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# COLLEEN COBLE

RICK ACKER

I THINK

I WAS

MURDERED

A NOVEL

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**COLLEEN COBLE**  
**RICK ACKER**



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*I Think I Was Murdered*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

[[CIP TO COME]]

*Printed in the United States of America*

\$PrintCode

*For our amazing team at HarperCollins Christian Publishing who came alongside us in huge ways to get this book to market faster than usual. Special thanks to editor and publisher Amanda Bostic who caught our vision immediately and gave the project wings.*





## PROLOGUE



IN 2009 SATOSHI NAKAMOTO LAID AN egg. Jason Foster had found it two weeks ago, and he'd been running for his life ever since.

Jason took his eyes off the dark, narrow road for a second and glanced at the Satoshi egg, which lay on the leather passenger seat of his Bentley Continental GT. It didn't look like much: a dusty, discolored plastic Easter egg in a baggie. But it was one of a kind—the first Satoshi egg that had ever been found, and the USB drive inside had treasure seekers salivating. His job as a structural engineer had uncovered the egg in a place no one else could look.

He had hunted the fabled Satoshi eggs for over a decade. They were the stuff of Silicon Valley legend, and he hadn't even been sure they existed. Now that he finally had one, he couldn't wait to get rid of it.

A brief gleam in his rearview mirror yanked his attention back to the road and spiked his pulse. A second later, the road curved and the light vanished. Were those headlights? Was someone following him? Only one other person knew about his trip to North Haven, and they would be waiting for him there.

The gleam reappeared and he got a better look at it. Definitely headlights. But there was no reason to panic. Why should he expect to be the only driver on the road, even at this hour? All-night truckers sometimes took this route, especially if they were picking up logs at one of the surviving timber mills. Or maybe someone was driving to work for the graveyard shift at a gas station or a roadside diner. There were dozens of perfectly plausible possibilities. Still, he pushed down the accelerator a little farther.

He went over the top of a hill and the landscape hid the lights again. Redwoods loomed out of the mist on the right side of the two-lane road, like pillars holding up the unseen sky. On the left, the Pacific crashed against the base of a low cliff. Patches of fog drifted in from Humboldt Bay, suddenly cutting visibility to near zero at random intervals.

The headlights reappeared as the other car crested the hill. And they were closer now. Jason pressed the accelerator down as far as he dared. The powerful engine responded and the car leaped forward.

Jason's tires whined as he struggled to stay in his lane. The Bentley's superb steering and suspension kept him from losing control and flying off the road, but only barely. Sweat trickled down his forehead and he breathed through gritted teeth. He flicked a glance at the rearview mirror again. Somehow the headlights were still getting closer. Whoever was behind the wheel of the other car must be a professional driver or incredibly reckless.

The road started a long climb. The Pacific fell away and enormous trees flanked the road on both sides. He'd just entered the Cathedral, a craggy stand of old-growth redwoods

a few miles from North Haven. He relaxed just a fraction. In ten minutes, he'd be in town. He focused on the road's hairpin turns and switchbacks, trying to ignore the glimpses of headlights that flashed between the huge ancient trunks.

The Pulpit—the massive granite outcrop in the heart of the Cathedral—reared in front of him, and he knew he had one more treacherous turn at its top. He slowed to take it—and a silver sports car roared by, passing him on the inside of the turn.

Jason yanked the wheel to avoid a crash, but the other car moved in front of him and slammed on the brakes. He swerved to avoid it.

He managed to slip past the other car, but there wasn't enough room for his Bentley on the narrow shoulder. The right wheels slipped off the side with a thunk. The car's undercarriage ground over the rock for a few feet. Then, with agonizing slowness, the car tipped into the abyss.

Jason was weightless. The night world revolved outside his window—stars, trees, rock, stars, trees, rock. The Satoshi egg floated in front of him, drifting across the passenger compartment of the car.

Regret spun through his head—his beautiful Katrina needed him, but he was unable to stop his descent. And then the tumbled granite of the forest floor reached up and smashed him like a giant's fist.

## CHAPTER 1



THE SECOND WORST DAY OF KATRINA Foster's life began on a beautiful September morning with the highly anticipated first coffee from Palo Alto Coffee House. Hot cup in hand, she got in her blue Tesla and drove toward her office at Talk, Inc., an up-and-coming tech company with an innovative AI app. Coffee was a necessity to face the barrage of legal questions she often fielded on Mondays.

She was within sight of the building when she took the first sip of her matcha and shuddered. Had the new barista used skim milk instead of almond milk? It was truly terrible. She set it in the drink holder.

A text dinged on her phone, and she fumbled in her purse. It dinged a second time before she managed to close her fingers around the phone. The message was from her mother.

*Bestemor has had a heart attack and is critical. Come home now.*

Katrina's breath squeezed from her chest. Her grandmother meant everything to her. Her health had been rocky for months. Her beloved *bestemor* was her rock, her mentor, and so much more. Hands shaking, she punched in, *On my way.*

A second message came through, this one from her best



friend and Talk's chief technology officer, Liv Tompkins. *I can't find David and the bank isn't returning my calls. I need you here now.* The elusive CEO who was Liv's boyfriend had vanished three days ago.

The messages reflected Katrina's past year in a nutshell. Both the grandmother she adored and the company she'd poured everything into had begun an inexorable slide downhill. She'd tried without success to be in two places at once, but she'd been utterly helpless to change either situation. Just a year ago she was a rising star in Talk, Inc., the AI chatbot start-up everyone was talking about. She was married to the best man in the world, and they'd been living the life of their dreams for three wonderful years. Her life had slowly spiraled out of control starting with Jason's death in a car accident just over a year ago, and most days, she felt like she was drowning.

She parked and opened the Talk app. Jason's smiling face appeared with the text *Hi, honey, how's it going?*

Her hands trembled as she texted him. *Terrible. Bestemor's dying and so is Talk. I can't fix it, Jason. What do I do?*

She knew a chatbot imitating her husband couldn't advise her, but somehow it always helped. Relying on it wasn't healthy, but it was all she had right now. Every day she blessed Liv for talking Katrina into letting her upload all Jason's social media messages and texts so they could try out the bot. She told herself it was only because the bot needed testing before it hit the market, but little by little she depended on it more and more. The AI app filled one chink in the mortar holding her sanity together.

His reply came. *Trust yourself, Katrina. You're stronger and smarter than you know. Take it one step at a time and do that*

*one thing in front of you. I know you can do it. You're my superhero.*

The weird thing was the words streaming from the bot always sounded like Jason. In her mind she could see his warm brown eyes and his tender smile. She could almost catch the scent of his patchouli soap and Tom Ford cologne. When she ended a session with the bot, she felt as if she'd been in his presence, as if his arms had surrounded her. It was a little spooky sometimes, but such a comfort.

*Thanks, she typed back. That's good advice.*

She'd try to put out whatever fire Liv was battling, then head to North Haven. Her decision made, she hurried toward the building looming ahead in the bright blue California sky. As she neared, she spotted Talk's employees milling around the doors. Some were on their phones, some were crying, and others were taking pictures. Had there been a shooting? A fire? Possibilities swarmed her thoughts.

Katrina spotted her law intern, Clare. "What's going on?"

Clare turned a tearstained face toward her. "The FBI has taken over Talk! The media is here." She grabbed Katrina's arm.

The FBI? Katrina wanted to run herself. This was the beginning of the end. Something catastrophic had to have triggered the FBI to step in. Was that why the CEO was nowhere to be found? Liv must be going out of her mind. They'd be lucky if they had an engineer left by evening. It was the end of any venture capital money, and Talk, Inc. was doomed.

She turned at the sound of Liv's voice and saw her struggling to hold on to a laptop as an FBI agent tried to tug it away from her. Katrina rushed to help. "What's going on here? I'd like to see your warrant. I'm general counsel for Talk."

He eyed her. “You’re Katrina Foster? We’ve been looking for you.”

“I am. What’s this all about?” He handed her the warrant. As she read it, her dreams went up in smoke as acrid as a trash fire. The FBI had authority to seize anything related to the finances of either Talk or its CEO, David Liang. The warrant also mentioned Talk’s chief financial officer, David’s cousin John—who Katrina realized was also nowhere to be seen.

She looked at the laptop in Liv’s hands. It was David’s. “I’m sorry, Liv. They have a warrant for that. You’re technically obstructing justice by not giving it to them.”

Liv reluctantly released her grip on the machine. The agent nodded his thanks and walked away with it.

Katrina tugged Liv away from the melee. It was her job to make sure the FBI didn’t overstep the four corners of the warrant, but Liv needed some comfort and Katrina needed information. “There’s nothing we can do, Liv. You still can’t reach David?”

Liv shook her head, and fresh tears slid down her cheeks. Her windblown dark hair and helpless manner were out of character for her. As chief technology officer she was usually a whirlwind of activity and determination. She towered over Katrina’s five-foot-five height by five inches, but she seemed lost in the face of this unexpected blow.

Katrina slipped her arms around Liv and held her in a tight hug. “We shouldn’t be so surprised. Things haven’t been good, Liv, but we’ll land on our feet.” Liv mumbled something incoherent. “What was that?”

Liv pulled away. “I’m pregnant, Katrina. It’s David’s baby.” Her expression crumpled again. “He left me here to face all of

this alone.”

A baby. The thought of a new life when everything seemed so dark brought tears to Katrina’s eyes. “Aw, Liv. I’m so sorry!” She hugged her tighter. “But you’re not alone—you have me.” Their casual friendship had begun when Katrina first started at Talk five years ago, but it had deepened when Jason died. Liv had walked beside her through that dark valley, and Katrina would be forever grateful. “We’ll get through this together. Maybe he’ll answer your calls.”

Liv shook her head. “I—I installed a tracking app on his phone the other night. Yesterday he was at the airport, and then he disappeared off the app. I think he took a plane home to Shanghai.”

“And left us all to handle the fallout. That snake.” Katrina spotted an FBI agent motioning to her. “We’ll talk more later. I have to oversee the search, and I need to get home to North Haven.”

“Is it Bestemor?”

“She’s had another heart attack and is critical. I hope I make it in time.” Katrina walked over to the FBI agents. She couldn’t let herself see Liv’s sympathy or she’d never get through the hard hours ahead.

Four hours later, she escorted the FBI out of the building and headed for her Tesla. She took a swig of her terrible—and now cold—coffee. Another message came through from her mother.

*Bestemor is gone, Katrina. I’m so sorry you didn’t make it in time.*

“No!” Katrina pounded the steering wheel with her hands. “I can’t lose Bestemor too.” She crossed her arms over her



stomach and sobbed.



Seb Wallace surveyed The Beacon and checked his watch. He needed to hit the road, but he couldn't leave quite yet. A restaurant during dinner rush was like the ocean: you could never turn your back on it. Especially if you owned the place.

By eight thirty there was no longer a line at reception. Muted conversation echoed from The Beacon's vaulted ceiling, which Seb kept when he converted the old lighthouse into a world-class restaurant. He'd preserved the redwood flooring laid a century and a half ago and the Victorian lightkeeper's house. He'd also restored the beacon, which guided the way to North Haven's snug harbor on dark and foggy nights. Ocean-going yachts lined the piers closest to The Beacon, which was a popular dinner spot with the seafaring set. Seb had wanted to create a unique ambience to go with his unique menu—and he'd succeeded, at least according to the reviews. Michelin gave The Beacon a rare three-star rating, praising the “authentic gold rush-era ambience” and the “eclectic menu drawn from at least a dozen countries scattered over four continents.”

Seb slipped through the swinging double doors into the kitchen, a room of white tile, stainless steel, and constant activity. He wove his way among the hurrying staff, checking for potential problems as he went. He saw none. He made his way to the chef de cuisine, Thor Thorsen, an enormous Norwegian who absolutely fit his name. He stood at a strategic spot near the office, monitoring the room with glacial-blue eyes.

Seb looked up at Thor, who stood at least five inches taller

than Seb's five feet eleven inches. *"Alt bra?"*

Thor nodded and gave a thumbs-up without taking his gaze off the busy room.

Reassured, Seb went to his final stop at the back of the kitchen, his sushi chef, Kenji Hayashi. Kenji saw him coming and pulled out a bento box containing a salmon sashimi meal. He also set out chopsticks and a small plate with samples of each item from the box.

Seb picked up the chopsticks and tasted each item from the plate, while Kenji watched expectantly. *"Mmm! Gochisousama deshita!"*

Kenji smiled and gave a sharp little bow at the compliment. Following Seb's lead, he responded in Japanese. "The salmon we received today was particularly good."

"And you are always particularly good." Seb slipped the bento box into a specially designed cooler to keep it fresh for delivery. "Thank you."

Kenji's smile broadened. "You're welcome. I hope he enjoys it."

"I'm sure he will," Seb lied.

Seb left through the back door and got into his Range Rover, the vehicle he always took when he headed into the woods. The driving could be treacherous, and parts of the route he would take tonight were little more than logging roads with some gravel dumped in the ruts. He set the cooler on the passenger seat, buckled himself in, and drove out into the night.

He stopped briefly as he passed through North Haven's downtown. Old-fashioned streetlamps cast a warm light on the log exterior of Bestemor's. Norwegian and American flags hung over the red double-door entrance with *Velkommen!*

painted in rosealing across both doors. Matching red gingerbread shutters flanked the darkened windows.

He couldn't see inside, but he didn't need to. He knew every detail, down to the little sign that hung in the office of the late owner, Frida Berg: "I'm called Bestemor because I'm way too cool to be called Grandmother." The sign had been a gift from Frida's self-centered granddaughter, Katrina, and the old woman had loved it.

The best memories from Seb's worst years all came from Frida and Bestemor's. He'd spent every minute he could there from the day she hired him as a busboy when he turned sixteen until he left home on his eighteenth birthday. She took him under her wing and gave him a start in the restaurant business, setting him on the path that led him to where he was today. And when things got especially unbearable at home, she even let him stay in one of the little apartments over the restaurant. He hoped whoever inherited the place would love it as much as he did.

The forest wasn't a safe place these days, so he checked to make sure his gun was in the glove box. Then he put the SUV back in Drive and headed into the woods. Rows of redwoods lined the road. These weren't millennium-old giants like the stands in the Cathedral, but even thirty-year-old trees were more than tall enough to block out the sky and give him the feeling that he was driving along the bottom of a sheer-walled canyon.

The skin on the back of his neck crawled and he had to force himself not to hold the steering wheel in a death grip. He was a city boy by choice, and he never went into the forest voluntarily. Especially this forest—too many ghosts and monsters

lurked among the trees.

A narrow gap in the trees to his left marked the “road” he had to take. He turned into it and was instantly grateful for the Range Rover’s sturdy suspension. He bumped along the twisty track for five bone-jarring miles, keeping his speed in single digits the whole time. Finally, he reached his destination. He put the SUV in Park, grabbed the cooler, took a deep breath, and got out.

A buzzing fluorescent light lit the entrance to the broken-down old trailer Seb used to call home. Inside lived the broken-down old man he still called Dad.

Seb frowned at the buzzing light. He made a mental note to contact the caretaker about that. He resisted the temptation to delay his visit by pulling out his satellite phone to send a text now. Besides, he wanted to get the meal to his father while it was still fresh.

He marched up to the rickety door and knocked. No response.

He banged harder. Still nothing.

Unease stirred his already-sour stomach. He pounded on the door again. “Dad! It’s Seb!”

He stood still for a moment, listening. Only night noises reached his ears.

His heart pounded against his ribs. Had it finally happened? Seb had urged his father to move into an assisted-living facility ever since he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s two years ago, but the old man refused to leave his remaining scrap of land. Had his stubbornness killed him?

Seb tried the door. Locked. He set the cooler outside the door and scrambled around the trailer, searching for an open



window. He found one on the far side. He punched out the screen and pulled himself inside. "Dad!"

A sharp snore and muttered curse came from the bedroom.

Seb heaved a sigh of relief. "I brought dinner, Dad. Salmon sashimi, like you asked."

"Took you long enough."

"Yeah, I had to take care of paying customers first. But it's fresh and it's free."

Seb unlocked the front door and got the cooler while his father got out of bed and shambled into the tiny kitchen/dining room. Age and addiction had made him look decades older than his sixty years, even before the Parkinson's. He was a shell of the nimble, broad-shouldered lumberjack Seb remembered from his childhood.

Seb set the bento box on the little table, along with a matching set of ebony chopsticks. His father ignored the sticks and pulled a dirty fork from the sink. He poked at the sashimi. "This is raw."

"Yes. It's called sashimi. You requested it."

"Huh. I saw 'salmon' on your menu and figured it'd be cooked at least." He picked up a slice and eyed it suspiciously. "Wonder how these would taste deep fried."

Seb was profoundly grateful that he hadn't inherited his father's taste buds. "You mean like salmon McNuggets?"

"Yeah. What's that called?"

"The technical term is *abomination*. Dad, if you're not sure what something on the menu is, ask before you order it."

Dad grunted and put a morsel of fish in his mouth. "Not as bad as I thought. Say, I hear old Frida Berg died."

Seb nodded. He hadn't cried in years, but ever since he'd

heard the news, his eyes had been suspiciously blurry.

“Can’t say I’ll miss her.”

Seb clamped down on rising anger. “I will.”

“Yeah, you might feel different if she’d stolen away your only son and sent him flying all over the world for twelve years while you was stuck alone in the woods.”

Seb stood and grabbed the cooler. It had been a mistake to come. “That’s not what happened! I left because I couldn’t stand it here. Frida just helped me find a restaurant job in Oslo. And she’s the one who talked me into coming back when you got your diagnosis.”

One time he’d vowed never to step inside this place again. Then Frida had quoted the verse in Exodus about honoring his father and mother, and his faith had prodded him to do his duty. On days like today, why did he bother?

His father looked up at him with bloodshot brown eyes. “Well, I remember what I remember. No need to get all angry about it.”

Seb took a deep breath and sat back down. Dad was right. They’d had this argument before, and his father refused to listen. He cherished his grudges and never willingly let them go.

His father shoveled in the last bite of salmon and swallowed. “Maybe you can get Bestemor’s on the cheap now that Frida’s gone. You can get great deals at estate sales.”

Seb winced at his father’s crass comment, but he had a point. Bestemor’s served homey Norwegian breakfast and lunch food, with a big helping of *hygge*. It was the perfect complement to The Beacon’s upscale epicurean menu. Maybe he should look into buying it.

## CHAPTER 2



KATRINA WOULD BE LUCKY IF SHE DIDN'T plunge over the side of the road herself. She could almost drive Redwood Highway in her sleep, but today it took all of her concentration to stay on the pavement that wound through old-growth redwood groves. She ran her windows down and opened the sunroof. Maybe the fragrant aroma of ferns and redwood would sharpen her senses and soothe her nerves.

The newspapers over the last three days had blared the news of Talk's predicament—and her picture and name had been prominent in the headlines that speculated whether she would be charged as well. And rightly so. She'd missed the signs of David's embezzlement with the grief that consumed her days. Liv had been a mess since they'd been closed down, and it had been all Katrina could do to keep her friend from saying something to the FBI or the U.S. Attorney's Office that could lead to her own indictment.

Her parents might not point out her failure, but based on the guilt-inducing texts from her mother, they'd already noticed something was wrong. Her life was in ruins, and Katrina didn't know if she'd return to Palo Alto anytime soon, so her back seat contained most of her personal belongings.

The dash alerted her to a phone call from her neighbor. She never called. Frowning, Katrina answered it through the dash. “Marlene, is anything wrong?”

“I’m so sorry, Katrina!” The older woman’s voice quivered with stress. “Your door was standing open this morning, and I peeked in. Your belongings are strewn all over the floor.”

Katrina groaned. Luckily, she had everything she really cared about with her—her MacBook and her jewelry were safely stowed in the back seat. “I appreciate you letting me know.”

“The police came, but I doubt they’ll find the culprit. You might want to notify your insurance.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks so much. I appreciate the heads-up.”

Katrina told her goodbye and ended the call. Another nail in the coffin of this truly awful week. The break-in left her feeling violated, but she was almost numb to bad news at this point.

A movement caught her attention ahead, and she spotted a kitten along the side of the road. Off in the trees a mountain lion, with its tail swishing, watched the little morsel. Without stopping to think, Katrina veered to the shoulder and stopped the car. She threw open her door and ran to scoop up the kitten. It didn’t look older than six weeks, and its white-and-black markings were striking. Part Siamese maybe.

She climbed back in the car, set the kitten on the passenger seat, and resumed her drive. The little thing mewed and circled for a few minutes before it fell asleep.

And there it was. *Home*. Katrina’s foot instinctively hit the brake at the city limits. This was an iconic site for tourists to pause and snap pictures. The original Norwegian name of Nordhavn was still on the town sign with its common name



of North Haven below. Founded in 1869 by Norwegian immigrants, its picturesque buildings along the wild Humboldt Bay drew artists and photographers from all over the world.

Pleasure craft dotted the water by the marina, and she spotted the old stave church, one of the few remaining in the world. A high steeple topped the tiered, overhanging steep roofs of the structure, and the unusual building had been photographed and painted countless times.

No one would have arrived yet for the funeral, and the comfort of the old pews and familiar dark interior called to her. She drove toward the steeple with tears already gathering in her eyes. As she traveled down Redwood Street, the town's hygge called to her. The rustic stabbur buildings and the Victorian brick structures dotting the downtown area created the welcome-home feeling of cheer, comfort, coziness, and friendly atmosphere that hygge was all about.

But not even hygge could heal the deep well of grief in her heart.

She almost stopped at Bestemor's, her grandmother's waffle shop, but it would take more than heart-shaped waffles with whipped cream and berries to get her through this. She gave a longing glance at its turf roof and her grandmother's beloved goats, Charlie and Lucy, in the yard before driving on to the church. The hallowed ground that had birthed her grandmother's strong faith and Katrina's own more faltering sense of God's presence might help her.

She parked in front of the church and ran the windows down a few inches for the sleeping kitten. The temperature was sixty degrees with a cool breeze blowing in off the water, so the animal was safe from overheating. She stepped through

the green front entrance, guarded from evil spirits by foliage and snakes carved into the wood of the old church. Even with more modern lighting, the interior was dim, and she paused to let her eyes adjust. Thankfully, the sanctuary was empty, and she made a beeline for the Berg family pew, three rows back on the right.

She sat in the spot last occupied by Bestemor and placed her hands on the back of the pew in front of her. The warmth of the old wood held so many memories. Her grandmother tapping her fingers in time to the music, the sound of her alto voice harmonizing with Katrina's own soprano notes, and the smell of the burning candles.

Her gaze wandered reluctantly to the casket at the front. If only she'd gotten here in time to say goodbye.

She swallowed the log in her throat and pulled out her phone to talk to her husband. *Jason, Bestemor died.*

*Aw, honey. I know it's hard. She loved you so much. We'll get through this together.*

She stared at the phone. He wasn't really here to help her get through this. No one was. Her vision blurred, and she tapped out, *I wish you were here. Why did you have to head up to North Haven the night of the crash? I need you here with me.*

It was a rhetorical question. He'd told her he was coming up because he was planning something special for her thirtieth birthday, which was a week later. But instead, she'd spent the day prostrate on his grave.

The phone vibrated and alerted her to his reply. *To meet her. Who? Bestemor? Mom?*

Jason's answer of *No* was followed by unintelligible characters. Maybe Japanese?

Katrina stared at the words. Her bot was a beta version, and it could be problematic at times. The Japanese characters were clearly a glitch—but what about the rest of it? Had he come here to meet a—a woman? Was he having an affair? The thought horrified her, but some part of her heart almost wished it was true. If she could hate him, maybe she could get over his death.

She shook her head. Jason would never betray her. Never.

The entry door creaked, and she rose to face the first arrivals for Bestemor's funeral. The rest of her family poured in, one at a time, through the narrow entrance. Time to take her medicine of shame and guilt.

|||||

Dylan Jackson pulled off the Oregon Coast Highway along a deserted stretch of stony beach. He left his pickup truck running because he wasn't sure he'd be able to restart it. It would be bad to get stranded here. And it would get real bad real fast if a friendly OSP officer stopped by to help and decided to run his license. Besides, Dylan wouldn't be here long.

He jiggled the door handle until it unlatched and the rusty door squealed open. He'd paid a thousand dollars for this piece of junk, which was more than twice what it was worth. It was mostly a 1998 Ford F-150, but it had parts from at least three model years. Dylan thought it had once been white, but he couldn't be sure. Still, he couldn't complain. He'd needed a new ride fast with no questions asked, and that's what he got.

The crash of waves and whistle of wind off the Pacific met him as he stepped out of the truck's cab. The wet, cold ocean air

in September cut right through his T-shirt as he walked around the cab. The sun was setting somewhere behind the low ceiling of gray clouds. He zipped up his hoodie and scrambled over the berm that separated the road from the beach. He scanned the coast. Rocks and gravelly sand covered most of the steep, narrow beach. Gray waves crashed against the gray stone. Not a person or building in sight, and why would there be? No one would sunbathe or windsurf here. It was perfect.

He walked as close to the water as he dared. Standing on an uneven block of wet rock, he looked around one more time. Then he reached inside his hoodie, pulled out a gun, and hurled it as far into the water as he could. It made a little splash in an oncoming wave and vanished.

That was it. The last piece of physical evidence tying him to that dead body in Seattle. Gone. He'd burned his bloody clothes in an empty field and dumped his car in Puget Sound. If no one ratted him out, he might be okay. The muscles in his neck and shoulders relaxed. He hadn't realized he'd been clenching them.

Now he just needed to go to ground for a while with a new name. The last name of Carver would do. And a new gun would be the next thing to find.

He walked back to the truck as fast as he could. He'd been on the road for seven hours, but he still had more than four to go before he reached North Haven. He'd find someplace he could sleep in his truck. Hopefully he'd come across a truck stop or some other place where he could wash up in the morning. He wanted to make a good impression when he met his brother for the very first time.

## CHAPTER 3



KATRINA STOOD BESIDE THE GRAVE WITH her parents and her brother, Magnus. The sweet scent of the roses heaped on the casket nauseated her, and she swallowed down bile. How could Bestemor be gone? Katrina couldn't accept so much overwhelming loss. She desperately wanted to talk to Jason but somehow managed not to pull out her phone.

Mom and Magnus moved off, and her father slung an arm around Katrina. "Friends are preparing a dinner at the house, but we're all going to my office for a quick reading of the will first. It won't take long."

Even as she sank into the uncommon embrace, she heard a note in his voice that set her nerves tingling. She couldn't put her finger on the cause of the vague unease that rippled up her spine.

He ended the hug and they walked across the newly mown grass a few paces behind the rest of the family. New streaks of gray glittered in his hair and grief lines were obvious around his eyes, but she knew better than to ask him how he was doing. He never shared feelings, though he had to be reeling with grief too. He was Bestemor's only child.

An attractive man in an Armani suit spoke on his phone by

a bay laurel tree. Was that language Japanese? Those green eyes under his light brown hair were striking—especially the piercing assessment in them as he glanced their way. He nodded as they passed as if he knew them. The breeze carried a hint of an unfamiliar cologne.

“Who was that?” Katrina asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Seb Wallace. He owns The Beacon, that big new restaurant at the old lighthouse.”

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but Katrina was sure she’d never seen him. She’d heard about the lighthouse being renovated, though she hadn’t been down to the historic waterfront in years. Her recent trips were all visits to Bestemor during her illness or escapes with Jason to the family cabin. Was her beloved North Haven being bought up by outsiders? Katrina dismissed the speculation and stopped to retrieve the kitten from the car. Dad wouldn’t mind if she brought her to the office.

“I didn’t know you had a cat. Looks part Siamese.”

“I found her on the way here along the side of the road.”

Her dad took the kitten and smiled down at her. She emitted a tiny purr. “Very cute.” He handed her back. “You can drop her off at the shelter after the meeting.”

The kitten curled into her arms and stared up at her with striking blue eyes. “I’m keeping her.” Until the words came out of her mouth, Katrina hadn’t been aware she’d made a decision about the kitten’s future.

She and her dad walked side by side to his law office. The building used to be the land surveyor’s place back when it had been built, and her mother had picked out the colors of light

green for the body with dark green and terra-cotta for the Victorian gingerbread on the storefront. Her dad held the door open for her, and she stepped into the familiar lobby with its twelve-foot ceiling. It held the scent of new furniture and carpet.

Her mother smiled when they entered the office, and she spied the kitten in Katrina's arms. "I didn't know you'd gotten a kitten. What's its name?"

"Lyla," Katrina decided on the spur of the moment. "I found her along the road on the way here."

Her mother snatched her hand back before it could descend on the kitten's ears. "You brought a stray cat in here with your father's new carpet and furniture? It probably has fleas. Get it out of here before it can infest everything. Sometimes I wonder about you, Katrina."

"It will be fine," her father said. "This won't take long."

Her mother looked her age of sixty today with fresh lines around her blue eyes. This past year of caring for Bestemor had taken a toll on her. "It can't enter our house until you give it a flea bath."

Her father pressed his lips together but didn't argue with her.

Magnus turned from staring out the window. Two years older than Katrina's thirty-one, he had inherited their father's youthful skin and blond hair. He and Katrina had been close growing up, until they'd both gone off to college and their own lives. She'd tried calling him weekly after she'd married, but they'd run out of things to discuss.

She moved over to stand by him. "How's Mag's doing?" Just before Jason died, they had come home for the grand opening



of her brother's brew pub, and it had been off to a great start.

He shrugged. "Struggling a bit." Magnus had always been brutally honest, even about his problems.

"Maybe I can help with some promotional ideas while I'm home."

"That'd be great. Can you help me find an accountant too? The money just seems to disappear."

"Have a seat, kids," their father said. "We've got people waiting at the house." Once they were seated, Dad picked up a sheaf of papers. "Bestemor's will is very straightforward. Her restaurant is going to Katrina. Her money, including the proceeds from the sale of her house, will go into a trust with Magnus as the sole beneficiary. I will be the sole trustee, and Katrina will be my successor. She left each of us certain mementos and pieces of furniture, which will be distributed later."

Katrina gasped, and the kitten drove her claws through her dress and into her thigh. She extracted Lyla's grip on her skin and clothing. "That can't be right."

Her father grimaced. "I wrote it, so I can assure you it is."

Magnus rose. "Why would you let her do that, Dad? She always talked like I would get Bestemor's. I'm the oldest and I know how to run a restaurant. And why is the money going into a trust? I'm thirty-three. I don't need someone else to manage my money."

Her father looked at Magnus in silence.

Her brother dropped his gaze to the floor. "Well, why didn't she leave anything to you—her only child?"

"I told her I didn't need her money and didn't want to run Bestemor's." His eyes held a trace of anger as he glanced at Katrina. "She changed her will after Jason died."

Mom wrung her hands. “But this isn’t fair, Torvald. You never said a word to me about this. Poor Magnus had his heart set on that restaurant.”

“He couldn’t say anything,” Katrina said. “He had to protect attorney-client privilege.”

Her mother rose and pointed a finger at her. “Did you say something to her?”

“Of course not! I have a life in the Valley. I have no need of Bestemor’s.” Though all of that had changed this week, her grandmother hadn’t known it. Or had she? Katrina thought back to her conversations with her grandmother. They’d always discussed everything, and she might have revealed her concerns about Talk, Inc.

Magnus gave Katrina a final glare before stomping out the door. He fired a parting shot over his shoulder. “Give my mementos to Katrina or put them in the trust, since apparently nobody trusts me.”

Dad narrowed his gaze at Mom. “Not another word, Emma. You’ve escalated this enough. That goes for you too, Katrina. Mor’s wishes will be carried out.”

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“Is this a joke, Seb?” Thor’s glacial-blue eyes went wide. “Cajun-style Japanese food? That’s an oxymoron.”

Seb sighed and leaned against a stainless-steel counter in the empty kitchen. He hadn’t wanted to come here right after Frida’s funeral, but he had work to do. She would have understood. “It’s not a joke or an oxymoron. It’s a customer’s order—and the customer happens to be the head of the West

Coast branch of a very large Japanese corporation. He has VIPs coming in from Tokyo and they want to see the redwoods, so they're all stopping in Eureka between visits to the company's Seattle and San Francisco offices. He read about us in the Michelin Guide and wants us to create something unique that will wow his guests. He said that the company president had Cajun food once and liked it, but he also likes traditional Japanese food. So we're supposed to combine the two."

"But how?" Thor held his broad hands palm up. "What does he want? Teriyaki beignets? Chicory-infused miso soup?"

Kenji had listened silently, tugging thoughtfully at his lower lip while Seb and Thor spoke. He chuckled at the chef de cuisine's suggestions. "Those would certainly be unique. Maybe *shiozake*—salted salmon—but blackened with Cajun spices and served with steamed vegetables?"

Thor nodded slowly. "The salmon could work, but what about the vegetables? Wouldn't the spices overwhelm them?"

As Kenji responded, one of the cleaning staff appeared in the door leading into the dining room and beckoned Seb over. "Mr. Wallace, there's a man here to see you."

That was odd—he wasn't expecting anyone. "Thank you, Julie."

He followed her into the dining room, and she went back to washing the old redwood floors. A tall, broad-shouldered man with longish blond hair waited by the hostess stand. He appeared to be a few years younger than Seb's thirty-two. He wore faded jeans and an unbuttoned flannel shirt that hung over a black tee. The top of a tattoo peeked above his collar. Two of the female kitchen staff were eyeing the visitor, who looked a little like a low-rent Chris Hemsworth. Seb didn't

recognize him, but his face lit up with a broad smile when Seb walked in.

The man stuck out his hand as Seb approached. “Glad to meet you, Seb! I’m Dylan Carver.”

Seb shook Dylan’s hand. “Sorry, we don’t open until five.”

Dylan laughed. “I’m not here for dinner.”

“Oh? Why are you here?”

“I’m Linda Carver’s son,” Dylan said, as if that explained his presence. He looked around. “Wow, this is quite a place you’ve got.”

Warning bells clanged in Seb’s head. Ever since he’d returned to North Haven, a steady stream of gifters had shown up. Classmates he barely remembered were suddenly long-lost best friends, guys who once worked a swing shift with his father were his “business partners,” and so on. They all acted like this guy—the surprise visit, the big smile, and the instant familiarity. And five minutes later, they were asking for money. “Should I know her?”

Dylan looked a little hurt. “Didn’t Dad tell you about her?”

Seb’s heart skipped a beat. “Dad?”

“Yeah, Dad. Rory Wallace. We’re brothers, Seb.”

Seb opened his mouth to contradict Dylan’s claim, but the denial died on his lips. The guy did look a lot like old pictures of Seb’s father, and there was an open honesty in the blue eyes that looked back into his. “He never mentioned her—or you,” Seb forced out. “I’m sorry,” he added when Dylan’s shoulders sagged and he stared at the floor.

“Well, his name is on my birth certificate.” Dylan pulled out a grubby, folded piece of paper and handed it to Seb.

Seb unfolded the paper. It did appear to be a photocopy of

a birth certificate from North Haven's only hospital, though it could easily be a fake. But was it? Could it be true? Seb's parents had accused each other of infidelity during the divorce proceedings, but Seb hadn't believed either of them. He also had never heard anything about a half brother. If his father had another child, would he really have hidden that fact from Seb?

Dylan was probably just another grifter—but part of Seb didn't want him to be. The possibility that he might have a brother woke a yearning deep inside him. Family had always been a bad thing—people to fear, be embarrassed by, or take care of. What would it be like to have an actual brother—someone to eat Thanksgiving dinner with or go to a ball game with? Someone who'd always be there, whom he could count on?

Seb refolded the paper and handed it back to Dylan. "I see."  
"Maybe you should talk to him."

"Oh, I will." Seb glanced back at the kitchen. "I've got to get back to work. Thanks for stopping by."

Dylan shifted on his big feet. "Okay. I-I'll go."

The disappointment on Dylan's face went straight to Seb's gut. "Look, give me your cell number and email. I'll be in touch."

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