

everyone my dream was to own my own shop like my granny someday. Except... well... there were some dreams I didn't mention, too.

I went around to the back of the counter and pulled out the guidebook to *France*. I rested my cheek in the palm of my hand as I flipped through the pages, looking at the pictures of the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower. Someday, I was going to train at the Cordon Bleu, I was going to become one of the best pastry chefs in the world. I'd own a high class tea shop in Paris or New York or London. I'd make sculptures out of spun sugar and three-story cakes that movie stars bought for their red carpet galas.

I tried to talk to my mom about these ideas a few weeks ago, and she decided I needed a dose of reality. She informed me a summer working in my granny's shop was the best education a person could get in running a business. And thus, I was shuttled off to Seaside. I let out a huge sigh. So far, all I'd learned was to keep your books behind glass and only let real customers use the restrooms.

The bell above the door tinkled again and I looked up, ready to put on my cheeriest face.

Instead, I had to remember how to breathe.

Standing in the doorway was one of the most beautiful men I'd ever seen. He was tall with broad shoulders and wore a blue plaid shirt tucked into his jeans. The sleeves were rolled up to show off his muscular forearms. His light brown hair almost matched the color of his sun-kissed skin. His nose was flat, like maybe at some point it had gotten broken. But what struck me the most were his kind eyes. They were deep and dark, but had a twinkle. There was a mischievous turn to his smile, like he was just on the verge of telling you a joke.

I smoothed back my hair nervously, not that it helped anything. It was already pulled back into a ponytail, and any wisps that had escaped were not magically going back into place. I smiled and tried to remember how to form words.

"Can I help you?" I asked, my voice cracking slightly.

It seemed to be amusing to him. When he spoke, it was like there was laughter under his words. "I'm looking for some coffee. I heard you were the person to see."

Coffee! I could do coffee. Suddenly given a task, I felt like I could handle this situation. "I might have a cup or two I could spare you," I replied, suavely reaching for a cup... and then I dropped it. I grabbed another off the top like nothing happened. "How do you like it?"

"Straight up, the stronger the better," he said, leaning his elbows on the counter. "I want it so strong, it'll punch me in the mouth."

"One tooth smasher, coming right up." I measured out and packed the grounds into the portafilter. Sure, I could have just poured him some pre-brewed coffee from the pump pots, but I wanted him to have to hang out as long as possible. He was going to get a full-on Americano straight from the espresso machine. There's no way I was letting him out of this shop without him thinking that he had just tasted the best cup of coffee he had ever had in his entire life and that he would need to come back for more. "So, are you just in town visiting?"

"Sort of." He ran his hand along his forearm. Dare I say I detected a little bit of nervousness. "My uncle lives here. Just... well, I'm here to give him a helping hand."

"Me, too!" I said, smiling and then realizing that made no sense. "I mean, I'm not here to help your uncle. I'm here helping my granny. She owns this shop and I'm just here for the summer... helping... because I want to have a shop... a bakery... someday... and it seemed like a good place... to learn how to run a shop..." I wished that the pressure from the espresso machine would cause it to explode, instantly killing me in a fiery death.

He just laughed as if random women rambling at him about the minutia of their lives was the most delightful thing a person could ever hear. "Well, it's good to know there'll be a friendly face whenever I need a cup of coffee."

I wiped my hand on my apron as I waited for the steam to drip through. "How long will you be here to get coffee? I mean... to help your uncle?"

"Oh, at least two weeks," he replied. "He's getting older and... well... just coming to see if there's anything I can do to help."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked and then realized that probably sounded crazy. "I mean, we're a small community and

if you need help, don't hesitate to ask." I poured the espresso shot into the cup and filled the rest with hot water. "Who is your uncle?"

"Byron Edward."

"Oh," I said, not recognizing the name.

"He lives up on the hill," Nate said.

"OH! THAT Byron!" I replied.

So, there is this mansion a little way out of town. It sits at the top of the hill. My granny had always just told me it was the Founder's House. I'm sure she mentioned who owned it at some point, but who remembers those sorts of things? It belonged to the families who settled Seaside. I never really paid any attention beyond that. I mean, it was just a bunch of dead people I didn't know, right? But now I had a FOUNDERS family member standing in our coffee shop.

"Your family has lived here for a while," I lamely offered like I was in the know.

He shrugged. "We're not really close. I haven't been here in years," he confessed.

"Well, welcome," I replied, determined to make him feel like this was a great place to spend the summer. "I'm Paige."

"Nate," he said, sticking out his hand for a shake.

As I placed my palm in his, his hand was strong. Not crush your-hand-in-his-I-don't-know-how-to-shake strong, but... reserved strong. As if he could smash things, but he knew it, and so he held back and all you got was gentleness. His hand had the muscles of a potter or a man who knew how to knead bread.

"It's lovely to meet you," I replied as our eyes locked. Once again, all of the oxygen seemed to whoosh straight out of the room, and we held each other for just a little bit longer than polite society would dictate.

He pulled away first, as if maybe he was a little surprised by whatever it was that was happening, too. He looked around as if needing to ground himself, too. "Really lovely place," he commented. His eyes fell upon the history book about Seaside the tourist woman had bent. He took it off the shelf carefully and read the back. "Is this any good?" he asked.

I nodded as I put his coffee on the counter for him. "All the information a person could want. Although, to be fair, even if someone wanted more, they'd be out of luck. Rumor has it, the historians had a tough time finding enough stuff to write about for *one* book."

He stroked the cover gently where it had been damaged and then nodded, placing it next to the register. "I'll take it."

"Really?" I asked. "We have editions that are in better shape..."

"No," he replied, taking out his wallet. "I want this one."

And I knew at that moment that I really, really liked this guy.

I opened up the pastry case, profits be darned to heck. I got out the tongs and a bag. "We're having a special offer," I explained.

"Buy a beat-up book, get a homemade cinnamon roll for free."

"What a bargain!" He inhaled deeply. "Those smell really good."

"I make them myself," I informed him. I got out a box and a bag and put the book and the pastry and some napkins inside, taking the time to arrange them nicely. He wouldn't notice, but I wanted to make sure that if for some reason he did, he'd know that he wasn't just another random customer to me. "You'll have to come back later and tell me what you think."

He laughed, and it wasn't one of those forced or restrained laughs. Here was a guy who wasn't afraid to just find joy in things. "You have yourself a deal. Put me down for coffee and pastries tomorrow."

"I'll look forward to it," I replied, a delighted tickle dancing across my heart at the prospect.

"Tomorrow!" he repeated as he took his things and backed toward the door. He suddenly stopped. "Say... what do people do for fun here?"

My brain raced, trying to come up with something. "Well... they go to the beach?" I offered.

He nodded as if agreeing with my sound suggestion. "You'll have to show me sometime."

"I'd really like that," I answered and realized I actually meant it. "I'd be happy to. Anytime."

"Good," he replied. "How about tomorrow?"

"Um... sure," I replied. "That would be great. Tomorrow."

“I’ll look forward to it,” he said. And I could tell he meant it. I gave him a little wave as he walked out of the door, balancing it with his hip so that he wouldn’t knock over his coffee. He returned my wave with a smile.

Perhaps this wasn’t going to be such a bad summer after all.

Chapter Two



The bell over the door tinkled a little after one o'clock as Granny came in to relieve me. She was still a glamour plate. She liked to tell me back in the day, she turned many a young fella's head before landing my grandpa. Her once shiny black hair was now gray, but she kept it dyed a shocking shade of red and done up in a bouffant. Today she wore a form-fitting blue sweater covered in pink flamingos, which was still loose enough to cover "that which God never meant man to see." She wore tight blue jeans rolled up to her calves and, despite having turned seventy a couple years ago, still insisted on wearing sassy little mules to show off each week's pedicure. This week, her toes were a Florida scene that matched her top, painted pool blue to show off the rhinestone flamingos and palm trees.

"How's business?" she asked as she walked in and dropped her purse on the counter.

"Oh, we sold a book and a cup of coffee and some mints..." I told her.

"Why, we are practically rolling in the dough!" She took my face in her hands and gave me a great big kiss on the cheek. And then she spent the next minute wiping red lip prints off me. "Now, you get out of here and I don't want to see you back until tomorrow morning."

"Done!" I replied, taking off my apron and handing it over.

As she took it, she gave me a sly look. "I hear that there is a veeery attractive young man who just came to town. No chance he stopped by?" She batted her eyelashes at me innocently.

"Maybe!" I laughed, knowing that she probably knew more details about my encounter with Nate than I did. And I had been there. Such are the joys of living in a small town.

"Well, he'd better take you out to dinner so the two of you can get acquainted. Seaside is nothing if not a hospitable town, and Paige, I just nominated you to be the president of the welcoming committee." She snapped the apron at me.

I laughed as I sidestepped away. "I told him I'd take him down to the beach tomorrow," I informed her.

She gasped in horror, collapsing upon the counter like a Southern belle in full swoon. With the back of her hand against her forehead, she declared, "TOMORROW! Why, that is just a lifetime away! You should go see what he's doing for dinner TONIGHT."

"TONIGHT," I repeated, gathering up my things, "he is going to be spending with his uncle."

"His uncle?" asked Granny.

"Byron Edward. He said his uncle was Byron Edward and lives in the Founder's House."

Granny's nose wrinkled like she had smelled something bad. "Oh. His uncle is Byron Edward."

I was shocked that this particular bit of the gossip had not already gotten to her ears.

Granny picked up one of the towels and flung it over her shoulder. "Maybe you shouldn't ask him to dinner. And maybe rethink that trip down to the beach."

"What?" I asked, mystified by this sudden turn. "Why? You were just telling me to track him down tonight. He seemed very nice."

"Well... let's just say that the Edward family is not the most... friendly... as it were."

I crossed my arms. "He seemed plenty friendly to me. Besides, he says that he barely knows his uncle and hasn't been here for years. Said that there were some things he just needed to check in on, that his uncle was getting older and was having a hard time."

Granny pointed her finger at me. "Age might excuse grumpiness in an old man, but it doesn't excuse a lifetime of being a jackass."

"GRANNY!" I said, a little shocked.

She shushed me. "You just watch yourself around the Edward family. There's a reason they live up on that hill and it doesn't have a thing to do with them being high and mighty. Although they sure do behave like that's what they consider themselves."

"Granny, they're the founders of this town—-" I replied.

She cut me off, waving my words away. "Let's just say if they didn't consider themselves royalty, we would have voted them off this island years ago." She sighed. "Now git. Don't worry your pretty

little head about the politics of our little corner of heaven. A young girl like you shouldn't be stuck indoors all day, keeping an old woman company. Get you out into that sunshine! Get some sun on your bones! You'll be having a vitamin D deficiency and then I'll have to send you home with rickets and I'll never hear the end of it from your mother!"

Granny picked up the day's newspaper and came around the counter as I grabbed my beach bag and some leftovers we hadn't been able to sell yesterday. I gave Granny a kiss on the cheek. "You're the best. See you for dinner tonight."

"If I don't have a hot date!" she replied, licking her index finger and flipping through the pages as I walked out the door.

A gull cried as I stepped onto the Main Street. I lifted my face to the sun and filled my lungs lustily with the salty, ocean air. It carried with it the faintest hint of jasmine. I pulled the long strands of my chestnut hair back and redid my ponytail, fighting against the breeze that was insistently blowing it into my eyes. The street was pretty quiet. Just a few tourists popping in and out of the line of white, clapboard-sided shops. A calico cat sat in front of the antique shop next to our bookshop, watching the world with interest. I bent down and gave her a scratch behind the ears, which she tolerated for about five seconds before moving out of reach.

For all my complaining that it wasn't Paris, I loved summer here. I loved how the blue sky contrasted with the white buildings, how the white light posts contrasted with the red geraniums hanging in the baskets. Main Street never heard the word "franchise." We had a locally owned general store, a bar, a café, and a yarn shop, which, I must say, did shockingly good business. I guess if you're on vacation for too long, you need something to keep your mind off of the peace and serenity, and nothing like a little crafting to do that for a person. There was a souvenir shop with little shells written on with Sharpie marker, and terrible tourist shirts that read things like, "I saw Seaside by the seashore" and "My parents went to Seaside and they should have stayed."

I walked behind our bookshop and pulled out my bike. It was a pretty, powder blue, beach cruiser that my granny lent me. It had a bell on the handlebars and a straw basket that her orange tabby,

Captain, would sometimes hop into for a ride around town. Hence Captain's celebrity status.

But Granny had loaned it to me for the summer since I didn't have a car and she lived over the shop. I put my lunch and beach bag in the basket, hopped on, and took off.

A couple of fellow shopkeepers waved at me as I rode by and I gave them a little jingle of my bell in return. There were some tourists eating ice cream next to a little takeout window that opened to the boardwalk, and a couple more having a locally grown, farm-to-table experience at a restaurant. There isn't much to do around here besides garden and farm, so it really wasn't that big a deal. It kept you from going crazy and was actually less of a hassle than ordering food in from the mainland.

I turned the corner and rode down toward the beach. The street ended in a parking lot. I leaned my bike against the white, slatted fence that flanked the dunes. It was a small enough town that no one would steal it. Eighty-percent of the population would witness your flight before you got home. And where would you take it anyway? The ferry only came twice a day.

I grabbed my lunch, took off my flip-flops, and stepped into the warm sand. It was like powder and oozed between my toes with each step. The sound of the waves greeted me as I crested the hill. The salt water hit my nose like a drug. Immediately, all tension was gone, all worries of the world. I marched on down the beach, listening to the gulls cry, and plopped myself down near a grass-covered bluff, hoping I was far enough away that no one would bother me. I opened up my bag and pulled out my *France on a Shoestring* book.

I flipped it open as I took a bite of my sandwich. I traced the path from the Louvre to the Eiffel Tower. Someday I would walk that path. I flipped to the restaurant guide and dog-eared the bakeries I was going to submit my resume to. You know. After I learned how to speak French, but I figured once I completed my training at the Cordon Bleu, I'd be in great shape.

I sighed again, realizing how far away this dream was.

There was no way to get any closer to it, though, if I didn't get started now. I pulled out my phone, plugged in my earphones, and

started my French language tracks. I closed my eyes and lay back in the sand, repeating the words in between bites of sandwich.

"Je voudrais une tasse de café, s'il vous plait," I murmured.

A shadow fell across my face. "Voodoo rays something on a silver plate?"

I opened my eyes, squinting up at the sky, and then smiled.

My friend, Johnny, stood over me. His mop of curly, sandy-blond hair was backlit by the sun like a halo. He was dressed in a black and blue wetsuit and held his surfboard.

"Hey Paige!" he said with a friendly wave, like he was just now realizing who I was.

He'd gotten thrashed by the surf a time or two in his day.

Johnny and I had known each other since we were kids. Every town has their dysfunctional family, and unfortunately, he drew the short straw. But he got away from it all by spending as much time as he could at the beach and eventually, it turned into a full-time gig. While I was finishing my fourth year of community college, he put together a dive shop. While technically his family owned it, his mom skipped town years ago and his dad was always passed out at home, so it was Johnny's place. In addition to air tanks and flippers, he rented paddle boards and wetsuits and took tourists on short trips around the island.

Johnny flung himself beside me in the sand. I pulled out a sandwich from my bag and handed it to him. He took a great big bite and then handed it back to me.

"Hard day?" I asked, taking a bite myself.

"Totally killer," he said. "Man. I'm like... swamped. I had... like... ten people come in." He stared at the water thoughtfully, about to drop something profound on my head. "I'm glad people are, like, finding their way to my shop and through my shop, finding their way to their bliss. I was just thinking how lucky I am to be a part of that. It's like, all a person can ever hope for during their time on this planet."

"Sure is, Johnny," I said, handing him the rest of the sandwich. With ten customers considered an overwhelming rush, sometimes eating was a luxury for him. Bliss doesn't help with the groceries as

much as it should. He devoured the sandwich like it was the most incredible thing he'd ever tasted.

In between bites, he noticed the book at my hand. "You booked your flight yet?" he asked, his mouth full.

"Not yet," I replied, guiltily hiding it away. "But someday."

"Gotta lose sight of the shore if you ever want an adventure. Or need to get in a plane if you ever want to see Paris. Or something." He paused a moment as he tried to sort out his metaphors, and then gave me a nod that he had gotten out what he had been trying to say.

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Hey, did I see that new guy going into your shop?" he asked.

I tried to be casual. "Yeah. Really nice guy. Named Nate. He'll be here for a couple weeks."

"Rocking," he said, taking another bite. "Bring him by the shop. I'll comp him a boogie board."

I stared out into the water and noticed a shape caught in the surf. "Johnny?" I asked, "Do you see that?" I squinted. At first, it looked like a tree trunk, but then suddenly I realized it was not a tree trunk. Not at all. I rose to my feet. "Is that a man?"

"Oh man," Johnny said, leaping up. "I hope it's no one I rented to." He took off running down the beach.

I yanked out my cell phone and dialed the police. I realized my hands were shaking as I gave them our location and a description of what was going on. As soon as I got off the line, I charged down the sand to see if I could give Johnny a hand.

He was hauling the guy out by his armpits and dumped him on the beach above the water line. It looked like it had been an older person. He had white hair plastered to his head and he was wearing brown, striped pajamas. Johnny wiped his hands on his wetsuit and did a grossed-out, oogie dance. I stood ready to help, but he shook his head and motioned for me to stay away. It was pretty clear this guy wasn't coming back.

Sirens wailing, two police officers arrived just moments later. The police station is just up the block, and I stepped aside to let them take over. Officers Stan and Fred were older guys with not a lot to do. They were always looking for a problem, yet seemed like they

rarely solved the issues already on their plate. They had been busting Johnny's chops for every petty offense since he was twelve years old and this time was no different.

"Did you sell this guy faulty equipment, Johnny?" shouted Officer Stan as he marched down the beach, pointing an accusatory finger at my friend.

A crowd had started to gather on the beach to see what all the sirens were about. Officer Fred took great pleasure shooing them back and saying, "Nothing to see here! This is a crime scene! Nothing to see! Just a suicide. Maybe a murder! We've got a man dead and I need everyone to respect our authority and stand back!"

Meanwhile, Officer Stan was totally in Johnny's face, leaping to conclusions with no reason to go leaping to conclusions.

"No man, no!" Johnny said, backing away. "I had ten whole customers and no one is dead!"

"That seems a convenient number," Stan replied accusingly. "Are you sure it wasn't ELEVEN?" He poked Johnny in the shoulder.

"That's Old Man Byron," Johnny replied, holding up his hands. "He'd never get into the water on his own. I just hauled him out!" He ran his fingers through his hair and looked at the body. "Plus, he's in his pajamas. I don't rent to people in their pajamas!"

Officer Stan looked closer at the body and squinted. "So, you're right. Well. *Someone* told him to get into the water in his pajamas instead of coming to you for a wetsuit. Unless he *knew* you wouldn't rent to him in his pajamas." He growled at Johnny like a dog protecting his meal. "Stay close! Don't go leaving town."

Johnny nodded in serious agreement and backed away as Stan and Fred started pounding stakes around the body and cordoning it off with yellow tape. I have no idea why they were preserving a crime scene that wasn't a crime scene. All there was to learn from this spot was that Johnny hauled the guy out of the ocean. I packed up my things and we drifted back toward my bike.

"That is some seriously heavy stuff to lay on a guy right after he eats a sandwich," said Johnny.

"I am so sorry—" I started.

Johnny shook his head in horror. "You're not supposed to swim at least a half an hour after eating and I was like... I just jumped right

in there. I could have..." He grew silent.

"You could have what, Johnny?"

But he had already space cadetted and forgotten what he was in the middle of saying.

"Did you say it was Old Man Byron?" I asked.

Johnny came back to earth and nodded. "Yeah. Karma's a bitch."

"Karma?"

"Meanest old man in town. Leaves his light on Halloween just so he can shout at the trick-or-treaters for disturbing him."

"I don't know if that's really a 'die in the water' offense... karmically speaking..." I pointed out.

"You don't know, man," Johnny replied sagely. "You just don't know."

I glanced back over my shoulder at the beach. "That guy who came into the shop today," I said. "Nate? That's his nephew."

"Oh, man. That sucks."

"I know. To come to town and have your uncle die?"

"I was thinking to have Old Man Byron be your uncle. That Nate guy has got to have some serious issues."

We arrived at my bike and I loaded my bag into the basket. "I should probably go check on Nate."

Johnny looked puzzled. "Who's Nate?"

"The nephew."

"Riiiiight. The nephew..." He looked at me a little puzzled. "Wait. How do you know him again?"

"He's the guy who came into the shop," I replied, brushing the sand off my pants and climbing onto the bicycle.

"Riiiiight. He came into the shop." Johnny looked out on the horizon. "Think he might have killed the old man?"

"Johnny?" I said. "You hit that head of yours one too many times."

Chapter Three



I walked into Bitter Beans and the whole place was buzzing. Granny was leaning over the counter, chatting it up with several of the gals from the neighboring shops. I knew I was in for it. I liked to call them Granny's Posse. I braced myself to get grilled with questions.

Granny looked up at me. "Well, there's my girl. I heard you were in the middle of this mess."

It had barely been fifteen minutes. "News travels fast," I replied, looking at the three other women whose eyes were fixated on me, begging for the inside scoop.

Marnie was one of Granny's closest friends. She was a plump, older woman who owned the yarn shop at the end of Main Street. She let her hair go grey and braided it like a skein of twisted wool that hung over her shoulder. She waved her iPhone at me. "We got some great video of Stan acting the idiot. And you can aaaalmost see the body if you zoom in on the picture..." She knocked her reading glasses off the top of her head onto her nose and squinted at the screen.

Granny peered over her friend's shoulder as she popped her gum. "Is it true?" Granny asked me. "Old Man Byron drowned in the ocean?"

I nodded. "Yeah... Johnny pulled him out of the surf."

There was a sympathetic clucking from the group.

"Poor thing," said the woman standing beside Marnie. For all of Marnie's naturalness, Wanda was the polar opposite. Her hair was cut short and spiky and dyed an electric shade of blue. She smoothed her tight fitting "If You're Going to Whine, There'd Better Be Wine" t-shirt over her hips. She owned the souvenir shop and believed in every single merry mantra she sold on each plastic knickknack. She made many of the seashell covered mermaid boxes herself. "As if that boy didn't have enough hard knocks in his life, to then have to pull a body out of the ocean."

"He's okay!" I said to them, trying to call off the guard. If I didn't intercede, this sympathetic army would be marching over to the dive shack to descend upon Johnny with hugs and warm blankets. This crew of women would put the Red Cross to shame.

"Still, we should probably bring him a meal..." said Holly. Holly ran the general store, which was basically just a convenience shop with an overlay of old-timey character. She liked to wear her mousy brown hair up in a bun like a Gibson girl. Her suggestion was met with more clucking and nodding of heads.

"I'll bring a casserole!" Marnie volunteered.

"We should put together a food train for the next two weeks!"

"It was just a horrible accident. Old man Byron was probably just out walking and got hit by a rogue wave or something," I offered, hoping to get their energies redirected.

"Rogue wave my ass," said Granny, slapping her behind for emphasis. "That man wouldn't have gone out to enjoy the sights of the ocean if a pod of naked mermaids was spotted on the shore."

"You think it was murder?" whispered Holly in a scandalized tone.

"Whoever did it, Byron had it coming," Granny pronounced.

All the women's heads bobbed up and down in agreement.

"And I heard his nephew came into town," said Holly, looking at me for confirmation, as if they all didn't already know that Nate had come into the shop earlier.

"Well, there you have it!" said Wanda, as if that proved something.

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" I said, holding up my hands to slow their roll a bit. "You all are jumping deep into the conclusions."

There was a pause as they all looked at me with pity, that look you get when someone is about to launch into a speech about how you'll understand someday.

"Paige, you don't know that family," said Granny, wagging a painted nail my direction. "I mean, sure the old man is one of the founders of Seaside. But that man was a bastard."

"I'm sure he wasn't that bad..."

"No, I mean literally, he was the illegitimate son of the family and there was this whole... THING... about how he shouldn't have gotten the family money and the land. That nephew of his... Nate, right?"

I nodded that she had gotten the guy's name right.

"Well, I seem to remember that the inheritance of the land was supposed to be Nate's, and it went to Byron instead because Nate wasn't of age."

"Bet he attacked Nate and Nate just defended himself," noted Holly conspiringly.

"By pushing his uncle into the ocean," added Wanda.

"Byron was a mean old man," Marnie reiterated, in case I missed it before.

I grabbed a couple of cookies from the counter and poured two to-go cups of coffee. I backed toward the door. "I'll be right back," I replied, but they were all so caught up in their conspiracy theories, they didn't even notice.

I figured this was probably a good time to go and see how Nate was doing and whether I had agreed to hang out tomorrow with a murderer.

Chapter Four



I walked up to the base of the hill and stared up at the Founder's House. It was this ornate Victorian. Or perhaps a better description was "was" an ornate Victorian. At one point, I'm sure it was one of the prettiest houses ever built. It had gingerbread trim, curved bow windows, and a turret topped with a witch's hat roofline. There was a wrap-around porch and sunburst panels over the windows. The roof had fish-scale shingles and a weather vane that was shaped like a ship.

But the good old days seemed to have come and gone long ago. The dark green paint was peeling and the porch was sagging. The white picket fence was missing a few pickets and the garden had grown over. There was a brick sidewalk leading to the front door, but it was wonky and uneven as the grass pushed through the crevices. In the center of the yard was a three-tiered fountain that was now clogged up with dead leaves and twigs.

The gate was hanging open and I walked inside. The front door was inset with a stained glass window of a stormy ocean. I couldn't decide if it was ironic or appropriate that it was the sea that finally took Old Man Byron.

There was a big, iron bell-pull hanging by the door. I half expected it to pull the house down when I yanked on it. But I could hear a bell ringing inside, so I hoped that I had made the right decision.

A few minutes later, the door opened and revealed Nate. His formerly mocha-colored face was practically white as a sheet. His brown eyes were red and rimmed with dark circles. His hair was sweaty and a mess. He looked like crap.

"Hi," I said. He seemed to not even recognize me. I gave him an awkward wave as I tried to jog his memory. "Paige. From down at the coffee shop? You asked me if I wanted to show you around the beach? I know you said tomorrow, but..." My voice trailed off as I suddenly felt like this was a super dumb idea.

He ran his fingers through his light brown hair as if suddenly realizing where he was. He cleared his throat as he pulled himself together. "Right! Of course I remember you. I'm sorry. It's... um... I don't think I'm up for a tour of the beach right now."

He turned and walked into the house. Though he left the door open, he didn't invite me in. Any idiot could see the poor guy was in shock, so I made the executive decision to follow him. He wasn't in any shape to be left alone.

"I didn't mean that I was here to take you to the beach. I just heard... I'm so sorry about your uncle," I called out as I stepped into the foyer and shut the door behind me.

If a person's home is truly an indication of someone's mind, his uncle was a wreck. The entire hallway was stacked almost floor to ceiling with magazines and paperwork. There were boxes labeled: "Sort" and "Toss." But his uncle seemed to have gotten distracted halfway through.

Nate turned around, suddenly realizing that he had left me behind. He looked like he was about to apologize, but I held out my hand to stop him. "Go. Sit down. I brought you some food."

"That's what people do in these sorts of situations, isn't it?" Nate said, looking at the coffee holder I was carrying with some recognition.

I'd take recognition. Seemed a few steps ahead of where we were moments ago. "Where shall I put these?"

He looked around. "The place is such a disaster... I don't even know."

I took his arm and steered him into the parlor. The walls were covered in red, flocked, wallpaper with a fleur-de-lis pattern. There were ratty-looking velvet sofas with carved arms and legs. They looked like what you'd find inside a dollhouse... if the dollhouse people had come to life and spilled on them every day for thirty years. I pushed aside a stack of newspapers on the marble coffee table, clearing just enough space to put the stuff from Granny's shop. I then heaped the dirty laundry from the sofa onto the floor and steered Nate to the seat. I put a cup of coffee in one of his hands and a cookie in the other.

"Thank you," he said, again as if just remembering that I was there.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I just came to the house," he said. "There was a note on the door saying that my uncle was going to be back in five minutes. I came inside. The door was unlocked. I couldn't believe how bad things had gotten..." He looked around, aghast at the room. I followed his eyes, seeing every cobweb in every corner. "It wasn't always like this..." he explained.

I patted his arm. And man, I know the guy was in the middle of grieving and my brain shouldn't have gone there, but he had some muscular forearms under that flannel shirt. I tried to cover my inappropriateness with sympathy. "I'm sure it wasn't."

He took a sip of his coffee and looked surprised. "Just the way I like it."

"I remembered from when you came in earlier," I said. "Strong enough to punch you in the mouth?"

He nodded and I could see that he was really grateful someone would extend a kindness. "Better a punch to the mouth than a kick to the teeth."

"So... you came in..." I prodded him.

He motioned to the room. "And the place was just like it is now. I waited and waited and then the phone rang. My uncle doesn't have voicemail or an answering machine, so I picked up." His eyes pricked with tears. "Um... and then the police... well... the police were on the phone..." I saw him wrestling with his emotions. "Sorry," he apologized as he squashed everything down. "It's just... I lost my parents not too long ago. I'm an only child. Uncle Byron wasn't the nicest guy, but... he was all I had left."

I dug around the paper bag and pulled out some paper napkins and handed them to him. "I'm so sorry."

"Do you know what happened?" he asked.

I nodded. "Everyone knows."

"Oh."

"It's a small town... text messages... also..." I didn't quite know how to introduce this particular facet of the story. "Um... I... um... my

friend was the guy who discovered your uncle's body... and I was with him."

His pale face got even paler. He stared down at his coffee cup like he wished he could stuff all his feelings beneath the lid and throw everything away. "Oh," was all he said for a bit. And then he cleared his throat. "I should go thank your friend."

"Johnny," I offered. "He runs the dive shop down by the beach. I can take you down to him. You know. Whenever you're ready."

"Right," replied Nate. "That would be great. Maybe not today, but tomorrow. Or something."

"Sure!" I replied, resting my hand on his arm once again. "Tomorrow. Or whenever. There's no rush."

The bell suddenly rang again and he looked up, as if bracing himself for another shock. I guess if you have a day like the one he was having, you start responding to doorbells and phone calls like a tragic version of Pavlov's dog. He got to his feet and walked to the door and I followed. He opened it. I saw over his shoulder that it was Seaside's two friendly, neighborhood police officers, Stan and Fred.

"Hello. Would you care to come in?" he asked, stepping aside.

"Sure." Officer Stan swaggered in, glancing up at the ceiling and around the foyer like all his suspicions were confirmed. "We just have a few questions we're hoping you can clear up for us."

"Of course," replied Nate. "I'd be happy to."

Officer Stan saw me and gave me a nod.

Officer Fred hustled forward like he was holding me back from rushing them. He held up his hands and got between me and the rest of the group. "We'd prefer to speak to Nate alone."

I couldn't believe these guys. I mean, just from a human sympathy point of view. "I was just on my way out," I replied.

Nate reached out and gave my hand a squeeze. "Thank you for stopping by, Paige," he said. "It means a lot to have someone who cares."

There was a look of such gratitude on his face. It felt a whole lot better to see that than the abject despair I had witnessed about ten minutes earlier.

"Sure," I answered. "Let me know if there's anything I can do. Make phone calls. Bring you some meals. Whatever."

He nodded. "I have a feeling that I'm going to take you up on that."

I smiled as Nate ushered the officers into the living room and I showed myself out. I shut the heavy door behind me. As I looked out at the overgrown yard, I couldn't help but think about all the mess Nate had unintentionally inherited.

Chapter Five



The news came the next day. I had just finished opening the shop. The air hung thick with the smell of cinnamon and butter and freshly brewed coffee. There were a few early risers who came in to get a little nosh, but otherwise, things would stay pretty quiet until the ferry boat came in. Later, folks would either be looking for a warm cup of something to drink on the ride home or be jonesing for some caffeine after getting off. But this early, it was just the folks up for a morning walk. The newspaper wouldn't come in until the ferry arrived, so there really wasn't even an excuse to get up early for that.

I was leaning on the counter, getting caught up on yesterday's stories, when the doorbell tinkled. I looked up to see Johnny. He was wearing his board shorts and his dive shop t-shirt.

"You're up early," I said to him.

He shook his hand, pinkie and thumb sticking out. "Surf's up."

"Right," I smiled, grabbing the tongs and sticking a couple cinnamon rolls into a bag for him. Only reason he'd get out of bed was to catch a wave. And by a wave, I mean "a" wave. There wasn't a lot to surf on this shore. But he was always happy with whatever he got. I held the bag out for him.

"Thanks, Paige!" he said with a smile, but then his brows furrowed like he was trying to remember something. "Oh! That Nate guy?"

"Yes?" I asked, suddenly ready to give him my full attention.

"Hope you guys didn't have plans today."

"He asked me to show him the beach, but then... well... things got a little complicated, so I think it's off. Why?"

"Oh." He scratched the back of his neck. "He just got arrested."

"He what?" I asked, dumbstruck.

He looked in the bag and pulled back the paper edges. He took a great big bite and spoke as he chewed. "Yeah. Turns out, he murdered his uncle."

My jaw dropped open.

He jerked his thumb to the shore. "Want to come out with me?"

I shook my head, too dumbstruck to put words together. "No. I have to work."

He gave me double thumbs up and jogged out the door.

Just as he left, Granny came wandering down from her upstairs apartment. This morning she was wearing a fuzzy, yellow sweater that reminded me of a baby duck and she had switched out her nail polish for something in more of the banana palette.

"I'm headed out to meet the girls for breakfast. Was that Johnny?" she asked with a smile. She fully supported my efforts to make sure he got fed every day. In fact, when I wasn't around, she usually just packaged up all of the day-old food and took it over to his dive shop.

But today I was having trouble focusing on Johnny. "They ARRESTED Nate for murder," I informed her.

Granny hadn't met him and, to her, Nate was nothing more than a point of gossip. She shrugged her shoulders as she poured herself a cup of coffee from the pump pot. "Goodness. Well, he arrived in town and there was a murder. Hasn't been a murder here in years. Correlation is not causation, but it seems awfully coincidental."

But I needed her to understand how this was all wrong. "I'm sure he didn't do it. He was SO nice," I explained, but it came out sounding so lame.

"You need to watch out for the nice ones, dear," she clucked as she kissed me on the cheek and headed out. "It is always the nice ones!"

I watched as she sashayed across the street to meet up with her posse. They took off, heads together, as they caught one another up on all the gossip.

It couldn't have been Nate. It just couldn't! It wasn't just that he was nice, he was... normal. Just a guy who came out to help his uncle. And he was all alone here on this island with no one to help him. I wiped down the counters out of habit. I mean, even if Stan and Fred remembered to give him a phone call, there was no way he could get a lawyer here by the morning ferry. And then it was the weekend and he'd be locked up in the jail cell until Monday.

A thought formulated in my head that wouldn't let go until my shift was over. Nate needed a friend, and it looked like I was the only one he had. I sped through the rest of the day in a haze, but the moment that clock hit noon, I packed up a lunch bag with as many goodies as I could squeeze into it and the moment Granny came back, I headed toward the door.

"Going somewhere?" asked Granny as she put on her apron, making sure to re-fluff her magenta hair in case it had gotten mussed.

"Just going to see how things are going for Nate," I replied. "See how he's being treated."

"I'm sure Stan'll treat him fine," she dismissed.

Having seen Stan in action, I wasn't so sure. "I'll be back soon," I said, my hand on the handle.

"Don't make me have to call your mother to tell her you're marrying a convict because of some forbidden love nonsense!"

"I promise I won't marry a convict," I replied, backing out.

"Better not! I've done some stupid stuff in my time and I support you upping the ante. But nothing THAT stupid."

"Cross my heart."

She pointed her finger at me and her reading glasses slid down her nose. "Better not hope to die."

I blew her a kiss and dashed out onto the street.

Chapter Six



The city jail was a two-cell joint about a block away from Bitter Beans. It was mainly used as a drunk tank for the idiot tourists who didn't understand just because we were living on an island didn't mean the ferry was a booze cruise. The jail was shaped like a brown, concrete box, circa late 1960s. Above its glass doors were stone carvings of the great seal of the United States of America.

Despite it being positively gorgeous out, the air conditioning was running full tilt and blasted me as I walked inside. I rubbed my arms to chase the goosebumps away. Stan looked up at me from the front desk, which was a brown, square piece of walnut that matched the outside of the building pretty perfectly.

He looked at my bag and then, using his brilliant powers of deduction, asked, "Did you bring those for us?"

I gave him a sweet smile. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" he said, narrowing his eyes. I guess he wasn't really the playful type.

"Compliments of the house," I continued, placing them onto his desk.

He was immediately all smiles again, rubbing his fingertips as he opened up the bag. He pulled out a cinnamon roll and tucked a paper napkin into the front of his shirt.

I leaned forward. "Listen, Stan, I heard that you got Nate locked up."

He answered with his mouth full, little flecks of bread spraying across his paperwork. "Sure do. Open and shut case."

"Really?" I asked, wondering if somehow something had come to light that was going to make me look like an ignorant jerk.

"We're still gathering evidence," he said to me with a wink, "but I'm pretty sure we got our man."

In other words, they had absolutely nothing on him. I shook my head. "Seemed like such a nice guy."

Stan shrugged his shoulders. "You can never tell about a person."

I leaned over the counter again. "Listen, Granny asked if I could check in on him. He's new in town. She thought you wouldn't mind, thought maybe a woman's touch might even loosen up his tongue a bit." I was making this all up as I was going along, but it seemed to make sense to Stan. I think he was just thrilled at the prospect of having someone handle the Nate problem for him.

"You turning into some angel of mercy?" asked Stan, taking another big bite.

I shrugged. "No fighting the power of Granny," I replied in a conspiring tone.

"She makes a good cinnamon roll," he replied.

I didn't mention I was the one who baked now. "Sure does."

"What'd you say you bring me the rest of the leftovers tonight and I'll let you have a private interview with our prisoner?"

Seemed like a fair trade. I mean, other than that Nate should have been allowed visitors without having to bribe an officer of the law, but sometimes you gotta play the hand dealt ya. I hated to think I was taking food out of Johnny's belly, but maybe I'd take him out for hamburgers tonight to make up for it. "You got yourself a deal."

He took the keys from his side and tossed them to me. "I can only give you five minutes, though," he said. "Visiting hours."

"Totally," I replied like I totally got where he was coming from. Five minutes?! The guy was rotting in a jail in Seaside.

Stan dug into the bag and pulled out a blueberry muffin. "Let yourself in. Just bang on the door when you want out."

"Sounds good," I replied, waving the keys at him.

I opened up the door that separated the front office from the jail area. Nate was sitting on the cot with his head in his hands. He looked up at me as I came in and I gotta say, he looked like crap. And it wasn't because of the pale green walls or awful fluorescent lights buzzing overhead, although neither was doing anybody any favors, either.

Nate's eyes were red and puffy. His face was swollen. He wiped away his eyes as soon as he saw me but didn't get up. And as

uncomfortable as that narrow, barely padded cot looked, that's saying something.

I walked over to the bars of the cell. "Hey!" I said. "How are you holding up?"

He smiled without humor. "You mean other than being accused of killing my uncle and being arrested for murder? Great. This is a really lovely bed and breakfast they set me up in, but I got to say, I'm looking forward to check out."

"I figured that you probably had enough 'bed' in this joint and could use a little more of the 'breakfast'," I replied, opening up my backpack and pulling out a second bag of cinnamon rolls. "Watch out for the nail file I baked into each of these. Wouldn't want you to break your teeth."

That got a real smile from him. He stood up and took the paper bag as I squeezed it through the bars. "Sneaking contraband into a prison," he said. "I couldn't be more grateful."

I hooked my thumb back at the office. "They're idiots." I watched as he took a bite and closed his eyes to savor it.

"This is really good," he stated.

I realized my eyes were lingering on the way his thumb wiped the frosting off the corner of his lip. "Soooo... what happened?" I asked, trying to change the subject in my brain.

I kind of hated myself for taking him out of the moment. He sat back down on the cot. "After you left, they asked me some questions. Told me not to leave town, which of course I wasn't going to do. I needed to take care of my uncle's funeral and notify people and... well... all the stuff you have to do when you are the executor of an estate and a family member has died. And suddenly they showed up a few hours later and placed me under arrest for murder."

Everything he said rang true, and it wasn't the sexy convict or the finger licking swaying my opinion. "That's CRAZY," I said. "Do you need me to contact anyone? Let folks know where you are?"

"Do you know a good lawyer?" he asked without humor.

"No," I confessed.

"Me, neither," he replied. "I mean... I've never been accused of murder before."

We sat in silence for a moment. I mean, how do you even go about finding a lawyer when you've got something like this happening? It didn't seem like something you'd want to hire from the yellow pages or a park bench ad.

"It's okay," he said, leaning his forehead in his hands. "I was told I'm being kept on a 72-hour hold as they collect evidence. If they don't find anything, I'm free to go. And if they do? Well... what do you villagers do to murderers here? Keel haul them? Stone them in the town square?"

"I don't know if our town has ever had a problem that couldn't be solved with a cookie and a beer."

"That'd be a nice way to go," he replied thoughtfully. "Death by insulin overdose and alcohol poisoning. Promise me you'll be the executioner."

"No one gives a person diabetes like me."

He gave me a sad smile. "Thank you for coming to see me. It means a lot."

Stan banged on the door. I guess my five minutes were up. I was surprised he had enough brain cells to tell time. He probably just made it to the bottom of the bag.

On impulse, I reached out and gripped Nate's hand. "It'll be okay. I'm going to make sure."

He sighed, but tried to put on a brave face. "I hope you're right."

Chapter Seven



I decided to walk my bike back to the shop rather than ride it. I just needed a minute to get my thoughts together. There was no way that Nate was the murderer. He didn't have the eyes for it. He didn't have the soul for it. He was kind and funny. There is no way that he could have killed a man he so obviously cared for. I mean, I guess everyone says it's always the one you least expect. Whenever the news has interviews with criminal's friends, they're always saying he was so quiet and lovely.

But this time was different.

I bent down to scratch my ankle as I felt a bug bite me.

Or was thinking "this time it was different" part and parcel to the whole denial thing?

I sighed. I didn't know what to think.

And I didn't have time to ponder anything more because a woman's voice called out. "Been to the jail, have ya?"

I stood up to see who it was. I simultaneously squashed down my dread and tried to look happy as I waved back. It was Marnie, the owner of the yarn shop, and Wanda, the blue-haired owner of the souvenir shop. They were out for a power walk, complete with matching visors. Both had cups of hot tea from our shop. They probably already got all the gossip straight from Granny's mouth.

"Do you think he did it?" shouted Wanda as they crossed the street toward me.

I knew I was in for it, one way or the other, so there was no point beating around the bush. "Something didn't feel right," I replied back.

"Darn," said Wanda as they drew beside me. She confessed to Marnie, "I was going to send him a thank-you basket."

Marnie smacked her in the arm in mock shock. "No speaking ill of the dead."

Wanda touched her hand to her heart. "I would NEVER speak ill of the dead," she replied. She leaned my direction and said in a

conspiring tone, "But I can name at least five people who will be throwing a party tonight."

"And you said you didn't get my invitation," teased Marnie. They tittered and then pulled themselves back together. "Not that I would speak ill of the dead," continued Marnie, pointedly.

"What did Byron do?" I asked. "I mean, everyone keeps talking about how awful he was, but... was it just him? Or did he do something?"

Marnie took a long sip of her tea as Wanda pulled a flask out of her bra and added a little tippie onto the top of her drink. She then looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was listening in. "Oh, he was all high and mighty, living in that old house up on the hill."

"Which, may I state for the record," Wanda interrupted, "was absolutely beautiful once upon a time."

"So, while he couldn't even be bothered to take care of the place he had, he found this loophole and starts buying up half the street in Seaside," continued Marnie without missing a beat. "*Then* he starts jacking up the rent on everyone unfortunate enough to have a shop on the parcels he's picked up, as if any of us is rolling in the dough. Especially during the winter. It's a miracle any of us survive the season, much less to suddenly be expected to hand over wads of cash to that skinflint." She leaned in. "Did you know he has not eaten ONCE at Yvette's cafe. Not ONCE. That place has been an institution ever since her husband got hauled away."

I couldn't really blame Byron too much on that front. Yvette wasn't exactly my favorite person on the island. For some reason, she saw our coffee shop as a direct competitor to her café. But her café had a walk-up window for ice cream, and featured sandwiches and a soda fountain. It had little marble-topped tables and black-and-white tiled floors. Our bookshop was the polar opposite and, you know, we sold books. But maybe having her husband arrested was the reason for her attitude.

"Her husband got hauled away?" I repeated, unable to keep up with all of the bits of information she was throwing at me.

Marnie and Wanda nodded at each other knowingly before Wanda continued. "Oh, it was a mess of a divorce. He was dallying on the side with a tourist and she caught him. Turned out he had

been dallying in the moneybox, too. All of his weeklong shopping trips into town were always a couple days longer than they needed to be and he always came back with a tan. And we're not talking a Seaside tan. You don't get that sort of brown without some coconut oil in a tropical location."

"Poor Yvette," clucked Marnie.

Absentmindedly, Wanda ran her fingers through her blue hair to spike it up. "Stan was good enough to haul that no-good, low-down, cheating man away for embezzlement until the Feds could come collect him, but for some unknown reason, the whole business of Yvette's ex stealing from *her* made Old Man Byron madder than a hornet. And not at *him*. Byron came after *her*."

Marnie took a judgmental sip from her tea. "Just goes to show, birds of a feather, if you know what I mean."

Wanda nodded in agreement. "Those are the only two men in this town dirty and scheming enough to enjoy each other's company."

Marnie continued the thought. "He swore he'd never set foot into Yvette's shop. And who even knows why? But he had no problem buying out the land beneath it to try to drive her out of business."

"Oh!" I said.

"It was like he had a vendetta against the whole town once Yvette's husband's sins were brought to light."

"Bitter, bitter, nasty old man, that's what I've always said," said Wanda. "I'm not one to speak ill of the dead and all."

"Me, neither," said Marnie. "But some people are dead because they just need killing."

"Like putting down a rabid dog that keeps biting the hand that feeds him."

"Town is better off without that bastard," said Wanda.

"Did you hear that Jake is throwing a wake for Byron at his tavern tonight?" Marnie laughed. "Down at his place. Dollar whiskey shots until the bottle's gone."

Jake owned the local watering hole. Jake's Tavern wasn't very fancy, but in a town like Seaside, you had two choices—dive bar or wine bar. The wine bar was usually filled with tourists celebrating whatever anniversary caused them to book a room at the local B&B.

Jake's Tavern was where the rest of us hung out, the folks who wouldn't be able to tell the difference between a \$1 shot or a \$5 shot, and were more interested in the fastest way to oblivion, rather than the best way there.

If Nate was innocent, it seemed like a good place to hear a lot of information on people who might want Byron dead. "A wake?" I repeated, suddenly very interested.

"More like a 'thank God he's dead' party, but you can't go saying those things out loud," said Marnie.

"It's tacky," added Wanda.

"Can anyone go?" I asked.

"The more the merrier!" said Wanda, lifting up her paper cup. "Just don't let that new boyfriend of yours hear about what we're up to."

"Nate is not my boyfriend..." I mumbled.

"Wouldn't want to hurt the poor duck's feelings," said Marnie.

"Of course," I replied.

Marnie looked at her watch. "Oh, I should be getting back inside. Evening ferry's coming in."

Wanda downed the rest of her tea. "On my way, too!"

There was usually a bit of a rush and then things would slow down again, so I headed to the coffee shop just to see if there was anything that needed to be done. Granny was snoring away in one of the chairs. If our town was any less safe, we'd be robbed blind every Tuesday.

I gave her a shake when the bell over the door didn't wake her up. "Granny!" I whispered. "The ferry is coming in!"

She took a great big breath and opened her eyes. She saw me and smiled before giving herself a sleepy stretch. "I was wide awake. Just reading the back of my eyelids," she informed me.

There must have been something really interesting written there because she took every moment she could get to "read."

As Granny sashayed behind the counter in her lime green mules, I started straightening the books on the shelves.

"Do you think that maybe we should expand our inventory?" I asked, picking up a book that was a big seller five years ago.

"Oh, we have plenty," she said, waving me away. "When the summer comes, people will want something trashy to read on the beach and throw away afterward."

But a thought was starting to percolate in my head. "I don't know," I said. "Maybe some books on local history. You know... about the town and the sights."

"We're making money hand over fist with all of the pastries you're making. Everyone likes a little something made with love," she reassured me with a comforting smile.

But now that this idea was in my head, it wasn't letting go. One of the most prominent men on the island had just been murdered and I couldn't get anything on the history except stories that he was a jerk. It seemed like a really great excuse to talk to people. "I could put something together," I offered.

"What was that, sweetie?" she asked, looking up from the till.

"Well, I was just thinking I could put together a little booklet about where to eat and places to hang out and we could sell it for a couple bucks. Maybe even interview some people in town and get some old stories."

"We have a couple of books like that already," she reminded me, pointing to the shelf.

"Yeah," I admitted, "but this would be new! With updated information."

She smiled at me, and I think she figured out something else was up, but she was willing to play along. She nodded as she mulled over my proposition. "Sure. If that seems like something that would be fun." Her smile widened. "In fact, I've got that copier in my office. We'll print it out and bind it up and make it an island-wide bestseller!"

I didn't have the heart to tell her the only reason I was thinking about it was that I wanted an excuse to dig a little deeper into the lives of the people living here.

I glanced out the window and saw Yvette walking down the street in deep conversation with Jake. I wondered if they were talking about the recent murder.

Remembering the wake that Jake was throwing tonight, I asked Granny, "Do you need me tonight?"

“No! No!” she said, dusting the leaves of a fake plant that we kept on top of the bookshelf. “Go out and hang out with all the young people!”

There weren’t really any young people in the town, but as I watched Yvette plant a kiss on Jake’s cheek, I figured when you want the gossip, you have to go where the gossip is.

Chapter Eight



I tugged up my shirt, realizing it was showing off just a little more cleavage than I felt entirely comfortable with, especially since we were headed to a wake. The chill from the ocean was rolling in and a light fog was causing a yellow halo to appear around all the streetlights. Johnny walked next to me, completely unaware of the world around us.

"So... um... thanks for asking me out for a drink," he said. He reached his hand out and stopped me. "Just so you know? I've known you, like, forever, and you're, like, a sister. Sooo... I just want you to know I don't feel about you, like, that other way. If that's why you asked me out."

"I KNOW," I said for the twentieth time. "I just need you to be my wingman at the bar tonight."

"OHHH!" he said, smiling with relief. "I get it now. But as long as you know."

Sometimes it was like talking to a wall.

We walked into the bar. It was paneled with honey-colored wood and had a pool table in the middle. A chair railing ran around the room at the perfect height for people to set a drink and a couple of tall tables were scattered throughout. Usually, just the hardcore drinkers, like Johnny's family, would have been taking up barstools, but tonight the place was buzzing with all sorts of locals. I waved to Granny's posse, Marnie, Holly, and Wanda, who lifted their fluorescent drinks my direction. I knew I was going to have to be on my best behavior or I'd hear all about it in the morning from all sides.

I sidled up to the bar. Jake was wiping out the inside of a pint glass with a dirty-looking rag. I'm pretty sure the man had never heard of a dishwasher and a good wipe down was the most his glassware had ever received. The alcohol he poured was hospital-grade, though, and strong enough to burn anything living.

Jake smiled when he saw me. "Hey, Paige! How are things at the bookshop?"

"Slow," I confessed.

He shrugged. "Just wait until Memorial Day. This place will be hopping." He threw his towel over his shoulder and gave me an appreciative look up and down. "You clean up nice. You get all fancied up for this crowd?"

I yanked down my skirt and gave another futile attempt at pulling up my shirt. "No. Just... sometimes a girl likes to look nice, you know?"

"Mission accomplished," he said, high-fiving me.

I pulled out my credit card. "Open a tab for me?"

He waved it away. "This is a wake! First one is on Old Man Byron." He poured what he knew I liked, a hoppy red lager, and shot a finger gun at Johnny. "What can I get you?"

Johnny was so spaced out, he didn't even hear Jake over the din of the crowd.

"He'll have some water," I answered for my friend.

"Pre-partying?" he asked, giving Johnny a knowing look.

"High on life," I replied.

"High on something," Jake remarked, pushing the glasses toward me as Johnny just wandered away.

I took a polite sip of my pint and tried to look casual. "So, did you know Byron?" I asked.

He leaned his elbows on the counter. "Yeah. Mean old bastard," he said. "I'd say that nephew of his did us a favor."

"Do you think he actually did it?" I asked. "I mean, it just seems pretty dumb, to come walking into town, meeting people, making sure that everyone knows your name, and then going and killing the one person you've told everyone you've gone to see."

Jake shrugged. "I don't know. Crime of passion? Idiot? People do dumb things in the heat of a moment."

"I guess," I said, taking another sip. "He just doesn't seem the type."

"And what kind of type would that be?" Jake asked.

"I don't know. Rougher. Colder. Like some of the guys who camp out and come to the bar. A drifter or something."

"Don't judge a book by its cover," said Jake. "Some of those rough guys, they'll be the ones to save you in a tough moment."

They're only that way because they're survivors."

"Sure," I said, wanting to explain and then realizing that I couldn't put into words the feeling I had in my gut. "You're probably right."

"All I know is that I'm glad they got him. We'll all sleep better tonight knowing that the guy is behind bars."

"Did you deal with Byron a lot?" I asked Jake.

"Not really," he said, giving his counter a wipe.

"I heard he really didn't like Yvette."

"That's putting it nicely," Jake said with a humorless chuckle.

"That ex-husband of hers was up to something and double-crossed him. A man like Byron'll screw you over from here to next Tuesday, but heaven help you if you hit him back."

"That's what some other folks have been saying. So, were you and Yvette talking about Byron earlier?"

"Earlier?"

"I saw you two walking by the coffee shop," I said. "Figured you were talking about the murder and how that was going to affect things."

"Ah," said Jake, rubbing the back of his head, looking a little embarrassed. "No, we weren't talking about that..."

"What were you talking—"

And that's when Yvette's voice chirped up behind us. I turned around. She was dressed in a little red number that was so tight, it looked like it had been painted on.

"Ah," I said, realizing what their conversation was more likely about and Jake's reluctance to get into specifics with me. I raised my pint. "Happy dead dude night!"

Yvette sidled over to the bar, leaned over, and gave Jake a kiss on the cheek. "Pour me something hard," she said, sitting down and giving him a wink.

Jake gave me a look and I realized that was my time to vamoose. I smiled at Yvette while he was putting together her beverage. "How are things at the cafe?" I asked as I slid off my stool.

"Much, much better," she said brushing back her frizzy blonde hair.

"I heard a lot of people are really happy about Byron," I noted offhand.

"I would never speak ill of the dead," she said, taking the whiskey on the rocks and holding it up to Jake in a toast. "But let's just say I'll never speak good of him, either." She downed it all in one big, long gulp and set it down hard on the bar. "Pour me another."

Jake seemed only too glad to oblige.

"Seems like he was on everybody's bad side. What'd he do to you?" I asked.

I'm pretty sure that these weren't her first two drinks of the night, because she actually answered me. Her voice slurred a bit as she said, "Oh, Byron and that bastard of an ex of mine were in cahoots. Business dealings and such. Byron was running people out of town and I am glad he's gone. Now, if someone could just get rid of my ex." Jake gave her a wink and she laughed just a little too loud. "I should ask that nephew of his to finish the job."

"What business were they doing?" I asked leaning forward.

She shrugged. "I have no idea, but it wasn't good. All I know is that Byron was madder than hell when it turned out my ex was stealing from the till and used the money to take his girl-toy on an all-expense-paid trip to the Bahamas. You'd think I would've had more of a right to be angry, but Byron acted like my ex cheated on him and like I encouraged him to do it. Made no sense at all! That bastard was trying to drive me out of business. Lucky for us, that nephew of his decided to come in and take matters into his own hands. I don't know what made him do it, but I will personally fund that young man's entire legal defense as service to the community."

"Too late!" said Jake, taking a tip jar from behind the bar. It had a piece of paper taped to the front that read "Free Nate Edwards Legal Fund."

Yvette took her cocktail purse from her shoulder, opened it, and poured all of her loose change into the jar. Jake turned around and started ringing a big brass bell, which caused the entire bar to cheer and lift their glasses.

"Next round is on the house!" shouted Jake.

I picked up my beverages to get out of the way as everyone started rushing the bar. Johnny had drifted over to the dart board.

He was watching the players like they were shooting darts through space and time. I put a glass of water in front of him.

"Thanks," he said. "Something so weird is going on here." He raised his glass as one of the players hit the dead center of the board.

"Bulls-eye," I replied.

Chapter Nine



We hung out for only another hour. The bar was so loud and noisy, I couldn't hear any conversations and Johnny was starting to nod off. I walked him over to his shack by the beach and made sure he passed out in the general direction of his bed before I grabbed my bike and headed for home.

Granny's little apartment above her bookshop didn't have a whole lot of room, so she rented me a cottage for the summer as part of my wages. My place was on a hill, which is why it was so cheap. Most tourists wanted an easy walk down to the beach. Sure, it was a bit isolated at the top of a gravel road, surrounded by nothing but tall, golden grass. And, yes, I'd taken to walking my bike so I wouldn't pop the tires on the rocks. But still, I liked it very much.

The cottage was covered in blue-gray clapboard. Two windows flanked the red door and there were sweet little window boxes filled with bright geraniums. I lifted my bike up the three wooden steps leading to the slatted porch and opened the front door. Most nights, I didn't even bother locking the place, but with the murder, I found myself turning the deadbolt as soon as I got in.

The cottage was not much more than a studio. On one wall was an antique brass bed covered in an old patchwork quilt. On the other was a ratty, green velvet couch and a television set that got a whole two channels if the antenna was angled just right. A braided blue-and-white rug added a splash of contrast to the light pine floor. The kitchen walls were blue-gray beadboard, painted from the same bucket that had been used to paint the kitchen cabinets and the outside of the house. There was a cooktop and oven, a small farm sink but no dishwasher. I had a landline, but no internet. The cable companies only provided service in town. The owner talked about maybe getting satellite up here, but then figured out if he started marketing the place as a retreat away from the distractions of everyday living, he could make bank off of that angle without having to pay extra utilities.

I stripped off my skirt and t-shirt, letting them stay where they landed, and made my way into the bathroom. I turned on the faucets to the claw-foot bath and sat on the edge, resting my elbows on the lip of the pedestal sink as I waited for the tub to fill.

My brain just couldn't stop thinking about Nate and wondering what he was doing. It was crazy that Stan had arrested him just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, namely that he came to town just in time to find out his uncle was dead.

I climbed into the tub and soaked until my fingers got pruney.

It sounded crazy, but all I could think is that anyone could have done a better job than Stan figuring this out. Everyone in the town hated Byron. There were half a dozen people I had met today who had a motive. Something wasn't right.

I looked at my wrinkled fingertips.

Had he really died from drowning? Or had something else happened?

The phone started ringing and I dragged myself out of the bath to see who it was.

"Hello?" I answered as I wrapped a towel around me.

"Oh, Paige..."

My heart skipped a beat as I realized it was Granny. She never called at night.

"I'm so sorry, I hate to disturb you but..." her voice trailed off.

"Are you okay?" I asked, scrambling around the room to find pants and a shirt.

"It's probably silly, but... I've looked everywhere for him but I can't find Captain. Did you let him out? Is he with you?"

"No!" I said. "A tourist must have let him out."

"Oh, what if an eagle got him! Or a shark!" The panic in her voice edged towards hysterical. "I've looked everywhere. He sometimes goes outside for some fresh air, but he always comes back for dinner. Only this time, he didn't come back. Oh, Paige, if something happened to him..."

I stopped her. "I'm on my way over. I'm sure he's fine. Probably found some leftovers behind the café and has been having himself a buffet of leftover fish and chips."

"Please hurry!" she said.

"I'm headed out now," I said. "I'll search all the way between here and there. We'll find him."

I hung up and threw on my clothes and a jacket. I grabbed a can and a spoon from the kitchen. Granny called Captain to dinner by tapping on the lid of his tuna can. Maybe if I tapped on the lid as I went, I could call him out of hiding. I grabbed a flashlight and stuck it in my pocket as I headed down the hill, calling for Captain.

I didn't have to go far. Halfway between my shack and the town's main drag, I heard a plaintive little meow and Captain came into sight.

"Oh, you fool cat," I scolded as I walked over to scoop him into my arms. "You scared the daylights out of Granny."

But he wouldn't let me pick him up. He dashed into the tall grass and out of sight. I took off after him, trying to track him by the movement of the grass ahead of me.

"What are you doing?" I shouted after him. "CAPTAIN!"

The grass cleared and Captain was sitting on a fallen log, as pretty as you please, licking his front paw like he had been there the whole time and the chase was all in my imagination.

I wasn't playing around this time. I gave the can another tap, then popped the corner of the top. THAT got his attention. I held it out, and as soon as he stretched to sniff, I grabbed him. He struggled, but I unzipped my hoodie and cocooned him inside my jacket, and he settled down. Between balancing the cat and the cat food and the flashlight, it was going to be a wonder if I made it to Granny's place with everything.

"What is going on with you?" I asked as I walked toward the road. It was at that moment that I stumbled on something soft that didn't feel right. I shone the light down from my flashlight. "Oh no," I said, backing away.

I dropped the can and the flashlight and fumbled for my phone as Captain tried to leap free again, but I wasn't letting him go anywhere. The phone rang several times before the line picked up.

"Seaside Police Precinct. What seems to be the problem?" Officer Fred yawned.

"Fred?" I said into the receiver as I peered through the grass just to make sure I wasn't going crazy. "I need to report a dead body."

Chapter Ten



The red and blue lights of the police car were making me queasy as they flashed across the dark hillside. The entire town had left the party at Jake's Tavern and was now out to see what the commotion was about. Granny came racing toward me in her quilted housecoat. I numbly passed Captain over to her. "I found him for you," I said.

She gathered me up into her arms, pressing Captain between us in a great big hug sandwich. "Do you think I'm worried one wit about this idiot cat right now? Are you all right, Paige?"

I nodded. I mean, time was all wonky and it felt like maybe I was in a dream that I might be able to wake up from later. "I was just out looking for Captain and I..." I couldn't say much more. Just pointed in the direction of the body.

Stan sauntered over, his thumbs hooked into his belt. "Well, quite a bit of excitement for a sleepy town like Seaside." He pushed back his hat. "Gonna be a couple days until we're able to figure out who this fellow is."

"What do you mean, Stan?" asked Granny, her arm still around me.

"Nobody I recognize and he's been stripped of all identifying information. We'll send him down to the coroner. Cross check the missing person's reports. Fingerprint him..." He seemed at a bit of a loss as to what he was supposed to do aside from those things. "You know. Figure it out."

I shivered. It was so cold out, and I couldn't keep my body from trembling violently. I just wished I could get my legs to stop shaking.

Granny rubbed my shoulders. "Come on with me. I'm not letting you sleep in the cottage by yourself on a night like tonight."

I felt like I needed more answers, though. I kept feeling that hand beneath my foot. I just needed reassurance, as crazy as it sounds, that he had been dead. That he hadn't just been injured and then died while I freaked out. I mean, the fact he hadn't said, "Ow!" was a

pretty clear indication, but I needed to make sure I hadn't ignored someone who needed my help while I had gotten as far away from the body as I could to flag down the police.

"Can you tell how he died?" I asked.

"Garroted," said Stan, miming a choking motion, in case I didn't have enough of an imagination. He sighed. "I guess this means we still have a killer on the loose."

Some pieces came together slowly in my head. "So Nate is free?" I asked.

Stan seemed really disappointed. "Yeah. I'll have to call the precinct and tell Fred to let him go. I was really hoping this was an open-and-shut case."

"I'm so glad that you will be able to devote yourself to finding the real killer now, though," I replied, a little pointedly.

He waved my words away, like he hadn't understood them. "Don't leave town. I'll need to bring you in tomorrow for a statement."

"And where do you think she is going to go, Stan?" chided Granny.

"Well, I don't know," he replied defensively. "But I'm supposed to tell people to stay in town. That's not such a crazy request."

She shook her head. "Really. The very idea. My granddaughter has had quite an ordeal. A little human kindness would not be uncalled for. I'm taking her home and will personally ensure that she does not 'skip town.' As if she were some sort of a murderer. Really, Stan."

"All these murders started when she arrived," he muttered under his breath.

"What did you say?" she snapped at him, eyes flashing.

He backed down and kicked at the ground. "Nothing."

"I thought not," she replied, grabbing my hand and her cat, and stalking away with her chin in the air. "That man has rocks for brains," she growled as she steered me down the hill and toward her little apartment.

The crowd parted and let us through. I wouldn't have tangled with Granny, either, if I had been in their shoes. I could hear them whispering and feel all their eyes on me. Tomorrow was going to

suck. I mean, not as bad as it sucked for the guy who was now dead. But I had a feeling all the gossip I was going to be deflecting was going to make me wish we could trade places.

Main Street was quiet. The shops were all dark inside, but their fronts were bathed in the glow of the street lamps. Thankfully, the sound of the ocean drowned out the hubbub on the hill.

Granny unlocked the front door to the coffee shop, ushered me inside, and locked the door quick as you please. I got the feeling she still hadn't walked off her irritation at Stan.

Behind the counter was the door to her apartment. She opened it and I followed her up the narrow hallway with its darkly stained, beadboard wainscoting. It led to her small living room. She had painted all of her furniture bright colors—red and turquoise. Her walls were painted a bright, cheery yellow and covered in hopeful sayings about goals and dreams that seemed really, really out of place and shallow after you've stumbled upon a dead body. She pulled a pillow and some bedding out of a closet and wordlessly made me a nice little bed on her narrow couch.

She steered me beneath the covers, she kissed my forehead, and planted Captain between my ankles. "He's always been a good watchcat," she informed me. "He probably knew something was up and snuck out to watch over you."

"Good old Captain," I replied, scratching him under his chin. The shock was starting to wear off and his warm, rumbling purr was a comforting reminder that right now, in this immediate moment, everything was okay. The cat was better than a personal zen master.

"Try to get some sleep," Granny instructed me as she turned off the light and went into her room.

I shifted onto my side, trying hard not to disturb the cat. He settled himself into the crook behind my knees. I stared at the light beneath Granny's door as I tried to sleep, but the Sand Man had nothing for me tonight. Every time I tried to close my eyes, I kept going back to that visceral memory of the field. I felt so powerless, so trapped by the world. I hated it. And I vowed that when the morning came, I wasn't going to let myself feel that way ever again.

Chapter Eleven



I didn't sleep much. In fact, I was up well before the 4:00 a.m. hour. I usually had to rise in order to get the baking done for the shop. I yawned and went downstairs. There was a lot of therapy in making up the cinnamon rolls. Most mornings, I would let the mixer do the kneading, but today, I really enjoyed pulling the dough out and beating it into submission with my hands. I could almost imagine that last night was nothing but a bad dream.

But from the moment I flipped the door sign from "Closed" to "Open," I realized that no one else was going to let me pretend it had all been in my imagination.

It seemed like the entire town had decided our shop was Ground Zero for the emergency of last night. Granny's posse was the first to arrive and they arrived in full force—Marnie, Wanda, and Holly. I bit my tongue and stopped myself from asking them if they didn't have their own shops to run.

"Oh Paige," clucked Marnie, tossing her grey braid over her shoulder. "We heard what happened! If you need anything... anything at all... you just let us know," she said, patting my hand sympathetically as I passed her a roll and her cup of coffee.

Wanda barely bothered with the pretense. "Just AWFUL!" She leaned over the counter. "And no one knows who he was, is that right? Some stranger who was just drifting through town and murdered?"

"I don't really know," I said, trying to rush through their orders so I'd have an excuse to not talk about it anymore. "It was very dark."

"And near your cottage!" squeaked Holly, sipping her tea as she held it in both hands like I was some riveting TV show. "I wouldn't be able to sleep at night knowing a murderer might be right outside my door!"

I took a deep breath as I rang up their charges on the till, reminding myself that Granny's posse were good people. But I felt like I was just a few moments away from telling them that maybe

they should all go get a good look at the outside of the Bitter Beans door.

Instead, I just decided not to give them the "friends discount." Wanda stared suspiciously at the change I put in her hands and bobbed it up and down like she knew it should weigh more.

We were interrupted by Granny coming out of her apartment. Gone was her funky sweaters and kooky shirts. She was dressed in a magenta button-down shirt that matched her magenta hair and magenta mules. You know things were serious when Granny pulled the business casual out of the closet.

"Now now, girls," Granny said in a no-nonsense tone. "You're not hounding my granddaughter, are you? We'll have none of that."

Her friends took the cue.

"Just here to let her know that if she needs a place to stay," squeaked Holly, pushing her old-fashioned, brass-rimmed glasses up on her nose, "I know that we all have couches and spare rooms and, Paige, you are COMPLETELY welcome."

I knew that if I took up any of them on their offer, I could look forward to my life being the subject of all the village gossip until I left town. It was a bad idea to show fear.

"I'm fine," I said. "Really. I can hardly wait to get back to my little cottage. This was just a fluke."

"She's so brave!" Wanda exclaimed to Granny. "A fighter!"

"Yes, she is," affirmed Granny, her hand upon my shoulder in solidarity. "Now, she has a lot of baking to do, and I'm sure you all have work to be done before the morning ferry. I'll let you know as soon as we hear anything."

The three of her friends nodded and clucked and cast me sympathetic looks as they walked out the door.

"Bunch of nosy biddies," she said as the last of them left. She turned to me. "Do you want the day off? Because if I were you, I might want to spend the day watching TV."

"We only get two stations," I reminded her.

"You really don't need to stay at your cottage. I would like it so much better if you stayed here."

"I LOVE my cottage!"

"You should see if Johnny wants to stay with you."

"I'll totally ask him today if he wants to crash on my couch," I assured her.

She held her arms out wide. "I have a shop full of books that are looking for a reader."

I could see she really wanted to do whatever she could to make me feel okay. I smiled. "I think that being distracted by work will do me good."

She squinted at me, trying to figure out if I meant it.

"I mean it!" I insisted.

She seemed to believe me, because she exhaled and said, "Fine. FINE! But I don't want you telling your mother I made you run a cash register on a day that I thought you should spend at the beach."

"It will be good for me to be here."

"Okay," she replied, reluctantly walking back toward the door to her apartment. "I'm going upstairs now. But you come get me at ANY point you start feeling like you need to sort out your head. You promise?"

"I promise," I said.

She suddenly rushed over and kissed me on the forehead, and then went back to the door. "Good. I love you."

"I love you too, Granny."

The rest of the day was a blur, and we completely sold out of my baked goods. I guess nothing pushes product quite like drama and gossip. There was the normal influx of tourists, plus every single person I ever met in town. The till was full by the time Stan stopped by to drag me off for my statement. Granny shooed me out, as if it weren't a complete hassle for her to hold down the fort while I said into a tape recorder everything I told Stan the night before.

He sat me across the desk from him, and Fred kept popping his head into the office to eavesdrop. When I was done, Stan folded his arms and sat back in his chair. "If you hadn't been so insistent that Nate was innocent, we might not have wasted such valuable time holding him," he said.

"What?" I replied, not following his logic at all.

"A person comes along, saying someone is innocent, and I have to waste all my time proving that they aren't," he clarified with

exasperation.

"That's kind of how the law works," I oh-so-gently reminded him. "Innocent until proven guilty?"

Stan began shuffling papers into a manila folder defensively. "Well, if I didn't have to waste all that time proving Nate guilty, I could have been out there looking for the person who really WAS guilty." He then gave me a hard glare.

I needed to make sure I was understanding the subtext of that glare correctly. "You're blaming me for the death of a stranger who was killed practically on my doorstep?"

"Did you kill him?" asked Stan, pointing a finger at me.

The man had been watching too many episodes of CSI. "Of COURSE not," I replied, completely aghast.

He seemed disappointed. "You sure? It was dark out."

"I am absolutely, positively sure that I did not kill the man whose death I called you to report."

"Where were you last night?" he asked sharply, like he was a detective in some black-and-white movie.

"Over at Jake's with the rest of town celebrating Byron's life."

"Because you're happy he's dead?"

"NO!" I answered, unable to comprehend the way these questions were turning. "I went to Jake's Tavern along with the rest of the town because they were serving \$1 shots. Then I walked Johnny back and put him to bed—"

"You sure he went to bed? That kid has always been trouble."

"His DAD has always been trouble, Stan. Johnny has been one of the sweetest kids in the world," I retorted.

"But you're SURE he went to bed?"

"He passed out before I left," I replied. I have no idea if Johnny actually passed out or not, but I was sure he didn't head off into the countryside to start murdering strangers.

"And then what?"

"I went home. Granny called. Her cat was missing."

"That's definitely out of the ordinary." He stopped me to take a few notes. "Captain is a good cat. Not like him to go missing."

"Yes, a very good cat who likes to sit inside Granny's apartment," I replied. "So, I went out to find him and I found him. And as I was

carrying him back, I stepped on the hand of the body."

"No chance the cat could have killed him?" he asked, not looking up from his notepad as he continued to scribble. "Accidental homicide? Cats are always tripping people."

I blinked at Stan. "You said the man had been garroted. Are you saying the cat garroted him?"

With a disappointed sigh, he crossed off something on his pad.

"Did you really write Captain's name on your list of potential suspects?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Everyone is a suspect until proven otherwise. As Sherlock Holmes says, the remaining answer, no matter how improbable, is the truth. Seemed like a cat accidentally strangling someone would fall under the improbable."

"The cat didn't kill him," I restated. "Do we even know who *him* is?"

"Not yet," said Stan, tapping his pencil next to an item on his to-do list. "But it is next on my to-do list." He shook his head. "I still think it is that Nate fella is mixed up in this somehow."

"He was barely in town when Old Man Byron was killed," I reminded him. "And he was locked up and in your jail when this other guy was killed."

"Probably a red herring. A detail he orchestrated to throw me off the scent. Seems pretty open and shut if you ask me," he replied.

"How can you say that?" I asked. "There's nothing open and shut about it."

"Well," Stan responded, folding his arms and leaning back in his wooden chair. "That's why I'm the town's police officer and you're not."

"You didn't answer my question."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well..."

I suddenly saw that he didn't have a good answer for me. I realized that he didn't actually know what he was doing and this was the problem. He didn't want anyone to know that he didn't know. And that's what made him an idiot.

He leaned forward. "The thing is, we never had a murder in this town until he showed up. I mean, we might have had a missing person or two, but it was years ago."

"Okay, so because Nate was here and a murder happened, you think he did it?" I repeated back at him slowly.

Stan shrugged his shoulders. "Listen, I don't tell you how to do your business. You don't tell me how to do mine." He put down his pen to take a sip of his coffee. He blew on it and scalded his tongue. "Should have gotten an ice cube..."

"Can I go now?" I asked, so done with this conversation. "Granny is all by herself at the coffee shop and it's a Saturday afternoon."

He nodded reluctantly. "Just don't go skipping town! I've watched a Sherlock or two in my day and it is always the one you least expect. You're not off my list yet."

"I really, really didn't kill that man," I reiterated, hoping he might understand how much I really didn't kill him.

"All the same," Stan replied. "Don't leave town."

"I'll be here all summer," I responded, getting up. "You know where to find me."

I walked out the door and heaved a gigantic sigh. If this is what Nate had been going through, I owed him a visit to see how he was doing.

I got back to the coffee shop to relieve Granny. The more time passed, the madder I got. By the time the last customer left and I flipped the sign to "Closed" I was fit to be tied. I cleaned the coffee bar and swept up the shop with a fervor I don't think I'd ever displayed. I took off my apron. Granny had caught on I wasn't in the best of moods and had gone upstairs, leaving me to my cleaning therapy.

I walked out of the shop and locked the door behind me. We always stayed open late on the weekends, and the sun was already down by quitting time. I could hear the sound of people in the restaurants down the road as I wandered down to the empty beach with no Stan around to harsh my mellow.

The moon hung full overhead. The sound of the waves washed over me and I closed my eyes. This was my peace. This is where I felt whole. I collapsed onto the sand and just let the sound of the wind and the waves crashing on the shore wash over me.

I heard footsteps in the sand and looked over, figuring it was just a tourist.

But it wasn't just a tourist. It was Nate, the one person who, I am sure, was having a worse day than I was. He hadn't seen me yet. He just stood at the top of the bluff, gazing out into the ocean. I saw him heave a huge breath and then his shoulders collapse with sadness.

I didn't know what to do. It was such a private moment. But if he saw me and I didn't say anything, it would seem like I was some sort of crazy voyeur.

"Hey!" I said softly.

His head jerked up and he brushed away his cheeks. He saw me and relaxed. "Hey, Paige!"

I patted the sand beside me and he seemed grateful for the invitation.

"So, you busted out, huh?"

"A regular jailbird," he replied in a weak attempt at a joke. He sat down and stared out at the ocean. "Thanks again for coming to see me," he said, grabbing up a fistful of sand and then watching as it sifted through his fingers. "I really appreciated it."

"I might need you to return the favor," I replied, shaking my head.

"What?" he asked.

I waved away his question. The man had just gotten out of jail and the clutches of that jerk of a police officer. "It's nothing. How are you doing?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

He brushed away some grains that had landed on his pant leg. I could see his brain scrolling through the five million things he wanted to say. He finally settled on: "It has been a tough couple days."

I rested my hand on his shoulder. "It's okay now."

"It's not," he said. "It really isn't." There was a crack in his strong, silent veneer and I caught a glimpse of the vulnerable man I had witnessed in his private moment. "To be accused of doing... to be..." He stopped himself. "To have someone you cared about die horribly and then be locked up in a prison and accused of doing it. And to know the real killer is out there and no one cares. And you know that if you just had a chance you'd at least *try* to find out the truth since the idiots guarding you are never going to figure it out..."

but you're stuck sitting in a cell... powerless... it doesn't make for the best end of the week."

It came out of my mouth before I could stop it. It was that word "powerless." I had sworn last night I would never let myself feel that way again, and I wasn't about to let someone like Nate feel that way. "I'll help you find whoever did it."

Nate looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time. "Really?" he asked. "You'd do that?"

"Of course," I replied. I then decided I owed him a little more explanation. "Stan just accused *me* of killing a dead guy I found last night."

"There's been a second murder?" asked Nate, in shock.

I couldn't believe Stan and Fred. "They didn't tell you when they let you go?"

He shook his head. "They just said the hold was up, and not to leave town."

"Jerks."

"Yeah," he laughed without humor. He looked at me with concern. "Are you okay?"

I took a deep breath, not wanting to lose control. "I didn't have such a great day, either," I admitted.

"Oh, Paige," said Nate, reaching out to give me a comforting awkward side hug. It's hard to angle your body right when you're sitting side-by-side in the sand with someone. But I appreciated the effort.

"I came down here to see where it happened," he confessed. "I wanted to do it when there weren't a ton of people around to stare at me. But I'm glad that you were here. It sounds like we both really needed the company."

"Ain't that the truth," I replied, pulling my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around my legs.

"So...what happened?" he asked.

I really didn't want to bring up all of the memories, so I just gave him the abbreviated version. "That's the real reason why they let you go," I finally finished. "It looks like we've got a serial killer on the loose."

"Great," said Nate. He then looked at me. "And you're sitting here alone by yourself on a beach?"

"I'm a tough broad," I tried to joke. From the look on his face, though, I could see that my own veneer was cracking and I was showing off my inner marshmallow. I tried to push past it. "Stan keeps swearing that he's going to pin this on you somehow. He was mad at me because I kept insisting you were innocent. He accused me of doing it. He even accused my Granny's cat."

"A cat. For real?"

"Said that maybe the cat tripped the guy. You know. Tripped him and then strangled him to death."

"As cats do."

"Stan is not going to help us. But if we're not careful, he's going to invent some story he's going to pin on us because he doesn't want people to figure out he's a train wreck."

"I'm glad you believed I was innocent, Paige," said Nate sincerely.

"I knew you couldn't do something like that. Murder someone. I knew it wasn't in you."

He leaned back and regarded me. "And how did you know that?" he asked.

"You have kind eyes," I replied with a smile.

They were full of tears and red and puffy, but there was a crinkle that came to the corners. He reached up and brushed back a wisp of my hair that had come free from my ponytail. "Of all the people here, you're the only one who thought that."

"Well, it is easier for them to think an outsider did it," I said. "Otherwise, they'd have to admit it was someone they know. But there's only one way in and out, and that's by boat. So, either the murderer has already left... or is still here."

We stared out at the ocean together, lost in thought.

Nate finally broke the silence. "We'll find him. If he's here, we'll clear our names and find him."

Chapter Twelve



The next morning came entirely too soon. Mondays are never anyone's favorite day, but for me, it wasn't too bad. Since weekends are our busiest times, I got my day off on Tuesday, and we closed up early during the week since there was no reason to stay open. The tourist crowd headed home on the afternoon ferry, and all the locals stopped by yesterday to ogle at me, so it was just the normal, run of the mill hassles as opposed to the sympathetic and curious looks from the day before.

In fact, by the time it was time to shutter up the place, there wasn't a single customer I needed to shoo out.

But I spoke too soon. As I was walking to the front to flip the sign to "closed", a gentleman walked in. He caused every single red flag in my soul to start waving for my attention. Something was really, really wrong with this guy.

His face was weathered and sunburned and his dirty blonde hair would have been bleached white by the sun except it was covered by a layer of dirt that left it an awful shade of grey. There was brown dirt clogged in his pores. His face sported a beard, but no mustache. He wore a navy blue turtleneck and dirty, white jeans. Atop his head, he wore a ship's captain hat that I might have dismissed as a Halloween costume, except that it was so authentic.

"Can I help you?" I asked, trying to figure out how to politely ask this guy to leave.

He pointed a gnarled finger in my face. "Are you the one that found that body?"

If I didn't tell him, anyone else in the town could, so I decided to cop to it. "I am," I offered.

He cut me off, waving his finger once more in my face. "Stay away from these murders," he said. "This is not some game. You keep your nose out of this business."

My mouth was dry and my throat clenched. "Or else...?"

He leaned forward. "Curiosity killed the cat."

And with that, he turned and left the shop. I couldn't lock the front door fast enough. I stood there with my heart pounding, wondering what had just happened. Had I just been threatened? I mean, you can't exactly go to the police and tell them a strange, crazy man dressed like a sailor stood there and whispered a cliché at you. But by the same token, things were not okay.

So, this sailor didn't want me to go around asking questions. The thing was, I hadn't been asking questions. I mean, people came in and gossiped with me, but that was it. Had he been eavesdropping on the conversation Nate and I had on the beach last night?

Chills ran up and down my spine.

It made me wonder if he made a similar visit to Nate. I pulled out my phone, but realized I didn't have Nate's number. I chewed the inside of my lip as I tried to figure out what to do. Granny was at bingo, so she wouldn't miss me if I bugged out for a little while. I hung up my apron, making the decision to swing by Nate's house and find out.

I grabbed my bike from behind the shop and took off toward Old Man Byron's place on the hill. The sun was just setting by the time I arrived at the mansion.

A few lights dotted the windows, but I didn't spot the mysterious sailor anywhere, so that seemed like a good sign. I leaned my bike against the front fence and opened the gate to the yard.

It looked like Nate had tried to rake up some of the leaves that Old Man Byron had left since last autumn, and then given up. Can't say I blamed him.

I went up to the front porch and knocked. A few moments later, I heard the sound of footsteps and the swing of the peephole's cover. The door opened and Nate stood there, looking both happy and worried to see me.

"What are you doing here, Paige?" he asked.

It wasn't exactly the "Great to see you!" I had been hoping for, but a fair question. I shivered, despite the fact that it wasn't particularly cold outside. "Can I come inside?" I asked.

"Of course!" he replied, as if suddenly remembering his manners. He stood to the side and swept his arm toward the hallway.

I walked in and rubbed my arms, trying to chase away the chills. I didn't realize how much that encounter with the sailor had affected me.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," he said, shutting the door, unable to keep the concern from creeping into his voice. "Did something happen?"

"Did you have a visitor?" I asked. "A creepy sort of sailor wannabe?"

"No..." he replied, glancing out the window with full-fledged concern now.

"I just had the weirdest thing happen. This guy stopped by the shop and asked if I was the person who found the dead body the other day. He then told me I was asking too many questions and should butt out of it. And then... I think he may have threatened me..."

Nate didn't even hesitate. He gave me a great big hug. He then held me out at arm's length. "Are you okay? We should go report this to the police." He began walking to the door.

I stopped him. "Nate, you know and I know that reporting this to the police will just make them ask what I did to provoke it and they will probably even side with the sailor." I could see in his eyes that he knew I was talking the truth. I sighed. "Besides, it wasn't a real threat... just a veiled threat... that could have been a threat..." I ran my fingers through my hair, feeling so unsure and confused. "Oh, I don't know. It's just so weird. I mean, I haven't been asking questions. You and I talked about finding out who did it last night there on the beach, but that's it. Do you think he overheard us?"

"I don't know. Do *you* think he did?" Nate asked.

"I don't know either," I admitted. "It was all just so weird."

He took my hand. "Come on. I'm going through some of my uncle's old files and I could really use some help. It'll help keep your mind off things... and I don't like the thought of you going back to your cottage alone with someone like that creeping around."

He led me into a musty living room. Or maybe it was an office. It was hard to figure out what exactly it was beneath the clutter. I'd seen tidier rooms on *Hoarders*. Two Tiffany-style table lamps barely lit the dim room. There was a desk and a sofa, and probably some

other furniture, but everything was buried in boxes and paperwork. Half-filled file drawers hung open with sloppy files of wrinkled paper. I did not envy Nate at all.

"Take a pile, any pile," said Nate as he moved me toward the couch.

I picked up a stack of papers on a coffee table. "Been through these yet?"

"Nope," he replied. "Have at it. There's plenty."

I started flipping through. "What are you looking for?"

"Well, I have to dispose of his property, so anything that looks like it might be important or historic... but I'm also looking for anything that might be a reason for people wanting to kill him." He motioned to the mess around the room. "Seems like a pretty stupid way of sleuthing, but I don't have any better leads."

We sat sifting through papers for about an hour when I found an interesting folder. "Nate, it looks like you may have a lot more property to dispose of than you thought..."

"What is it?" he asked, coming over and looking over my shoulder.

"It looks like he was buying all of the land under Main Street. And look!" I pulled out a second set of papers. "He has bids from a series of contractors to tear down all the buildings."

"He was going to tear down Main Street?" He took the file out of my hands and began flipping through it rapidly. "But... it's Main Street. It's why anyone even comes to the island."

There was a stack of full-color brochures in the next folder and I passed them over. "It looks like he may have been planning on building a resort with a high rise hotel."

"This is one of the worst ideas I've ever heard!" Nate exclaimed taking the brochures.

"Do you think someone found out and they decided they needed to put a stop to it... permanently?" I asked.

Nate paused, staring at the pictures of happy couples frolicking across white sandy beaches. "It makes sense..."

"But who?" I mused. "And what about the second body? That stranger I found?"

"Maybe he was someone who worked for one of these companies my uncle was trying to hire?" asked Nate. He began tidying up the papers, stacking them neatly and smoothing out the wrinkles. "Once the body is identified, we'll know for sure."

"Maybe tomorrow we should start talking to people to see who knows what," I suggested. The side of my mouth quirked up. "Plus, if someone was desperate enough to warn me not to dig too deep, it's probably a sign that there's something there to discover."

Nate looked at me and the gratitude practically shone from his face. "Thank you, Paige. No one deserves to die the way my uncle died, and finding out why will give me some closure."

A warm wash of good feelings coursed through me, and I realized that maybe my intentions were not entirely unselfish. Sure, we needed to find the murder to clear both our names, but it didn't hurt that I was going to have to see Nate a lot in order to figure things out. I smiled and stood.

"We start in the morning," I said. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

He put down the folder and walked over to me, giving me a huge, warm hug. His arms wrapped around me and held me close. It felt so safe.

"Thank you," he murmured, his words whispering in my hair.
"Thank you."

Chapter Thirteen



Nate walked me home and, fortunately, there were no creepy people lurking in the tall grass. Still, I appreciated it, and there was a sweetness in the way he said goodnight that kept me smiling till I drifted off to sleep.

He was at the coffee shop first thing in the morning, and a few minutes later Johnny wandered in looking for his breakfast.

"Hey, Johnny!" I said as I put together a bag of goodies for him. "Got a minute?"

"Always. What's up?"

"We're gonna catch a criminal. You in?"

He considered for a moment. "Can I wear a fedora?"

"You got one?"

"Maybe."

"If you can find it, you can wear it."

"I'm in."

I motioned to Nate. "Have the two of you met?"

Johnny jerked his chin in friendly greeting. "Whaddup?"

"Thank you for trying to rescue my uncle," Nate said, reaching out to shake Johnny's hand.

Johnny's arm was sort of noodly, like he didn't exactly know how the shaking hands thing worked. "It's all good," he replied.

As they talked, I walked to the front door and flipped the sign to "Closed." After that sailor somehow knew Nate and I were planning on doing a little sleuthing, I was completely paranoid. We only needed five uninterrupted minutes, so hopefully we could squeeze in our conversation before the caffeine addicts showed up, jonesing for their morning hit.

I walked over to the counter and pulled out a paper map of the main street. It was one of those touristy things we handed out to folks just off the ferry. It was hand drawn and was all about the shops and what they offered.

"So, we know that your uncle was buying up land under all of these shops." I pointed to all of the buildings on the side of the street opposite to the beach.

"And I stayed up late going through his paperwork and saw that he had only gotten as far as this corner." Nate circled the buildings on the right-hand side.

I gave a low whistle. "He was one building away from owning the land under Granny's bookshop."

Johnny let out a breath. "That would have like... seriously sucked. Like. For serious."

"Totally," I agreed. I turned to Nate. "I guess first up, we need to decide if people were mad at him for buying up the land, or mad at him because he was thinking about buying up the land." I stared at the door to Granny's upstairs apartment. "I'll start with Granny and see if she had any idea that your uncle was after this place. She'll be able to let us know if it was general knowledge or something folks found out after the fact."

"And I'll start talking to people on this side of the ferry dock," said Nate.

"Which means I can ask people on this side..." Johnny looked at the map and then squinted at it. He flipped it upside down and then looked outside. "Wait. Which side am I talking to?"

"Anyone you can talk to, Johnny," I offered. "If you run across any of your friends, anyone you know, just chat them up and find out if they heard anything."

"Riiiiight," he replied, as if hearing our plan for the very first time.

"And if anybody asks," I said to him, marking up his map so he would know where Nate and I were going to go, "just tell them Granny and I are working on putting together a new brochure for the tourists."

"That is like... super brilliant. They'll never see what hit 'em."

He gave me a half salute and then crossed toward the front door in a half jog. He fumbled with the locks a bit and then turned and gave me another little half salute and tripped out the door.

"Do you think he comprehended anything that is going on?" asked Nate with a note of bemusement.

"Who? Johnny?" I hooked my thumb at where my friend had disappeared. "That guy is crazy like a fox. He'll probably have all this solved before dinner. And hopefully, he'll even remember what he discovered long enough to tell us."

"Him?" confirmed Nate.

"It was no accident he found your uncle." I held up my hands and stopped myself. "I mean, it was an accident, but in the grand scheme of life and the universe and chaos theory, he, of all people on this island, definitely would be the one to stumble across him. What's that whole saying about how God looks after drunks and fools? Well, Johnny's hit his head enough to qualify for the 'fools' part and, I gotta say, somebody upstairs is *definitely* looking out for him."

"Cool," replied Nate, totally on board after hearing my reassurances. "I'll look forward to seeing what lands in his lap before sundown." He picked up the map. "Mind if I take this? I'm still learning my way around."

"Have at it!" I replied. "I'll meet you at Yvette's café around one for lunch?"

"I dunno," he said. "I hear her place has a 'no shirt, no shoes, no killers' policy."

"We'll see if she serves us anyway," I replied, giving him a wink.

He laughed. "See you then," he replied. He walked over to the door and then stopped with his hand on the handle. He turned back to me, a small, warm smile creeping across his mouth. "Thanks for doing all this, Paige. I don't know why you're doing it and I don't know how you got mixed up in it all, but I'm glad that you're in this with me. And I'm glad that we're working on this together. If I had to face this all alone... well..."

A rush of heat flared up in my cheeks, and I'm pretty sure I had turned as red as the cranberries in my orange cranberry scones. I don't take compliments too well. "Well. Of course. You know. I just... I just wanted to help. It's wrong what happened and I'm sorry that you have to go through all this. Plus, my behind is on the line, too."

He smiled at me once more as he left, but there was a knowing look in his eye. I didn't know that a bell ringing over the door could

send my heart into mushy palpitations.

I put on my apron and managed the morning rush. Granny showed up around 11 AM, her hair perfectly coiffed. She gave me a hug and looked over at the till. "Busy day?"

"Things are picking up," I replied. "I think we're on the verge of the tourist season."

"Glad to see that word is getting out." She picked up a duster and went into the shop, tidying up and putting things back in their proper place. Captain was sleeping on a leather chair by the window, next to a little sign encouraging people to tag their photos of him with our suggested tag of "#CaptaintheSuperCat."

"Granny?" I asked as she pattered around.

"Yes, darling?" she replied, not even looking up from the stack of books she was putting away.

"Did you know that Old Man Byron was about to buy the land under your shop?"

She froze, horrified, as if I had just announced I was pregnant from a one-night stand with a recently freed convict. "He WHAT?"

"I was over at Nate's last night, helping him sort through some paperwork. We discovered that he was buying up all of the land under Main Street and yours was next on his list."

"Well, that son of a—" She stopped herself. "Now, I'm not one to speak ill of the dead, but that BASTARD. I mean, I know he bought up half the town, but who in tarnation does he think he is, waltzing in and buying up land under MY shop?"

"It was the weirdest thing," I replied. "He bought up everyone on the other side of the ferry and was working his way down this way. Would you mind too much if I found out if anyone knew what he was doing?"

"Oh..." She seemed to be sorting through a whole list of things she wanted to say, but settled on an explosive, "I will most DEFINITELY help you find out who he was planning on swindling. In fact, I'll head down the street right now to start talking to people!"

"Someone needs to run the shop..." I reminded her.

"Oh, forget the shop," she replied, waving me away.

"I know your friends will swing by for their afternoon cup. Maybe if you could just casually talk to them when they come in and find out

what's what. I don't want to start some witch hunt. It could be that everyone who sold knew what he was up to...?"

"I can't imagine that," she replied with conviction.

"Just, let me ask around... quietly... and if I can't find anything out, then we'll send out the big guns."

She hitched her hip and placed the end of her feather duster in her pocket like a holster. "You just let me know when you're ready, because I'm locked and loaded."

Chapter Fourteen



Nate just happened to be at the end of the block as I came outside. His arms were full of shopping bags. I gave him a wave and he strolled over.

"How is it going?" I asked wondering what on earth he had bought.

He shrugged. "Slow going. For some reason, people aren't exactly the most forthcoming to an accused murderer who happens to be the nephew of Byron Edwards, and who also is nosing around for information on their business dealings." He lifted up his purchases. "I resorted to bribery."

"Did it work?"

"Not as well as I had hoped." He set down his bags and dug around for a jar. He read from the label. "Need some lavender honey sugar algae face scrub?"

He put it in my hand, and I took it with a laugh. "I see that you've been in to visit Wanda's souvenir shop."

"Let's just say that lady made sure all my holiday shopping was done *before* she would open up."

"They'll warm up to you," I assured him, tucking the jar into my purse.

"They better, otherwise you may have to free me from debtor's prison, too." He glanced over at my map as he fell into step beside me. "Where is your first stop?"

I pointed to a place at the far end of the road. "I think I'm going to start with Tim in the fish and tackle shop."

Nate looked at the quiet shop. "Really? It doesn't seem like he would have many visitors."

"A bait shop? On an island? You really are a city slicker, aren't you?" I teased before explaining my reasoning. "It was a sailor who threatened me. And if you're a sailor, odds are you're going to have to fish for dinner, at least every now and then. And where else are

you going to go? Plus, a fish and tackle shop is perfect for buying weapons that don't actually seem like weapons."

"How so?"

"Knives to gut fishes. Oars to knock people over the head with. Ropes to choke people with."

"Remind me never to tangle with you." Nate grimaced. "I'll leave you to it," he said and then gave me a little salute. "See you at the café in about an hour to reconnoiter?"

"Sounds perfect!" I replied, unable to keep the smile from spreading wide across my face.

"I'm going to go drop off my purchases at my place and hit a few more spots. See you soon, okay?"

I admired his retreating figure before turning back toward Tim's fishing shop. Investigating a murder that I may have been accused of should have put me in a much fouler mood, but it was hard when you had a partner who looked as good as Nate.

I tried to look casual as I walked over to the shop. The fish and tackle shop had a cluttered display window filled with old glass floats and thick nets. There were some pretty antique fishing lures someone had once hand-tied. I had a feeling that Tim's wife probably set up the window, but Tim took it upon himself to add the stuff that he thought was cool. He didn't quite understand that there was a rhyme and a reason to not putting every single interesting thing he offered in his shop on display.

I opened up the heavy wooden door and stepped inside. The planks of the floor were wide and if they ever had any polish on them, it had long worn off from all the feet traipsing to and fro.

"Hey, Tim!" I called out to the man at the far end of the shop, raising my hand in greeting.

"Well, hello there, Paige!" Tim called back. He was older, but still in crazy shape. While it was more likely because he ran regular deep-sea fishing trips, rumor had it he once served in the Coast Guard and kept up his physical fitness in case they ever needed him to leap into the fray. His hair was curly and reddish, his face was permanently burned. He had a regular rotation of plaid flannel shirts he wore no matter what the weather. He folded up the newspaper

he was reading, took off his brass-rimmed reading glasses, and put them on the counter. "What can I do you for today?"

"Oh..." I replied, glancing around the shop. "Thinking about putting together a new brochure of all the stuff in Seaside. A lot of tourists ask questions I have no answer for. Realized I'd never really come in to see what you have."

"Well, take your time! Look around! Make yourself at home." He got out his glasses and put them back on his face. "Let me know if I can answer any of your questions."

I picked up a jar of bait eggs and pretended I was super interested in them. "Isn't it crazy what's been taking place here on the island?"

He took his glasses off of his face again and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I know. You think you live in a quiet little village, but then suddenly have two murders in a week. What is our town coming to?"

"Did you know Old Man Byron much?" I asked as nonchalant as possible.

Tim gave out a disgusted grunt. "More than I would have liked."

"Really?" I asked. "What was he like?"

"Meanest, greediest, son of a biscuit eater, if you excuse my French, I ever did meet. Not that I would ever wish harm on any human creature, but some people just need killing."

I couldn't help a small, rueful laugh. "That's what I'm hearing from a lot of people around town."

"You'll be hard pressed to find a single person who liked that man. Here he was, one of the richest people in town, and all he wanted was more. Never did anything good with his money! All he did was collect it. It would have been different if he had used his power to do something good... like... building that community garden that Marnie is always talking about. Or a library for the kids. Or even donated to the flower fund for the geraniums on Main Street."

"He never did anything like that?" I said.

"Miserly freeloader." Tim launched into it, totally wound up. "I'd understand if he was saving up to buy a boat or something, but he never did anything. Just sat up in that miserable house of his, thinking his miserable thoughts, living his miserable life."

"Not exactly a ray of sunshine?"

"Not a bit."

I put down the eggs and picked up a packet of fishhooks. "So weird they found him in the water. Did he have any connection to the sea?"

Tim barked out a laugh. "Not that I know of. He never booked one of my excursions. I'd be surprised if he took the ferry to the mainland more than once a year. I think that's how Stan knew it was murder. Byron wouldn't have so much as gone down to the beach to admire a sunset. NO chance he would have even been there to get knocked down by a rogue wave."

"That's so weird," I said.

"What is?"

I hesitated. "There was a guy... he looked like a sailor... he stopped in my shop last night."

"What did he look like?" asked Tim, his ears pricking up with interest.

I gave him the description. Tim's face turned several shades of pale, and there was a decided shift to the temperature in the room.

"Do you know him?" I asked when I was done.

"No," said Tim, suddenly rushing from behind the counter. He began mopping his forehead nervously. "Listen, I just remembered I have a doctor's appointment and need to shut up shop for a couple hours. I'm afraid I'm going to have to move you out."

"Oh!" I replied, putting the fishing hooks back where I had found them. "Oh, that's fine."

"I'm so sorry," he said, completely distracted. "It is just this dentist appointment."

"I thought you said doctor?"

"Did I? I meant dentist. Slip of the tongue," he answered, putting a hand on my back and guiding me out the door. "Say hello to your grandmother for me. Tell her that my wife and I will invite you two over soon and get caught up. But for now, I really need to go."

"Sure!" I said, allowing myself to be pushed out of the door. "I'll interview you about your shop later."

The door shut behind me a split second after I stepped onto the threshold and Tim quickly flipped his sign to "Closed."

I wonder what it was about that sailor that had Tim so scared...

Chapter Fifteen



The next person on my list was Georgia. Georgia was an interesting woman. She was forty years old and already a grandmother several times over. I had heard her family had been here on the island since before it had been officially settled. Byron's family got off the boat and Georgia's family were there to help tow the dinghy in. Not that they were native to the island or anything. Her family just didn't like people very much, and so braved the treacherous waters in an effort to get away from everyone. Evidently, it didn't work.

Which made it even more surprising that someone who didn't like people as much as Georgia didn't like people would end up working the ticket booth for the ferry. I'm not sure if she actually paid that much attention to who came through her turnstile. I know she really liked it when somebody tried to sneak through without a ticket, and she had a chance to give them a good talking-to. She never messed with the police. She liked to handle all the trouble herself. In fact, she REALLY liked to handle all the trouble herself. One could even say that she sought out trouble just so she could handle it.

I was not looking forward to talking to her.

The ferry terminal was in the middle of Main Street. There was a small white booth built by the WPA in the 1930s. The now-crumbling concrete was occasionally plastered over in a vain attempt to get it looking a little more welcoming. Granny, in fact, had tried to organize a city council meeting on regular repair of the place, but no one else seemed concerned, so the matter was dropped.

Georgia sat behind a large glass window next to the turnstile, guarding the covered waiting room. We really didn't get that many people. It fit less than a couple hundred and it was only full during the summer. Rumor had it that Georgia had the volume on the speakers turned up so when she made an announcement, she could count how many people jumped. I guess if you're stuck in a glass

box selling tickets for only two ferry rides a day, you look for ways to amuse yourself.

I walked up to the window. Georgia had short, frizzy hair that was once strawberry-blonde, but now the roots were white and she kept forgetting to dye them to match. Her face was squashed. It would pretty much look the same if she was sitting there or had it pressed up against the glass. She wore round, red plastic glasses on her pug-like nose. Her teeth were crowded in her mouth and her face wore the permanent lines of a permanent scowl. Her chin disappeared into her multiple chins, and if she had a neck, the waddle folded over her chest so many times you couldn't see it.

"Hey, Georgia!" I waved as I walked up to the booth.

She licked a thick finger with her wrinkly tongue and then turned the page of the newspaper. She didn't bother looking up. "Yep?"

"How is it going?"

Again, she didn't bother looking up. "It was going just fine until you decided to swing by and interrupt my reading."

"Sorry," I apologized. And then realized I really didn't have anything I should be apologizing for. "Listen, some weird things have been going on here and I was just wondering..."

She cut me off, again, not looking up from her paper. "I said all the saying that I was going to be saying to Stan when he swung by. If you have questions, you should go talk to the cops."

I could tell my "just trying to write a new brochure" excuse wasn't going to fly with a person like her. "Well, I'm trying to help them out," I explained.

That made her put down her paper. "Good. Because they have too much to handle already on the island without you going around killing people."

My jaw dropped. I was absolutely taken aback. "I am not going around... killing people..."

"Well, that's just what a person like you would say, isn't it?"

"What would make you think I'm the sort of person who could kill someone?" I asked.

She squinted at me, and then licked her thumb and turned another page in the newspaper. "I see things. I know people."

I took a great big breath. "Well, then, maybe you can help me. I didn't kill anyone—"

"Mmm-hmmmm."

"—but I want to find out who did. I want to help Nate figure out who killed his uncle."

Georgia paused her reading again to look up, her frowny mouth now contorted into what I think was sadness. "That was a good man, he was."

"Byron?" I asked, just to clarify that she was indeed talking about the same guy that everyone else on the island hated.

"Totally misunderstood by these fools. He was just trying to look after us and everyone here was always so bent on shunning him and making him feel unwelcome. He was a good man."

"What did he do that was so good?" I asked, genuinely hoping there was something kind I could pass along to Nate. I felt like half of our conversations were him apologizing for being related to Byron.

But Georgia didn't have anything.

"I just can tell about people. I can look at a person and just know. He spoke plainly and what was on his mind instead of hiding it behind all sorts of fancy talk. He wasn't fake. He was real. And that is more than I can say about just about anyone on this island."

I took another breath, biting back all of the words other people had told me about their feelings about Byron. "Well... I'm glad you feel that way, because I think you're the only one who can help us."

"Darn tootin' I'm the only one who can help you!" she exclaimed, sticking her elbow in the middle of where she had been reading and leaning forward to point her finger at me. "It is my patriotic duty to pay attention to the comings and goings of the people on this island and, let me tell you, I've been paying attention to everyone coming and going for years."

"That is FANTASTIC!" I said. "Tell me! Have you noticed anyone suspicious? Anyone who came over but then didn't go back?"

"Nope," she replied, her energy expended in her one outburst. She went back to her paper.

"Well, what about a sailor?" I asked. "There was a sailor who came and talked to me. He seemed rather strange. Maybe like he

had seen some hard times."

"Oh, him? He wasn't suspicious. Just another man of the sea coming to say hello to the island."

I didn't waste my breath telling her what his "hello" entailed, namely threatening me. "When did he come over?"

"Don't remember."

"Did you see him leave?"

"Naw. I expect he has a boat here somewhere."

"Are you sure?" I pressed.

"Well, I don't remember seeing him come over and he didn't leave, so either he had a boat or else he is still here."

That simple sentence made my heart beat just a little bit faster. "Right." I chewed on the inside of my lip. I wasn't sure if I could trust anything that Georgia said, but I asked anyway, "Can you think of any reason why anyone would want Byron dead?"

"Oh, I can think of one..." Georgia muttered.

"What?" I asked.

"I'll take it to my grave."

"Lives may hang in the balance," I insisted.

She considered me with her rheumy eyes. "The thing is... he was always sweet on me."

That gave me pause. "What?"

She heaved a sigh, and I think she may have even wiped a tear from the edge of her cheek. "He never said anything, but we understood one another. Every time he bought a ticket, I was pretty sure that he was going to pop the question."

"Really?"

"And I'm pretty sure that the rest of the women on the island were jealous. Ours was a forbidden love, but his heart belonged to me and no one else. I'm pretty sure it was one of those 'if I can't have him, no one can' cases."

"Oh," I replied, so confused with how far off the rails this conversation was going, and whether Georgia was crazy, or if there really was something going on between her and Byron. I mean, I didn't know the guy... who knew? Maybe the whole reason he was such a recluse was that he needed to hide his feelings for her... or something...

"I'm pretty sure if Stan goes digging around a bit, he'll find out it was one of those busybodies who hangs out with your Granny that killed Byron."

That was the moment I knew she was crazy.

She sighed and rested her cheek upon her ham fist. "I think he actually went over to the mainland to buy a ring for me."

"When did he go over to the mainland?" I asked.

"Two days before he died," she replied. "He went over, looking very secretive and didn't even want to look me in the eye. And then when he came back, he just tucked his head down into his collar and wouldn't even acknowledge I was here. A man like that has secrets, and I know he knew that if he looked at me, he'd have ruined the surprise."

"Two days before he was killed, huh?" I mused, picking out the only bit of useful information from her ramblings. "Any chance you have a record... credit card records or something... of people who were on the ferry the day before he died?"

"I do," she replied. "But I'm not giving that up to you or no police unless they serve me with a warrant. Like it says in the Constitution."

"Right," I said with a sigh. "Well, thank you so much for your help."

"You're sitting here taking up all my time," she grumbled. "I'm going to have to cut short my break to make up for all the time you wasted."

I looked over my shoulder and up and down the street. There was no one anywhere around me who needed her help.

"Sorry about that," I apologized. "I'll be running along."

"And don't bother me again!" warned Georgia. "My love for Byron was between the two of us, and if I hear that word gets out, I'll know it was you! I'm pretty sure he left me everything he owns in that will, so you tell that nephew of his not to get too comfortable."

"I'll pass it along," I replied, my face frozen in what I hoped was a pleasant expression, and not the horror I was feeling at being in the presence of such a hateful woman.

She gave me a little half wave. "Get gone!"

And I did. And man, was I glad that interview was over.

Chapter Sixteen



My next stop was Jake's Tavern. It used to be that during the day, only the hard cases took up stools. But Jake had expanded his business model to include a small grill for burgers and fries, and it was a hit. Guess there was a market for folks wanting something a little more artery-clogging than the foodie joints up and down Main Street. I stepped in. Most of the tables were full and the entire place smelled of grease and meat. The jukebox was cranking out 80's hits and a rumbling din as people tried to talk over the music.

"Hey, Paige!" Jake called out. "That grandmother of yours run out of things for you to do? I've got some dirty dishes in the back you can wash up if you're looking for a job."

"Ha ha," I replied as I sat down at the bar.

He tossed his dishrag over his shoulder. "What can I get for you?"

"Just a Coke," I replied.

"A Coke? You came in here for a Coke," he chided. He poured the drink and put the large pint glass in front of me and shook his head. "If you wanted a Coke, you should have gone down to the soda fountain. This here is a bar."

My stomach growled, betraying the truth that the burgers were smelling better and better. "Okay, and also a burger." I'd just pretend I hadn't eaten when I met Nate in a few minutes.

"THAT'S what I'm talking about. Show that Yvette she's not the only place you can get a decent meat sandwich in this town." He went into the back. I could see him through the pass-through flipping the burger on to the grill. He shouted at me over the sound of the sizzling grease. "How are you doing, by the way? You had a pretty big scare the other night."

I stuck the straw into my cup and took a big mouthful. "I'm okay, but it isn't anything I'd like to repeat."

"Glad to hear it," Jake said, looking through the pass-through at me, making sure I caught his eye so that I understood he really cared. "Nobody should have to find something like that."

I shrugged. "I think even more..."

"Just a second!" he shouted. I could hear him plating up my burger. He walked around to the bar and put it in front of me. "Now, what was that you were saying?"

"I was just thinking that more upsetting than finding the body... I mean... it's like, burned into my skull..."

"Play some video games," he suggested.

"What?" I replied, completely confused.

"Yeah, there was this article I read. Play some video games with the sound on. It short-circuits your brain and stops you from looping over a bad situation again and again."

"Oh," I said. "That's really helpful. Thanks, I'll do that."

"Anytime," he replied, going back to wiping out his glasses.

"But, what I was saying was that—"

"Hey, Tim!" Jake shouted, waving at the bait shop owner I had just said goodbye to a few minutes ago.

Tim's face paled as he looked at me. He patted his pockets. "I left my wallet at my shop. I'll be right back!"

"I'll spot you, Tim! I know you're good for it!"

"No," said Tim, walking backward. "Thank you, but I think I need to go get my wallet right now. I'll be back. In a little while."

"I'll keep the griddle hot for you!" Jake said as Tim hurried out the door.

Tim's back pocket had the suspiciously square shape of a man's wallet.

"Do you think Tim is acting really strange?" I asked.

"Seems fine to me," said Jake. "But that could just be Tim. He's always been a little off, if you know what I mean." He circled his finger around his ear knowingly. He then folded up his arms and rested his elbows on the bar. "But I know you aren't crazy. You were saying something when he came in."

"It's nothing," I replied.

"No! Go on!"

There was just something about Jake that made me want to confide in him. "The worst thing about this all has been being accused of killing that guy myself."

Jake outright guffawed. "People think YOU were even CAPABLE of killing that guy?"

"RIGHT?" I said, feeling for the first time like someone understood how ludicrous it was. "I mean... Look at me. I wouldn't even know how to do it."

"And it was a big guy, too, wasn't it?" Jake asked.

"I actually have no idea," I replied. "I kind of ran away as soon as I realized I was stepping on his hand."

"Smart girl," Jake complimented.

"But then this sailor came into Granny's shop earlier today."

"A sailor?" repeated Jake, looking at me with some disbelief. "Next you're going to tell me stories about butlers killing people in drawing rooms with candlesticks."

"No, really! This crazy sailor guy! And the moment I mentioned it to Tim, he suddenly had to go running off like he had forgotten something. Just like he did now."

Jake looked at the door. "Huh. Some sailor has Tim all scared? What did the guy look like?"

I gave Jake the full rundown. By the time I was done, he gave a low whistle. "Listen, I'll stop by and see what's up with Tim. It could be nothing more than an unwanted relative or one of his wife's ex-boyfriends. Who knows?"

"I hope it is just something like that," I admitted.

"Do you think it might have been something more?"

"I don't know," I replied, suddenly realizing I had just unloaded all over Jake and forgotten I was supposed to be the one asking questions. "We — Byron's nephew and I — were looking through some of Byron's things and discovered he was buying up a lot of land under people's businesses. Did he ever approach you about stuff like that?" I asked.

Jake shook his head. "Nope. Never did. Although if that old bastard ever stepped across this threshold, I would have popped him in the nose."

"Why?" I asked, surprised by Jake's vehemence.

"Aw, he was trying to crowd Yvette out of her shop."

"Why was that?" I asked. "What did he have against that shop?"

"Maybe he thought he could squeeze Yvette out if he bought up everything under her and around her. He was a vindictive old bastard."

"Oh," I replied, realizing where some of the puzzle pieces might fit. "Someone said that this all started after Yvette's husband was arrested. That's when Byron started acting differently toward her."

"Don't know about that," said Jake. "Feels like things were never right with that guy."

"It seems like everyone hated him... I mean... everyone but Georgia." I leaned forward and whispered. "She told me she thought he was going to propose."

"GEORGIA!" Jake burst out with laughter. "Oh man... that is RICH! And makes so much sense. Birds of a feather. Him and GEORGIA!" He slapped his thigh. "Well, I never."

"Don't tell anyone!" I said to him. "She made me promise not to tell anyone."

"We bartenders keep secrets better than a priest in a confessional." He gave me a wink.

I realized he had done a really good job of getting me talking. "So, since you hear so many people talking, can you think of anyone who would want Byron dead? I mean, not just hypothetically?"

Jake thought for a few moments. "Did they get the autopsy report back yet?"

"Not yet," I replied.

"Well," said Jake. "If it was just a drowning, it would have had to have been someone who could have lured him to the edge of the bluff. I can't think of anyone who would have been able to do that... except..." Jake looked concerned.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Well, if what you are saying is true and he was after Yvette's shop... no. I don't even want to think such a thing. I've known Yvette for years. No."

I realized what he was saying, though. Everyone said Byron was after Yvette's business. He probably would have met her anywhere. Was she desperate enough to take a man by surprise and push him

off a cliff? Looking at Jake's face, I saw how much he didn't want to believe Yvette was capable of such a thing.

I offered up a hypothesis. "But if that's what happened, maybe he lured her out there. Maybe he attacked her and it was just self-defense."

Jake seemed relieved to have an alternate idea. "That could be what happened. I mean. If that's even what happened. We won't know until we see the autopsy report." He leaned on the counter. "Because if for some reason he was drugged or incapacitated, someone would have to have been strong enough to carry him to the bluff." Jake looked at the door. A shadow crossed over his face. "You don't think Tim... I mean... he's strong enough to haul in nets full of fish, and has landed some swordfish larger than a grown man..." He stopped himself again. "Now you've got ME going through crackpot conspiracies." He hadn't quite talked himself out of the thought, though. "But if the autopsy comes in, and Byron died from anything but drowning, someone pretty strong must have moved him."

I stood up.

"Hey! You barely touched your burger," he said. "You want me to box it up for you?"

"All this talk made me lose my appetite," I said.

"Sorry about that," he replied. I started to pull out my wallet but he waved me back. "Don't worry about it. On the house. You gave me some of the most fascinating conversation I'll have all day. Come back anytime!"

I smiled. "Thanks, Jake."

"Really, anytime," he reiterated, clearing my plate away. "Keep me updated on your sleuthing, Nancy Drew." He gave me a wink.

"Will do," I replied. "That's a promise!"

As I walked out the door, I realized it was almost time to meet Nate. And fortunately for the both of us, it was in Yvette's cafe. I had a few questions I wanted to ask her; and I wanted to see, too, if she was hiding any bruises. As much as Jake wanted to think the murderer might be Tim and not Yvette, there was a part of me that wondered if perhaps Jake was blinded by love.

Chapter Seventeen



Nate was sitting inside the cafe as I arrived. Yvette's place wholeheartedly embraced the shabby-chic, French country look. Everything was whitewashed shiplap. Pretty blackboards hung from the wall, featuring handwritten menus in colored chalk. There were booths by the window, and Nate had found a spot where we could have a good view of the sidewalk. He was looking at his menu, but the bell over Yvette's door tinkled merrily and he looked up. A great big smile crossed his face.

It felt good to see him so soon for me, too. I slid into the booth across from him. "How'd it go?" I asked.

"Very, very interesting," he said. He held up his hand to reveal a highly buffed manicure. "The ladies in the beauty shop are absolutely lovely, by the way."

I laughed. "They do good work."

"How about you?" he asked. "Did you have any success?"

"I think I did," I replied.

I stopped as Yvette came over. She pulled out her pad and a pencil. "And what will you two lovebirds be having to drink?"

"Oh... we're not..." Nate and I said in unison.

Yvette crossed her arms knowingly and smiled. "My point exactly." She gave us an obnoxious wink.

"Yvette?" I asked, figuring it was going to be really awkward if I didn't get the elephant in the room to put all the cards on the table. "You know Nate, right? Byron's nephew."

She didn't even bat an eye. "We haven't met. Now, what will you be having?" she asked.

I grabbed a coffee while Nate just had some water. Yvette's drip coffee was out of a pre-brewed pump pot, but I didn't want to seem like a snob.

"I'll give you a few more minutes to look things over and be back," she announced.

"Did she seem suspicious to you?" said Nate, leaning over the table to whisper at me.

"Not particularly...?" I replied.

"And THAT doesn't seem strange to you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Think about it. I'm the nephew of the most hated man in town, a man who hated her evidently, and she was totally fine. Didn't say, 'Oh, I'm so sorry for your loss' or 'Your uncle was a bastard' or anything. It should have been at least a little bit awkward."

"Maybe she's just trying to be polite...?" I offered.

Yvette rang up a couple of tourists and then fired up her espresso machine for their drinks. I glanced over and tried not to judge how long she allowed the shots to sit, as she pattered about, before adding them to the drinks. No wonder we had her beat on the coffee front.

"Just feels like there's something else going on," Nate mused.

I leaned across the table. "I just talked to Jake, and he was thinking there might be something funny going on with her, too."

"Huh," said Nate, staring over at her and squinting.

"We should figure out what we're going to order so that WE don't look suspicious," I replied.

By the time Yvette came back, we had both picked out the least murder-y things on the menu. I went for a salad. Nate went for the soup and sandwich combo. Hopefully, our choices seemed normal and not like we were there to find out if Yvette killed Nate's uncle.

While Yvette disappeared into the kitchen, I told Nate everything I had learned, including Tim's weird reaction when I mentioned the sailor and Georgia's belief that she was set to inherit all of Byron's belongings.

"She said they had a 'thing' between them?" Nate clarified. "That woman in the ferry booth had a 'thing' with my uncle?"

"That's the one. She said not to get too comfortable in Byron's house because she is sure he wanted to give it to her."

Nate laughed. "She can HAVE it. Seriously. I'm ready to just set fire to the place and call it a day."

"I'll let her know," I replied. I sipped on my tepid coffee. "Huh," I mused.

"Huh?" Nate repeated back at me.

"Well, I just wonder... if you DIDN'T want someone like Georgia noticing your comings and goings, I wonder where you might land instead."

"Huh," said Nate, sitting back and contemplating my question. "Well, we're on an island and there are plenty of beaches where you could come ashore... I mean... I guess?"

"There are a lot of cliffs," I said. "The water is pretty deep in some areas, but there would have to be some places."

He paused for another moment. "Do you think Johnny would know? I mean, surely, with all his surfing and diving, he must know this island better than anyone else."

"Maybe after lunch, we should see if he wants to take us out," I suggested. "It couldn't hurt. Maybe if that sailor came in on an actual boat, we'll see it somewhere."

"Sounds like a really good idea, Paige." Nate smiled. "You're pretty fantastic at this whole sleuthing business."

"That's just what Jake was telling me at the bar."

Yvette came out of the kitchen with our order. She set it down in front of us and then drifted politely away.

Nate bit into his sandwich, set it down, and then pointed at it. "This is good. I really hope that Yvette is not the murderer, because this is REALLY good."

As soon as she saw him finish chewing, she drifted back over. "How is everything over here?" she asked cheerfully. "Good?"

"EXCELLENT sandwich," Nate complimented as he wiped his mouth.

"I hope you're getting done what you need to get done," she replied. A muscle twitched in her jaw as she clenched her teeth. It said louder than words that her earlier politeness was skin deep. "Headed back to the mainland soon?"

I thought now was a good time for mending some fences. And maybe see if Yvette would talk to us over the fence, as it were. "Listen, Yvette. Nate was going through Byron's things and realized his uncle was buying up a lot of land. He wants to be able to sell it back to the shop owners for what his uncle bought it for."

Nate looked at me like I had gone mad. I figure that it is a gentleman's prerogative to change his mind and he could backtrack later. But if we could somehow convince Yvette that Nate wasn't the enemy, we stood a much better chance of getting people to loosen up and welcome Nate in. Maybe even to stop killing people.

I didn't want to say it, but I was thinking about that dead man I discovered.

What if the killer had seen Nate hanging out with me? What if he thought Nate was coming to see me at my cottage? It could have been an easy enough mistake to make in the dark. If someone killed his uncle, it made a lot of sense that they would have gone after the next of kin. MUCH more sense than them just killing a random stranger.

It was that flash of tension on Yvette's face that made me tell the lie. Maybe if we created the gossip that Nate wanted to do right... well... I just wanted to do what I could to make sure it wasn't Nate's body I stumbled across the next time.

And if Yvette was the killer, maybe I could convince her to give Nate a fair shake before taking him down.

It seemed to work.

Yvette seemed totally taken aback. "Oh!" she said. Her demeanor softened and she cautiously seemed to warm a bit toward him. "Well. That is a really nice thing for you to do, Nate," she said.

"Is it true that Byron bought your land?" I asked innocently. "We're just trying to make sure that everyone is accounted for. Things were a real mess up at the house."

Yvette's face flushed and she cast her eyes down at the ground. "No. No, he didn't buy my land. He wanted to. But he didn't." She smiled again, but this time much more real. "If there's anything I can do to help, let me know. If you want, I can ask around."

Now I was totally confused. Why had everyone told me that Byron had bought Yvette's land? On the map Nate and I looked at the night before, it said he owned it. How did she get the property back?

"That's such a relief to find out we're square with you," said Nate, sighing. "You make a mighty fine sandwich, and I would've been sad

if I couldn't come back for another one tomorrow."

She smiled again and this time it was a little bigger. Nate really knew how to work the charm, I thought.

"Well, you and I are right as rain, Nate. He very much wanted this place. In fact, sometimes he was a little pushy about it. But, I held firm."

"Why did he want your place so badly?" I asked. "I mean... not that I am into gossip, but I heard he REALLY wanted this place bad."

Yvette shrugged. "I just don't know. He was bent on it, though. He would stop by at all hours. Call me at home. Call my family at home..." Her mouth thinned into a line.

"That's AWFUL!" I said.

"I know he's your uncle," said Yvette to Nate, "But he wasn't always the kindest man to people. I'm glad to see that quality was not passed down through the family."

"I'll try my best to make up for any of the hardship he put this town through," said Nate. "And I mean that."

Yvette took the check off the table and ripped it up. "Listen. This lunch? On the house. On account of all that you've been through. You haven't exactly been welcomed into the community with open arms, and that was our mistake. You're always welcome here, Nate." She leaned forward. "You know. As long as you don't go trying to buy my place."

Nate stuck out his hand. "You have yourself a deal."

And then they shook on it.

Yvette went back to the counter as the bell over the door rang to alert her to new customers. Nate sat for a moment, smiling and watching her until he was sure she was fully engaged and then leaned over the table at me. "Um... thanks for making promises I may or may not be able to keep...?"

"I'm sorry!" I apologized. "It just came out. But look! You had someone who hated you and now she doesn't. That's a good start, right?"

Nate ran his fingers through his light brown hair. "Listen, I don't even know if I CAN keep that promise to everyone else. I mean, I would like to..."

You know, I had been a little judgmental about the way that Jake had been unable to believe Yvette could have done something wicked. But Nate's kneejerk stonewalling gave me a flash of realization that I might be guilty of the same sin. "Why couldn't you?"

"I was looking through his paperwork, and it is a LOT of money."

"Is that a problem?" I said. "I mean... he was buying it up from people for pennies on the dollar."

"But... The value of the land is SO much more."

"Which is why you should sell it back to them for the cost of what you got it for."

"I don't know how much he owed," Nate replied. "I don't know if he borrowed money from a bank or got some investors to buy it. I mean, it seems like something he would have had to do. How am I going to pay that back?"

"Nate, your uncle swindled a bunch of people out of their land. Land that sits under their shops and... I mean... these are people's lives. Their ONLY lives. It is not like they can go off and get another job somewhere."

"I just don't know WHY he did it yet," Nate said. "Let me figure out why, just to make sure I'm not getting us into hotter water than we already are. It could be there are contracts or loans or... I don't know what. Just... Let me figure where everything stands, first. It could be that he was in financial trouble. Maybe he bought it because he really needed to sell it. I just don't know."

"But if that's not the case, if things are free and clear, you'll sell it back to everyone at cost, right?"

Nate didn't say anything. Instead, he picked up his sandwich and bit into it guiltily.

"You mean, you might not?" I asked him.

He chewed and then swallowed, I think trying to buy himself time. "I just don't know, Paige."

"What do you mean you don't know?" I replied. "It seems like a really, really black-and-white issue of right and wrong."

"I just mean... I don't know."

I looked at Nate like I was seeing him for the very first time. "You know, you might have a little more of your uncle in you than I thought."

"C'mon, Paige. Don't say that..."

I got up. "I lost my appetite. I think I'm going to head on down to the beach and see what Johnny is up to."

"I'll come with you," said Nate, standing to join me.

I held up my hand. "No. I think you shouldn't. I'll talk to you later if I find out anything. You know, anything that won't cause you to lose a penny of your millions to the hardworking people of this town, who just happen to be the reason you have any money at all."

"PAIGE!" Nate called out after me as I stormed out the door.

I didn't care. I didn't care if everyone was staring at me. The fact he didn't categorically state that he was going to do everything in his power to set things right made me mad. Yes, I know he was in a complicated situation; but the more I thought about it, the more I wasn't cool with it. Did he think he could just walk into some shops and buy a couple presents and things would be fine? This was an entire town's livelihood his uncle had tried to screw up.

I slowed down as I neared the beach.

I had judged Jake for letting his feelings for Yvette get in the way of his objectivity. Was I guilty of the same thing? I mean, not that I thought Nate was a murderer. But maybe there were some other facets of his personality that his charm distracted me from noticing.

I walked over to the sand dune to the little blue dive shop seated next to the walkway. It wasn't much more than a glorified garage with a cash register. It rented out bikes and boards, as well as snorkel equipment and fins.

Johnny waved at me. "Yo! Paige!"

I waved back as I tripped on the sand toward him. "Hey, Johnny! How's it going?"

He shrugged, leaning against the counter. "Quiet."

"Want to close up early?" I asked. "Maybe take a private client out for a tour of the island?"

He looked around, mystified. "Who is the private client?"

I cleared my throat and raised my hand.

Johnny's face broke out into a wide grin. "Heck yeah!" He pulled the chain on the side of the wall that rolled down the front door and started locking up, securing the entire shop with a simple padlock. Anyone who might be interested in breaking in would have had no

problem. But even if they did, they'd be stuck on the island, and it's hard to miss someone trying to pawn a bunch of used air tanks and flippers.

I slid out of my Keds, using my toes to hold the heels down, and it felt so good to have my feet in the warm sand. Johnny hung the key around his neck. "Okay, so the boat is moored off of the dock. This is SO rad! We're like... skipping out... like school. Except, it's like... part of my job. Because you need a tour. Rad." He looked at me. "Why do you need a tour again? I mean... you like... live here and junk..."

"So, we... I mean... I was talking with Georgia—"

"That woman is SUCH a bummer."

"I know. But I talked to her—"

Johnny stopped me, folding up his arms and staring at me with intent focus. "Go on. I'm listening."

I took a deep breath and continued. "So I TALKED to her and she said she didn't see the sailor come in on the ferry."

Johnny's hands flew slowly from the side of his head as he mimed his brain exploding. "Oh man... you... like... you think he must have SAILED here? Whoa."

"Right. I was thinking he might have sailed here, but there are no new boats moored at the pier, so I'd like you to take me around the island so that I can see if there is a boat somewhere else."

"MAN, Paige. You are GOOD at this. I NEVER would have thought about doing something like that. Like... using a boat... to find a boat." Johnny stopped in his tracks to contemplate the enormity of it all. "It is, like, so meta..."

I patted Johnny on the back. "I know. We will have plenty of time to think about it on the boat. As we look for a boat."

"Riiiiight," he said.

We walked over to the dock and I slid my shoes back on my feet. No need to go catching tetanus from rusty nails. Johnny just had a little motor boat moored on the dock. It wasn't fancy. Pretty much a bathtub with an outboard attached, but it got him where he needed to go and, now, was going to get me where I needed to go, too.

I stepped in first, then Johnny untied the line and hopped in, too. We were at low tide and the weather was nice enough that the ride

wasn't too choppy. We began pattering along the coast and, without being able to help himself, Johnny launched into his sightseeing spiel that he usually reserved for tourists.

"And you can see from here the main street where the majority of our businesses are located."

"Johnny," I said, interrupting him. "I live here. You don't need to tell me the story."

Johnny nodded in understanding but then explained, "It helps me not get lost."

"Ah," I said, realizing that this was a valid argument for a guy like my friend. "Then, by all means, have at it."

Johnny launched back into his tour. He pointed up the bluffs at Byron's house. "And there is our founder's house. The family first arrived in 1866 and helped to settle our island."

"Stop just a second, Johnny!" I said.

"Okay," he replied, cutting off the motor. "But I may need to repeat that sentence, otherwise I'll forget."

"That's fine," I replied. "I just wanted to get a look at the bluff." I looked up at it. There were trees and scrub all along the top of the cliff. And at the base, were some massive rocks. "Johnny, do those rocks get submerged during high tide?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "I mean, you get some tidal pools and some wash, but most of the waves break much farther out."

I realized there was something fishy going on with the sea. "Johnny, if I pushed a body onto those rocks from above, the body would have stayed caught on the rocks, right? Because the water would have never reached it. But it didn't. Byron floated ashore."

"Huh," he said, looking up at the bluff. "Yeah. And, like, the tides probably wouldn't have carried it toward us anyway."

"What?" I asked.

"Yeah, the time of day when we found him? He would have gone that direction." He pointed in the opposite direction of where the beach was that we found Byron's body.

"Which means..." I mused, "that he wasn't pushed off that bluff."

Johnny stared at the cliff. "Whoa."

"So, why did they assume that he fell off the bluff and then drowned?" I wondered.

"Well, if someone beat him, it could have been like he had been dropped on the rocks," mused Johnny. "Or Stan and Fred just guessed. They do that sometimes."

"They won't figure out what killed Byron until the autopsy comes back," I replied, knowing pretty much for sure that Stan and Fred were making things up as they went along. "But there's no way he could have fallen from there."

"What do you think it all means?" asked Johnny.

"I think it means that someone took him somewhere else, and then tried to make it look like he fell from the bluff. But why would they do that?" I mused. "Why hide the murder site?"

"No, I meant, what do you think it all *means*?" He stared at the bluff, a faraway look in his eyes. "Death and life and us in the grand scheme of the cosmos?"

I did not have an answer for him.

"Johnny?" I said, pulling him back to the moment. "I think I'm ready for the rest of the tour."

"RIGHT!" he said. He fired the motor back up, settled into his seat, and got focused. "And there is our founder's house. The family first arrived in 1866 and helped to settle our island...."

As Johnny's voice droned on, my brain started churning through the implications if someone killed Byron and then moved the body to make it look like a potential accident. It could have happened anywhere. But wherever it actually took place, it meant that there was some sort of clue linking the murder to the murderer. Something that the murderer did not want anyone to know about or see.

We turned the corner and there was a boat sitting in the inlet. I couldn't believe that it was just sitting there. But then a movement on the shore caught my attention, and I tapped Johnny's arm. "Keep going."

"WHOA! NO! Isn't that, like, the boat you were looking for?" Johnny asked. "Shouldn't we, like, check it out or something?"

What I didn't want to tell Johnny was that I had seen a man who looked suspiciously like Tim, the keeper of the bait shop, step out onto the beach and then, as soon as he saw our boat, go back into the tree line.

"I'll explain later," I said. "Just keep going. But keep the boat in sight for as long as you can. I'd even really like to see who gets on the boat if possible."

"Right," said Johnny. "You know. We could, like, moor our boat on the beach and then, like, sneak up and see if something's there. You know, like Navy Seals."

"I think that's a great idea," I said. "Let's go do that."

Johnny swung the boat around, and as soon as we were out of sight, he cut off the motor and let the boat drift toward shore. We dragged it up the sand and then ran through the trees back to the beach. Just as I suspected. Tim was in a boat, heading toward the sailboat.

"What is he up to?" I mused.

"Who? Tim? Maybe someone forgot their fishing tackle and he is delivering it. A man's gotta eat," he commented, as if that explained everything.

A familiar face stepped onto the deck of the boat. "That's the sailor!" I hissed. "That's the one who threatened me!"

"WHOA! THAT guy?" asked Johnny.

The wheels in my brain started whirling. I sat back as I tried to sort everything out.

"Careful, hoss," Johnny said. "You look like you're about to break something." He poked my forehead. "And by 'something', I mean your brain."

I pushed his finger away. "Give me a second." The picture was starting to form. "Listen, what if Tim did it?"

"Tim? Naw, he's a good guy. He cuts off the lock to the dive shop all the time, for free, when I lose my keys."

"RIGHT! He's an expert at opening locks!"

"I dunno, Paige," Johnny replied, his voice full of doubt.

"He cuts padlocks. With his own two hands. He's SUPER strong. He doesn't even have a motor on his rowboat, Johnny. He rowed all the way out from shore. He could TOTALLY lift Byron's body and dump it somewhere."

"WHOA!" said Johnny.

"And then there is that whole deal with the sailor," I added. "That sailor threatened me. Why would he threaten me if he was here for

good reasons? And the moment I mentioned the sailor to Tim, he freaked out and came here. Those two are up to SOMETHING and they don't want anyone to know about it. Otherwise, they wouldn't have met here in secret, and the sailor would have moored at the pier. Something is really, really wrong Johnny. I feel like maybe we should let Stan know."

Johnny ran his two hands through his hair as he considered my words. "You think you got enough for the police?"

"Well..." I hemmed. "Not a ton, but maybe just enough to help them out, you know? Like, not enough to make an arrest, but if the autopsy comes back showing that Byron was beaten before he died, they'll have something to go on. At least enough to clear Nate's name and mine."

"I dunno..." said Johnny. "It seems like a mighty big stretch to me."

"I'm not saying that Tim did it. I'm just saying that he was acting really suspicious, and now he is out here with a guy who threatened me. That's not cool, Johnny. If there is a completely reasonable explanation, they can tell it to Stan." I got up and started walking back down toward the beach where we left the boat.

Johnny ran after me. "Wait up, Paige! Come on!"

My feet slid on the sand dunes as I hurried along, feeling an urgency. "Johnny, we need to get back to the village to talk to Stan and Fred."

He gave out a great big sigh. "But I didn't even get halfway through my tour before you decided you were done. If I don't give you the whole tour, my boss is gonna be pissed."

"Johnny, your boss is your dad and he's passed out on his couch right now."

"True," said Johnny. "But he is gonna be pissed."

"He's pissed no matter what you do, and he's probably going to be more upset that you DIDN'T get back sooner. He doesn't care if you finish or not."

Johnny ran his fingers through his hair nervously. "I dunno, Paige. He's always going on at me about not finishing what I started. And this is definitely not finishing what I started."

I reached out and grabbed Johnny's hand. "Listen, how about this. I'm not feeling well and need to go back to the village. Can you give me the rest of the tour later this week?"

"OH!" said Johnny. "So, I wouldn't be... like... not completing it. I would just be like... completing it later."

"EXACTLY!" I replied.

"Oh! Yeah. That should be fine!"

I let out a huge sigh of relief that I had been able to get Johnny's brain around my idea. Listen, Johnny was my best friend on the island. Always would be. But he sometimes had a rough time figuring things out.

We got back into the boat and pushed it out to sea. Had to go over a couple waves, but we made it. Johnny turned on the motor and we were off. By the time we got back to the village, it was nearly dinner time. I hoped that Stan or Fred were still in the police station. Sometimes they would just forward all the lines to their house phones and go home for the evening. I walked up to the front door, though, and it was unlocked. Stan was sitting at the front desk, spinning in circles. He took one look at me and pushed back in his rolling chair, dread covering his entire face.

"What do you want this time?" he asked.

"What I want," I informed him, "is to clear my name and Nate's name from all wrongdoing."

He folded his arms across his chest. "Oh? So you think that the best way to solve a murder is for the accused murderer to go out and provide an answer to the problem that doesn't involve her."

"Um... A) You're accusing me of murder so it does involve me. And B), look at me, Stan," I said, motioning to my scrawny legs hanging out of my cutoff shorts. "REALLY look at me. Do I *really* look like someone who could have killed that man I found?"

Stan shrugged. "Once you eliminate the probable, whatever is left, no matter how ludicrous, has to be the truth."

"But you haven't even eliminated the probable," I pointed out.

"Well, that's what I'm *trying* to do, but you keep riding my tail!" he grumbled at me.

"That's because you've accused me OF MURDERING SOMEONE." I took a deep breath. "Listen, I was in my shop, and

this sailor came in."

"Ah! The mysterious sailor! A stranger from another land who is guilty of EVERYTHING," said Stan, waving his fingers as if I had suggested that the murders had happened because of magic.

"NO!" I replied. "Except that he came in and *threatened* me. And then when I mentioned it to Tim, Tim got super weird. And when I was talking to Jake about it at the bar, he said that the only person who would have been strong enough to carry Byron's body would have been someone like Tim, who regularly wrestles in massive fish from the bottom of the ocean."

Stan rubbed his lower lip. "Huh. Jake said that."

I almost rolled my eyes that it took a guy like Jake to endorse what I had been trying to say since day one before Stan would consider taking it seriously. "Yeah. Jake said that. And then we talked to Georgia, and she said that no one by the sailor's description left by ferry. So, Johnny and I took out the boat and sure enough, there was a strange sailboat moored over near the rocks where Byron's body supposedly was pushed. But we looked, and there is no WAY his body would have been carried out to where Johnny and I were. That body was moved, Stan. It was moved to protect someone."

"Huh," said Stan. He stood up. "Well, if Georgia and Jake said that it is what happened..." He seemed to be thinking it through a bit. "Well, maybe I'll just bring Tim and this sailor in for questioning. Just to see what they have to say about things. The truth will always come out."

"That's ALL I'm asking," I replied. "Just talk to them."

"Right." He put his keys onto his belt loop. "But if I find out you're wasting my time..."

"Just talk to them, okay?"

"Johnny can show me this boat?"

"Yeah. He just took me there."

"Okay. I'll check it out." He looked at me, and there was this energy in the air. I couldn't quite figure out what it was. Was he going to thank me or something?

Turns out it was nothing.

He just leaned across the table and talked to me like I was an idiot. "You need to leave before I can go. I gotta lock up."

"Right," I said, heading for the door. "You're welcome, too."

I headed down to the coffee shop to take over Granny's shift. Even Captain could tell something wasn't right. I'm not sure who paces the shop more, me or the cat. I perched on a stool and stared out at the street, my leg bobbing up and down with nervous energy. What was going on?

I didn't have to wait too long, though, to get the answer.

Granny's friends Marnie and Wanda came scooching in just about an hour later.

"Is your Granny here?" asked Wanda. She was wearing a t-shirt that said, "If you can't say something nice, sit next to me," which seemed appropriate. Her eyes were lit up with the gossip she was holding in.

"She is!" I replied, standing up and walking over to the stairs leading up to Granny's apartment. I opened up the door and shouted up. "Granny! You have some visitors!"

I went back to mind the counter and pretend like I wasn't eavesdropping on the conversation.

Granny came down, dressed in a blue t-shirt that she had tied in the back to show off her figure. Coincidentally, it matched Wanda's hair almost perfectly. Granny's hair, however, was in rollers underneath a scarf, and she was filing away a rough edge from a red fingernail.

Marnie waved her over and leaned in, her gray braid falling over her shoulder and into her tea. "Did you hear?"

"Hear what?" asked Granny.

Marnie realized what had happened and pulled her hair out of her cup. She grabbed a handful of napkins and tried to soak out the liquid as I set about brewing her up a new cuppa. "Tim's been arrested for murder. BOTH of the murders. Can you believe it? TIM!"

Granny popped her gum in disbelief. "Tim? No. I've known Tim for YEARS! That man is the gentlest giant. Whatever made Stan think that TIM could possibly be capable of murder?"

"Well, evidently Johnny was showing some tourist around the island and saw Tim go onto this boat that was anchored in the cove. I mean, really. A boat that hasn't even been registered. Just ANCHORED. In the COVE. Well, Stan went out there and Tim was on the boat, and he kept shouting something about maritime law and such. But Stan just went right onto that boat, pretty as you please. And what do you think he found there?"

"What?" asked Granny.

"Nothing," said Marnie. She gratefully took the new tea from me.

"Can you believe it? NOTHING!" emphasized Wanda.

"But why did Stan arrest Tim for being on a boat?" asked Granny, confused as to where this all was going.

"I have no idea!" said Wanda. "Stan said something about new evidence that has been uncovered and Tim was a prime suspect and that he could come the easy way or the hard way, but it *certainly* wasn't going to look good in front of a judge if Stan reported he had found Tim trying to skip off the island on an illegal sailboat."

As she paused to take a breath, Granny jumped in. "Was the boat illegal?"

"Oh, you know Stan," said Wanda, brushing aside her question. "He likes to put the fear of God into a person to get them to admit something they might not want to admit at first."

All three of them nodded their heads in understanding.

"So, Tim went along the easy way. But what do you think could have made Stan point a finger at TIM?" asked Marnie conspiratorially.

"I just can't get over that he arrested TIM!" Granny said again. "I mean, I've known that man since high school, and that was a long time ago. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Well, he is AWFULLY good at descaling a fish..." said Wanda.

"And handling a knife..." added Marnie.

"And killing seafood..."

"A fish is a lot different than two men," said Granny.

"Just seems awfully suspicious, if you ask me," said Wanda. "I mean, why would a man agree to be arrested for murder, without an ounce of protest, if he wasn't guilty of SOMETHING?"

"I don't know, girls," said Granny, shaking her head dismissively and going back to filing her nails. "It just feels wrong."

Captain gave a meow of agreement from his pillow on the window ledge.

"Well," said Marnie, casting a knowing look Wanda's direction. "We will keep our ear to the ground and let you know if we hear anything. You do the same. Promise?"

Granny nodded. "Promise."

The ladies sashayed out of the coffee shop, leaving just Granny and me. She let out a huge sigh.

There was something about Granny thinking that Tim couldn't be capable of murder that made me wonder if maybe I hadn't been seeing things right. I picked up a rag and started wiping down the coffee machine nervously.

"Such a shame about Tim," I said, trying to be casual. "They say it is always the quiet ones."

Granny walked over and leaned against the counter, chewing her gum thoughtfully. "I just don't know, Paige. Something isn't right. It just couldn't be Tim."

"Well... if it wasn't him, who else could it have been?"

"I don't know. You've been the one snooping around town asking questions," she said with a knowing wink. "Who do YOU think it is?"

My face burned bright red.

She patted my hand. "Oh, don't worry. I know you are just trying to clear your name and Nate's name, but make sure you don't go pointing your finger at an innocent man just because you want to get out of a sticky situation. It makes you no better than the people who accused *you*."

"But don't you think that it is awfully suspicious? The boat? And Tim's about the only man in town strong enough to have carried a body... or two bodies... And everyone who came onto the island through the ferry is clear. When I told Tim about the sailor, he got really weird."

Granny stared out the window at the street, watching as the gossip of Tim was passed down the road. The other shopkeepers were looking over their shoulder in the direction of Tim's shop. "I don't know, Paige. It just doesn't feel right. I don't know what DOES

feel right, but it's not this." She rapped her knuckles on the counter. "You keep looking. There is something off. You make sure, and you make doubly sure, that Stan hasn't locked up that poor man for the wrong reasons."

I nodded. "I promise."

She grabbed a cookie from the pastry case and headed back toward her apartment. She lifted up the cookie. "I look forward to your report!"

I swiped my cloth one more time across the counter. Had I made a mistake? Was I wrong for thinking what I thought? Had I accused an innocent man? Granny's words were hitting home and I felt ashamed that I had gone to Stan without concrete proof. I was just so scared that Tim and that sailor might disappear.

I rested my chin on my fist and thought through everything I had learned. There seemed to be only one loose end. If Byron hadn't drowned, but instead had been killed and moved, someone needed to find the original murder site. I was pretty sure it wasn't going to be officers Stan and Fred. That assumed there WAS an original murder site. Maybe I was right about Tim, and this was a wild goose chase.

At that moment, Nate passed by the store window. He gave a furtive look up, but the moment he saw me looking at him, he cast his eyes down again.

It was worth making sure, for all of our sakes. It was worth making sure that I was right.

Chapter Eighteen



The next day came and went. Every local who came into the shop had an opinion they felt obliged to share with me on Tim's guilt or innocence. The more they talked, the worse I felt. You know things are bad when you start looking forward to the tourists.

Finally, my work day was over, and I could not fold my apron fast enough as Granny came down to take over.

"I'm headed out!" I said, loading up the bag with some leftovers.

"Have a nice afternoon!" she replied, blowing a bubble with her gum. "See you tomorrow!"

I went around the back of the shop and unlocked the powder blue beach cruiser, and placed the bag of goodies in the basket. I turned my bike in the direction of Nate's house. I know things weren't exactly right between us, but I needed his help to figure out if I had completely screwed up with Tim.

I pedaled up the hill and was breathing heavily by the time I reached his house. I noticed he had made some minor improvements. The yard had been cut back and there was a sprinkler trying to bring the dead grass back to life. I didn't have the heart to tell him there was more likelihood of his uncle coming back than that yard. I pushed open the gate and it didn't squeak. He had obviously oiled it. His uncle's old pickup truck was parked in the driveway, and it looked like it had just gotten a good wash. I walked up the path, tripping in my flip-flops on the uneven cobblestone, and knocked on the door. I waited for a few moments and then it opened.

Nate stood there. His face was awash with a mix of emotions. I think he was glad to see me, but also a little scared and nervous.

It was up to me to bridge this gap. I held out the bag. "Peace offering?"

He smiled, all tension disappearing as he took it from me. He opened up the bag and nodded. "There's not an international

conflict on this globe that could not be solved with your baked goods," he said.

"I'm totally a dealer in weapons of mass appetite destruction," I replied. I shifted on my feet and folded my arms. "I see you're fixing up the place!" I offered. "It looks nice."

"Well, just a little therapeutic work," he answered, rubbing the back of his neck. "Needed something to keep my mind off of things."

I realized he was talking about the way we left things yesterday. I wet my lips. "Listen, Nate," I said. "I was wondering..."

"Yes?" he replied, his head lifting quickly as if he was hoping for something.

I wasn't sure what I was ready to say about what was going on between us, though, so instead, I just lamely asked, "I was wondering if I could take a look at the maps of the land your uncle purchased."

Nate's face fell. "Sure," he replied. "They're this way." He motioned for me to come inside.

He walked me into the dining room and began digging around some file boxes. "I think I saw them here somewhere," he said. "Ah! Here they are!" He pulled out some folded paper and brought them over to me. He laid them out on the table for me to get a look at. "Turns out, he owns all of this land."

I squinted at the boundary lines. "I didn't know he bought the old fish cannery."

Nate shrugged. "Seems like he was buying up everything that was for sale. I even found some contracts saying that he hired a surveyor. I haven't been able to find any of the results of the survey, and the company won't be open until Monday, but I'll need to give them a call to find out if we owe them any money."

I shook my head. "Being the executor sucks."

"Completely," said Nate with a sigh.

"I'm sorry you have to sort all of this out," I said, hoping he'd also get the implied apology for not being understanding yesterday.

"Thanks," he replied.

I motioned to the maps. "Do you mind if I borrow these?"

My question seemed to make him really uncomfortable. "I'm not sure," he replied. "They're the only ones I have..."

I cut him off. This conversation wasn't going the way I wanted it to go. "What if you brought them with you?" I offered. "Maybe tomorrow you could go with me to these plots of land? I think we can figure out where most of these are. Maybe we can just look around and see if there is anything there, maybe some clues."

"Clues?" Nate asked. "What about Tim? I heard he is all but convicted of the crime."

Now it was my turn to be uncomfortable. "Nate, I might have done something really bad," I admitted.

"What?" he asked, leaning against the table with a concerned look.

"I might have jumped to some conclusions. And I might have gone to Stan with my suspicions. And he might have taken my suggestions for routes of investigation as an accusation that Tim was the murderer." I grimaced, bracing myself for Nate to lay into me about what an idiot I was.

But he didn't. Instead, he rested a hand on my arm and said, "It takes a big person to admit they might be wrong."

"I could be wrong," I admitted.

Nate smiled. "And that's what I love about you."

I knew he was just joking around, but the word hit my heart like an arrow. Did he just say that was what he loved about me? I felt the heat rising in my cheeks and tried to hide my smile as I looked down at all the maps.

"We'll either clear Tim's name or come up with evidence that he did it," Nate pronounced with finality.

I felt a wave of gratitude wash over me. No matter what, he was the one guy on the island who viscerally understood the tangled web of this whole mess. "I'm sorry we fought," I said.

"Me, too," he replied. And then he gave me a great, big, warm, make-up hug that was so wonderful I almost felt like I wanted to pick another fight just so he would have to hug me again.

Instead, after we pulled away, I decided to refocus our energy on the task at hand instead of the list of other things that hug made me want to do. I pointed to the town. "So, he bought up the parcels of land on Main Street, but it looks like he also purchased a bunch of land on the other side of the island. I wonder why?"

Nate looked closer. "It's on the open ocean side," he answered. "Perhaps he was planning on building a dock?"

"A dock?"

"Cruise ships maybe? The boats could come in, and then he could bus people to Main Street and build up hotels along the road...? I don't know," Nate guessed before giving up. He motioned to the mess of papers in the room. "I'm sure the answer is here somewhere, but I haven't found it yet. It doesn't mean it isn't here or even that I haven't seen it. But, I promise you I will find it, Paige."

I smiled. "Okay. I'll keep you to that promise."

"Shall we go tomorrow?" Nate asked, looking like maybe he was just as excited as me about our grand adventure. "Maybe early?"

"Sure! That sounds perfect!" I replied.

"Okay," he said. He reached over and tucked a stray wisp of hair behind my ear. "I'm glad that you came over. And I'm sorry I was a jerk."

"Me, too," I replied.

"You're sorry you're a jerk?" he laughed, thinking he had caught me in a logic blip.

"I am," I said. "And I'm also glad I came over."

His gaze lowered to my lips and lingered.

There's a moment when you're about to kiss someone for the very first time. You both want to cross that distance, you both have to decide who has the courage to say "yes."

And it turns out that Nate was braver than me. His lips touched mine lightly, tenderly. They were soft, yet firm. Just that gentle brush sent a rush of warmth up from my naked toes in their flip-flops to the tip-top of my ponytailed hair. His arm snaked around my waist and pulled me closer. All I wanted was for him to keep going, but instead, he stopped himself. Because he is a gentleman, the jerk.

His hand cupped my face and his thumb traced my jaw. "I should let you go," he murmured.

"Are you sure about that?" I asked.

He closed his eyes and nodded, but I could see that he was having a herculean battle to not pick up where we left off. As much as I wanted to fling my arms around his neck and tell him I had nowhere to be besides here with him, I respectfully disentangled

myself and stood back. I shyly smoothed my hair as he let out a deep exhale. He smiled, and I could see in his eyes he was already regretting breaking things off.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I reminded him.

"Yes," he replied. "We will pick up where we left off tomorrow." And I could see that he wasn't just referring to the job we had to do.

He walked me to the door and his hand lingered upon mine as I walked out. "Tomorrow," I reminded him.

"Tomorrow."

As I walked out of the front gate though, the fact of the matter is I'm a liar.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that from the moment I looked at the map, I had already decided I wasn't waiting until tomorrow to prove Tim's innocence. I didn't want to give the murderer another day to clear out whatever it was he or she was hiding. I was going to head out to the old cannery this afternoon. I looked back at the house and waved to Nate, who was standing in the window watching me.

The sooner I solved this mystery, the sooner we could figure out if that kiss had any future.

Chapter Nineteen



I grabbed my bike and headed off toward the other side of the island. It was about ten miles away and my guesstimate was it would take me about an hour. Fortunately, the land was fairly flat and deserted. There were a few houses out this direction, inhabited by summer folk, but the season was still early and most of the places looked vacant. People came out to hike and camp on the island, but most of those folks went through the paths that went around the island, where the view was better, as opposed to the boring road straight through. I didn't pass a single car as I pedaled.

It was turning into a hot and humid day, though, and I was sweating by the time I got to the far end. The sky was gray in the distance and it felt like we might get an afternoon thunderstorm.

And that was when I was in for a bit of a surprise. There was a concrete barrier across the road to the old cannery with a sign that read, "Closed." I mean, if Byron owned all of this land, there wasn't much sense in anyone using the road except him. But still...

I walked my bike behind the barrier. The road was covered in dead branches and pine needles and potholes. Maybe he had blocked off the road because it was in such bad shape, I thought. I propped my bike behind a tree. There was no chance of anyone seeing it and I wasn't sure the tires would survive the punishment I would inflict riding it. I stumbled my way along. Although it was light now, I realized I needed to make sure I wasn't out here when either the darkness or the rain fell.

The trees finally cleared and I found the expanse of the cannery before me. It was an old, wooden, rotted-out building. The cobblestone parking lot had been taken over by Mother Nature. The weeds cracked through and were as tall as my waist. I slapped my calf as something bit me. I made a mental note to check for ticks as soon as I got home. My shorts and flip-flops were an idiot idea.

There was a tall security fence around the building and metal bars on all the windows. There were great, big, orange hazard signs

warning of toxic chemicals. It's why the place never became a party spot. It's only fun and games until someone slips in a puddle and dissolves into a pile of goo in industrial waste.

Which is why it seemed really, really weird to see a construction trailer set up in one corner of the parking lot, and the fence to the building unlocked and open. I picked my way toward the trailer, not exactly sure what I'd say if someone was inside, but feeling like I should check it out before I went trespassing.

I knocked on the door. No one answered. I peered into the window. It looked like a standard office trailer. There was a conference table and plans tacked up on all the walls. Looked like it was outfitted with a computer and printer. I moved over to the next window, and there was a bed set up, and some men's clothes draped over a chair. No one was home.

I realized I had kind of been hoping someone would be there to stop me from what I was about to do next.

I crept toward the cannery building. The whole time, my brain kept telling me how stupid I was to head here without Nate. Why couldn't I have waited until tomorrow? Why had it seemed so urgent to come today?

I looked down at my phone. There were no bars. I guess demand for cell towers isn't particularly a high priority in the boonies. I couldn't even call Nate to tell him to meet me.

I stepped through the gate and into the building. The floor of the cannery was concrete, which was a small blessing. At least I didn't have to worry about falling through rotted out floorboards, although it seemed like a hearty sneeze might bring the whole place down around my ears.

The building still had a fishy, metallic, machine smell to it, even after all these years. It was two-stories tall and had a long, open floor plan, as they might say on HGTV. The squat, narrow windows ran along the top of the walls, but they were so covered in dirt, they barely let in any light. Old, rusted vats sat on one side of the room, and an old, rusted catwalk hung over them. Bits and pieces of the cannery's assembly line were still bolted to the ground and ran down the center of space.

I guess that Byron had decided to try to flip this flop, because there was a modern clipboard and tape measure sitting on the conveyer belt at the far end of the factory.

I carefully picked my way over, praying that the place was so abandoned even the rats had decided to pull up stakes and go where the pickings were less slim.

I looked down at the clipboard. There was nothing useful there. Not even letterhead. It was just a yellow legal pad with a bunch of measurements in handwriting so sloppy, I couldn't make heads or tails of it.

I put my hands on my hips and looked around. Where was the person that this clipboard belonged to? Had he decided to take a smoke break down at the beach?

And that's when something caught my eye.

Back in a dark corner, behind one of the large metal vats, was a lump. I opened up the flashlight app on my phone and tried to figure out what the lump was. It looked like a pile of dingy, green material.

I walked around it, and there was enough space between the vat and the wall for me to get a closer look.

It was something wrapped in a dusty, wool Army blanket.

I nudged it with my foot. It was something stiff and hard. I reached out and lifted up the corner.

And found myself stifling a scream.

It was the skeleton of a girl. Or at least, I assumed it was a girl. She had been dead a long time. There wasn't much left of her, except a short, red party dress that looked straight out of the 90s party scene.

I dropped the blanket and backed away. THAT'S what the guy in the trailer must have found. He came in here and discovered a body. But what had he done next? Where had he gone? And what was I supposed to do? Wrap up the body in the blanket and bring it with me back to the police station? Bury it? Leave it... just lying there... My heart was racing and I couldn't think straight. My thoughts were all white noise.

That's when I heard a sound outside. My heart flew into my mouth. Who would come out here? Maybe it was just an animal. I prayed it was the guy from the trailer. Unless he had killed the girl, in

which case, I hoped it wasn't him at all. Who would find their way down a closed-off road and just stumble into the cannery? I mean, yes, technically, that's what I did, but I had a reason to be here. I flipped off my flashlight and crouched down, watching the door.

I rested my head against the vat. I was so dumb coming out here alone. Anything could happen and no one would ever know. Heck, no one would even know I had been out here to look for me. Would they think that I had killed this woman?

I heard footsteps enter the cannery.

I glanced around the corner, feeling sick to my stomach. I ducked back, terrified. Standing out in middle of the cannery was Yvette. Yvette, the same woman who should have been minding her cafe. Yvette, the woman Byron hated, yet whose land had magically returned to her. Why was she here? Was this where Byron had been killed and then moved away from? Was she covering up her tracks, now that Tim was about to take the fall? Or had she worked with Tim?

I heard her shuffling around, and then I heard her footsteps coming my way. Had she seen me? Was she coming to deal out the same fate to me as she had dealt to Byron and the man outside my cottage... and maybe the girl I had found hidden behind the vat?

And then she stopped and started moving the other way.

There's a moment in everyone's life where they decide fight or flight. And being alone, out in the far end of the island by myself? I picked flight. I ran toward the door as fast as my legs could carry me.

"Who's there?" I heard Yvette call. And then I heard her shout, "PAIGE! PAIGE! GET BACK HERE!"

There was no way I was going back, not without police protection. It sounded like she was running after me. I doubled my speed.

And that's when all the humidity that had been building up all day decided to show what it was really made of. The skies opened up and the rain began pouring down. It was not a gentle summer rain. I cursed myself for not checking the weather before I left. I couldn't hear Yvette anymore, and I figured maybe I had lost her.

I stumbled back the general direction I thought the road was. And it was not the right direction. I ended up at the shore. I pulled

out my phone to try and work my GPS to find my way back to the road. And that's when my phone leaped out of my hand and landed in a puddle of water.

I picked it up, dripping. "Oh no..." I said. That was the last thing I needed, to destroy my phone before I could call for help. I knew if I turned it on now, it would be toast.

I took a deep breath. I was on an island. I might be lost, but all I had to do was turn around the other direction. I had my bearings. I plunged back into the tree line and just kept running in a straight line until I emerged on the other side. I followed along the edge of the forest and the field until I found the road, which led me to the closed road, and my bike. I kicked up the kickstand and headed toward town as fast as my legs could spin those pedals.

The journey back to Main Street seemed to take twice as long as before. I was cold and shivering and the rain was coming down in torrential sheets. I prayed that Yvette wouldn't pass me on the road. There was no place for me to hide aside from dropping my bike on the ground and crawling into the grass.

When I arrived, the police office was dark and shuttered. Granny was at bingo night. My cell phone didn't work. The only light was from Jake's Tavern. I wiped the raindrops from my eyes. He'd have a phone and he'd know Stan's phone number.

I walked up to the front door. The bar was completely empty. I guess on a rainy night, people prefer to stay indoors rather than stumble down the road for a game of darts. But I could not have been more thankful. Jake was washing out a glass when he saw me come in.

"What the heck happened to you?" he asked, racing around the bar. "Wait here. I think I may have a jacket someone left in the lost and found." He was back a few minutes later with a black coat that smelled of old beer and cigarette smoke. I didn't even care. I slid into it and it felt like heaven.

"Here! Sit down! Is there anything I can get you?" he asked.

"Something hot?" I replied.

"Of COURSE!" He grabbed the coffee pot and poured a cup into a sturdy white mug. "It's no Bitter Beans, but it'll have to do."

I wrapped my hands around the cup and felt a million times better already. I tried to ignore the fact that my hands were trembling.

"Thank you," I said. "I can't stop shivering."

"I bet that rainstorm chilled you to the bone," he said, "Your lips are blue. You should get home. What were you doing out there?"

"I think I may have found where Byron was murdered."

He leaned forward, suddenly even more concerned. "What?"

"It was out on the other side of the island. The cannery. And... I think I may have... I think I may have found something else."

"Seems like you need a little something that will warm you a little better than that coffee," he said. He reached below the counter and pulled out a bottle of whiskey, giving me a shot. He put it on the table in front of me. "Are you okay?"

I knocked it back and enjoyed the burning tingle as it spread out through my body. "I think I need to call the police..." I replied.

"What did you see?"

"Oh Jake," I said. I started trembling even more. My eyes filled up with tears as the shock and fear wore off and the emotions of what I had seen rushed over me. "It was awful."

He gave me a squeeze. "Listen, Stan will have closed up the jailhouse and gone home to bed. Half the time, he turns off his ringer. You go home. Get into some dry clothes. I'll head over and pick him up. Bring him to your place. Okay?"

I smiled in relief. It felt so good to have someone else step in to take care of things. "You have yourself a deal," I replied, getting off the bar stool.

"I'll see you soon!" said Jake, closing up the till as I walked toward the door.

It's funny, I felt a little woozier than I should have from that little splash of whiskey that Jake had given me. The whole world seemed like it was spinning. I got to my bike and tried to put my feet on the pedals. They kept slipping off. I knew it was just that I was exhausted, and chilled to my core, and in shock, and I hadn't eaten all day. I rode my bike up the hill, but couldn't seem to keep the wheels facing in the right direction. I finally just got off and started stumbling to the door. I didn't even bother dragging the bike beside me. I let it drop into the grass, and figured I'd pick it up tomorrow.

It felt like the world was turning into a tunnel, and all I could see was the faintest pinprick of light from my cottage in the distance. I stumbled and fell to the ground. The rock gashing my knee brought me out of the stupor for just a second. I just needed to get into the cottage.

I put my hand on the door, but it kept slipping off the knob. Finally, I figured out how to work the key in the lock, and the door swung open. I fell face first onto the bed, and then all was dark.

I woke, aware that someone was in the room. I pried open my eyes. They felt like they had been glued shut. There was a part of me that was telling me all was fine, that I should just ignore it and go to sleep. There was another part of me that was screaming to get up.

"Hello?" I croaked.

"Hey, Paige."

"Jake?" I asked. It sounded like his voice, but I couldn't see him. The door to the cottage was open, and he was standing in silhouette. "Did you get Stan?"

"No, I didn't get Stan," he replied. I felt him sit on the corner of my bed. "Tell me, Paige, what did you find at the cannery?"

"A body," I murmured as the darkness threatened to engulf me again. "I found the body of a girl."

"Oh Paige," replied Jake. It sounded like he was very sad. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

I suddenly felt a pillow over my face, and I couldn't breathe. I could feel Jake trying to hold me still. I kicked and thrashed and somehow managed to get away from him.

I crouched on the ground, my head banging. I realized Jake had put something in my drink. "Why are you doing this, Jake? Why?"

He shook his head as started coming toward me. "I wish you hadn't gone there. I wish you hadn't found that girl. I really liked you, Paige. I felt like you had such a bright future."

"What are you talking about?" I croaked. My head was so fuzzy and my mouth felt like it was full of cotton. My body felt so heavy. "Did you kill her? Did you kill her, Jake?"

"I didn't want to," he said coming around the bed with the pillow. "Just like I don't want to kill you. But sometimes we have to do

things we don't like." And then he lunged again. He had me pinned between the bed and the wall. There was no place for me to wiggle away. There was no place for me to go.

And then suddenly I felt Jake's body lurch, and the pressure lifted. I felt someone pushing Jake off of me. I heard the sound of a struggle, and a loud crash, and then silence.

"Paige? Paige, are you okay?"

The pillow lifted and there was Nate, standing there looking at me. "Oh, Nate!" I blubbered, unable to get my lips and tongue to work properly, and the tears and snot making it even worse.

Nate gathered me up into his arms and held me, simultaneously pulling out his cell phone and dialing someone. "I'm calling for help," he explained. He said something into the receiver, but I was having a hard time hanging onto consciousness.

I felt him put my arm around his neck and lift me. Within moments, he helped me out of the cottage. The blast of cold air brought me back to consciousness.

"Stan is on his way," Nate said, putting my feet on the ground. "It's all going to be okay, Paige."

I nestled into his shirt. I felt my knees go to rubber, and if I hadn't had my arms wrapped around him, I would have fallen to the ground.

He pushed back the hair from my face, and I guess whatever he saw there was bad.

"Paige?" His voice was filled with concern.

"Jake put something in my drink," I slurred, unable to keep my head straight.

Nate swung his arms beneath my knees. I felt my body bouncing as he ran. I pried my eyes open and saw his uncle's car in front of us.

"I need you to stay with me, Paige," Nate said as he opened the passenger's door. "I need you to stay awake."

"But it would feel so good to go to sleep," I replied, my eyelids becoming unbelievably heavy.

"But if you go to sleep, I might not see you anymore," Nate replied. I heard the door next to me shut, and then the driver's side door open. I felt the bench seat shift as Nate climbed in and revved the engine of the old truck. "You still with me? Stay awake! I want

to see your eyes open, Paige. I want to see you! If I didn't see you anymore, that would make me sad."

"Okay," I replied, sleepily. "How sad would it make you?"

"Very, very sad," he replied. He reached out and grabbed my hand as he drove with the other. "See, I was planning this big date for you and me, Paige. I was planning on this great day out. I was going to take you to the beach and put together a picnic. Just you and me. Oh, Paige, don't leave me now..."

But I didn't have much say in the matter.

Chapter Twenty



The next thing I knew I was lying in a hospital bed. There were IVs sticking in my arms and a circle of familiar faces around my bed. I weakly opened my eyes and tried to smile.

"I had the strangest dream, Auntie Em, but there's no place like home," I croaked, my voice not coming out much louder than a whisper.

Nate flung his arms across my shoulders and pressed his cheek against mine.

"He wouldn't leave your side," said Granny, sitting on the foot of my bed. "This young man saved your life."

Johnny gave him a double thumbs up.

I tried to moisten my dry mouth, which Nate seemed to notice, because he picked up a cup of water and held the straw for me until I could get a good gulp. I relaxed my head on my pillow, unable to hold myself up for any longer. "All I remember is Nate putting me into the car after Jake attacked me. What happened?"

"Well," said Granny, gazing with pride and approval at Nate. "After Nate knocked Jake out cold, he drove you here to the medical center, where a team of Seaside's finest have been detoxing your blood like an O.D. addict." She gave a nod to Johnny. "Johnny was particularly helpful in identifying what Jake slipped in your drink."

Johnny gave me a little salute. "Happy to be of service."

"Nate called Stan, and Stan went up to the cottage and found Jake unconscious on the floor just like Nate told him," Granny continued. "Stan's an idiot, but even he could see that Jake hadn't been there on a social call. Stan made the arrest, and we've just been waiting for you to wake up long enough to tell us exactly what happened."

Nate put his hand in mine and I gave it a grateful squeeze. I was still confused, though. "But why did you come up to my cottage in the

first place, Nate? We weren't supposed to get together until tomorrow."

"Well," he replied, rubbing his jaw, "I had been thinking about everything that we talked about... my uncle and the land and... I just thought that maybe we should get some stuff on record." He looked at me guiltily. Even in my state, I could tell something was weighing heavily on his heart. "I thought I also might see what Tim had to say. And... this whole time you've been here at the hospital, all I've been able to think is that if I had called you and told you I was going to talk to Tim, maybe you wouldn't have gone to the cannery. Maybe I could have stopped this." His shoulders slumped. "I'm so sorry, Paige. I should have told you. I should have let you know what I was doing. This is all my fault and I'm so sorry."

I shushed him, feeling so awful that he had been carrying around a sense of responsibility for my, frankly, idiotic actions. "I should have told you. I headed over right after I left you," I tried to reassure him. "I was out of range. You wouldn't have been able to reach me even if you tried. I was the jerk."

I don't know if he accepted what I was saying. I think it was going to take him a little longer to come to peace with what happened and to understand he had nothing to feel guilty about. I decided I was going to have to heal up fast to prove to him it was going to be all right.

He re-gathered his thoughts and continued his story. "The office was closed, but that's when I ran into Yvette in the parking lot. She was so upset. She said she went out hiking and she likes to park where the road is closed off by the old cannery and head out to the beach, but then she saw your bike. She said that she saw the door to the old cannery was open and wondered what was going on. She went inside and you were in there, but something really spooked you and you took off in the rain toward the shore. She went to see what it was and... well... she found what had frightened you."

"Stan says it was a girl who had gone missing at least fifteen years ago," Granny explained gently.

"We couldn't find Stan or Fred anywhere," Nate said. "That's why I didn't immediately drive out to the cannery. It was all happening so fast, and I couldn't abandon Yvette. I thought we'd find Stan or Fred

quickly; by then, you'd be back, or they could show me how to get there."

"Stan was with me in the dive shop," Johnny piped up. "I was supposed to be taking him out to the sailor's boat in the cove, but the rain nixed the cruise. Total bummer. But, that meant we were around and stuff. Isn't it crazy how everything is in divine order in the universe?" He fell into silence as he became completely mesmerized by the drip of my IV bag.

"By the time we reached Stan," Nate continued, "you still hadn't shown up. I couldn't shake the feeling that something was really wrong. So, I went to your place. And that's when I found Jake trying to kill you."

"Jake's in the prison now, but he's not talking. We know he's tied up to that girl somehow, but the murder site is so old, there's no proof," added Granny.

At least I could help there. "He said that he hated killing her, just like hated that he was going to have to kill me," I replied.

"Whelp, that seems like enough," Johnny logic-ed out.

"Maybe I can help, too," said a voice.

We all turned to look as a man pushed back the curtain separating my hospital bed from the rest of the room. It was the sailor who had come into the shop and threatened me. Only, now he was cleaned up and looking a million times less scary.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

My brain was having a really tough time figuring out why he was here. I could tell everyone else felt the same way. "Better," I replied. "I'm feeling better... thanks for asking..." I looked at him in confusion. "Sorry to be rude, but exactly who are you and why are you here?"

The sailor stuck his hands in his pockets and lowered his head to stare at the ground. "My name is Allen," he mumbled. "I'm a... friend... of Tim's."

"Ah, well, now that we've got *that* cleared up," said Granny sarcastically, folding her arms across her chest and popping her gum. "It *all* makes sense now."

Her challenge seemed to give him the nudge he needed, because he held out his hands in a sign for patience as he

explained. "Ten years ago, I was on this island. I knew Jake from college. We were roommates. I sailed out one night and was at Jake's bar and there was this party girl... He seemed really into her. She played fast and loose, so I didn't think much when she went home with him. But... she went over to Jake's place and... I don't know exactly what happened, but I got a call that night that somehow he killed her. He swore it was an accident and talked me into helping him hide her body at the old cannery." He took a deep gulp of air and stared up at the ceiling tiles. "I know I should have called the police, but instead I got in my boat and left. I mean, it was Jake. He was my friend." He shook his head, as if the next statement was more towards the internal argument he had been having with himself over the years, rather than to us. "But it turns out you can't run from your troubles, no matter how far across the globe you sail. I joined the coast guard, thinking I might be able to do some good. That's how I got to know Tim, and we talked a lot about a lot of things. I've been doing a lot of rethinking of my life and came back to set things right. I almost ran out of courage. But Tim has been walking me through a lot of these changes. He told me that if I did it, I could hold my head high wherever I go. He said the only way to get through it is to face it." He turned to each of us earnestly, as if he really needed to understand his sincerity and intentions. "I was going to go to Stan and confess as soon as I got to town, I swear; but then he threw Tim into the slammer for killing that man, and I got scared." His eyes rested on me, and they were full of apology. "But I was even more scared when I found out Jake tried to kill you. I could have prevented all of this. That's a cold, hard truth I'll have to live with. So, I just wanted to stop by to say I'm sorry. And I am. I'm sorry."

As soon as he finished, it was like a huge weight had been taken off his shoulders. Granny looked from me to him, checking to see what I thought of his story. I gave her a little nod of acceptance.

She reached out and patted his hand. "You done right."

He let out a huge exhale. "I just came back from my meeting with Stan," he continued. "He let me come here and explain. Turns out that if you're willing to testify against a murderer, they sometimes go a little easier on you." He gave me a grim smile. He reached behind

the curtain and brought out a silver, mylar balloon with a yellow smiley face on it and handed it to me. "I hope you get better soon."

He turned to leave, but I called out. "Wait!" He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. "Thanks," I said. "Thank you for setting the story right."

He nodded. "It's my responsibility now." And then he walked out and pulled the curtain shut behind him.

"Hey!" said Johnny, looking like he was noodling through a really big thought. "What if Jake killed Old Man Byron because Old Man Byron found the body of the dead girl when he went over to the cannery after he bought it. And then that other guy who was killed must've been a surveyor or something and must have stumbled across the same thing. So, Jake killed him, too. Yeah. I bet that's it."

I rested my head against the pillow. Johnny always got the right end of things. "I think you are an absolute genius, Johnny."

Chapter Twenty-One



"Are you ready for this?" Nate asked, gazing into my eyes. I wet my lips. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Yvette put the double scoop hot fudge sundae in front of us and presented us with two long spoons. We dipped into ooey-gooey goodness and I couldn't help the moan of pleasure that came out of my mouth. I had been released from the hospital yesterday and this was the first non-broth, non-bland food to hit my tongue in far too many days.

"This is SO GOOD," I said to Yvette.

She smiled. "I made it special just for the two of you. I'm going to call it the Superhero Sundae." She rested her coffee carafe on the table and gazed out of the window. Finally, she shared her thoughts with us. "I'm grateful you uncovered the truth. I never would have guessed about Jake. Just doesn't even seem real, that the man I was dating could be capable of such a thing." She paused and then gave a little laugh. "Guess my picker is still broken."

"Did you ever find out what your ex did that made Byron so mad?" I asked.

"He was stealing from both of us. He took Byron's money for the resort and my money. He was supposed to use it all to buy up the land on Main Street, but it turns out that uncle of yours, Nate, did something to piss off my ex. When my ex bought up all the land under all the shops here on Main Street, under my café? He didn't put the title under Byron's name. He put it under mine. And that's why your uncle didn't own it, Nate, and why he came after me."

"That's amazing!" I said, in shock.

"Seems Byron had a bad picker, too," she said apologetically to Nate. "But it turns out mine isn't as bad as I thought." She smiled. "My ex was a sleazy, slimy, no-good idiot, but he was my idiot." She poured some coffee in our cups. "I sure do appreciate you letting the rest of the people in the town buy back their land at cost from you, Nate."

Nate looked at me with a strange smile. "I was reminded that the legacy of what my family created lives in the people of this town. It belongs to you all. And that's worth fighting for."

She rubbed his shoulder and looked like she might have been a little teary. Instead, she cleared her throat and said, "I should see to my other customers. Gotta make sure I stay in business long enough to make this investment worthwhile."

She wandered over to the counter. Nate dipped his spoon into the ice cream, his eyes never leaving me.

"What?" I asked, fighting him for a glob of the warm chocolaty sauce.

"Just thinking how different my life would be without you."

"Besides rotting in jail?" I joked.

"I'd be trying to dig my way out of Stan's correctional facility with a spoon," he laughed. He then got serious and reached across the table to grip my hand. "You scared the heck out of me, Paige. I don't like that feeling... that feeling that maybe you weren't going to be there tomorrow or the next day. I don't ever want to feel that way again."

"Well," I said. "Maybe you should do something about that."

"I was thinking..." he started and then stopped himself, as if he was wrestling with deciding how to string together the words. "I was thinking maybe I would stay."

"What?" I asked.

"Uncle Byron's house needs a lot of work. And his land needs to be managed. And... I was just thinking... maybe I would stay. You know. At least for the rest of the summer. And... for however long you might be around." He glanced up at me, checking in to see what my reaction would be.

"Oh," I said, putting my spoon down. I thought about how just a few weeks ago, it seemed like coming to work in my granny's shop was the worst summer I could ever have. I had these dreams of the excitement and romance of Paris. But sitting across from me was a guy who made me feel all the things I thought I would have to travel halfway across the globe to feel. And all I had to do was to travel across the distance of the table.

So that's what I did.

I got up and sat next to him on the red Naugahyde bench seat. I leaned my head against his shoulder. He was warm and comforting and solid and real. "I would like that. Very much."

"You would?" he asked.

I lifted up my head to gaze into his deep brown eyes. They twinkled at me, so gentle and tender.

"Very much," I said again.

He smiled and leaned down, giving me a soft kiss that held promises of the days to come.

It was going to be a great summer.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Agatha Ball's mother used to have to bribe her to study with the promise of a new copy of Nancy Drew, Trixie Beldon, or Linda Craig mystery. Now grown, there is nothing Agatha enjoys as much as a quiet evening in, curled up on the couch with a hot cup of coffee, watching a British mystery on the telly.

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