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Opening Extract from...

MURDER, FORGOTTEN

Written by **Reverend Deb
Richardson-Moore**
Published By **Lion Fiction**

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Deb Richardson-Moore, with her trademark skill to yank readers in from the first sentence or two, tells a compelling whodunit that makes the reader wonder: can a writer/artist's intense, immersive creativity be dangerous? Although the book's description says Julianna, the blockbuster mystery writer and immediately sympathetic character, is losing her memory, Richardson-Moore unleashes twists from the start. Is Julianna's memory really slipping away or has she fallen so deeply into her made-up worlds that real-life murder actually becomes inevitable? Is that the real mystery?

Writing with her delightful turns of phrase, Richardson-Moore not only makes you wonder about that; she also makes you become the detective who must solve this richly multilayered mystery: what in the world happened here, and in what real world did this murder actually happen?

A delicious premise vibrantly told.

**John Jeter, author of *Rockin' a Hard Place*
and *The Plunder Room***

*Deb Richardson-Moore has woven a masterful tale of mystery and suspense in her latest book, *Murder, Forgotten*. With superb pacing, she takes us on a page-turning journey from the coast of Scotland to the South Carolina shore. Her cast of characters with their many secrets will keep you guessing whodunit right to the end.*

Sally Handley, author of the *Holly and Ivy* Mystery series

Deb Richardson-Moore is a former journalist and a former pastor in Greenville, South Carolina. Her first book, *The Weight of Mercy*, is a memoir about her work as a minister among homeless people.

She and her husband Vince are the parents of three grown children. To find out more about Deb, go to her website: **www.debrichardsonmoore.com**.

Online reviews are always appreciated.

Also by Deb Richardson-Moore

NON-FICTION

The Weight of Mercy: A Novice Pastor on the City Streets

FICTION

The Branigan Power Mystery series:

The Cantaloupe Thief

The Cover Story

Death of a Jester



Murder, Forgotten

DEB RICHARDSON-MOORE



LION FICTION

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*To the real Annabelle,
who ensured I had no visitors during the writing of this book*

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PART I

Chapter 1

Julianna climbed into the back seat of the waiting Volvo, square and black and unremarkable until she sank into its plush leather. The wind lashed through the crowds on the pavements as they stumbled against their luggage, called for taxis, grabbed children. Edinburgh Airport, though smaller than most she passed through, sported the same cacophony of noise and movement, and Julianna wasn't up for either. She sighed with gratitude upon entering the warm car.

Margot slid into the front seat beside a stranger, then turned and smiled wearily. "You remember Evan, don't you, Julianna?"

She looked into the rearview mirror where half of the driver's face was reflected. The stranger spoke. "How are you, Mrs Burke? It's been awhile."

Perhaps he was familiar. She met so many people. She'd learned long ago to listen for clues. Often someone would drop his own name in the first few minutes of conversation if you waited. A name or, if not, at least a city or an event or a book title or a spouse's name. You smiled and nodded until you figured it out. She never wanted someone who knew her to suspect she didn't know him. Though increasingly she didn't.

"Of course, Evan," she said, picking up on Margot's pointer. That was a big part of Margot's job these days. "How are you?"

"Fine, ma'am. It's good to have you back in East Neuk."

"Mr Burke will be joining us next week," she said, shivering as she looked at the steel gray sky. "Though it doesn't look much like golfing weather, does it?"

She didn't notice the look that passed between the two in the front seat; didn't see the question that arose in Evan's reflected eyes. "Aye, that's for sure. It's been a brutal winter."

Julianna closed her eyes against the airport traffic for what seemed only moments, but when she opened them again, rain was spitting on the windshield, and they had crossed the frigid waters of the Firth of Forth. Now they were passing barren fields with the waist-high stone walls that lined miles and miles of these winding roads. It had been too long, she thought – too long since she and Connor had been back to this eastern coast of Scotland where her writing career began.

Twenty years ago they'd discovered the stone house – or castle, as they laughingly called it – along the Fife Coastal Path, almost exactly halfway between Crail and Anstruther. Connor had wanted to play the fabulous golf courses of Scotland with the natives – who could've been his cousins had his ancestors not "crossed the pond", he'd claimed. But he didn't want to travel solo or to be alone every night. Truth be told, Connor never wanted to be alone.

She'd been halfway through her first book and said she could write anywhere. So he'd booked them into the turreted house of gray stone because of its reasonable rental price in April, before any semblance of warm weather arrived. At a desk overlooking the North Sea, Julianna had been invigorated. The book was set in her native Charleston, and somehow, with only her memory to rely on, the setting came alive more vividly than when she was actually writing in the Deep South.

After her third book, they'd bought the house in Scotland.

Her eyes flicked to Margot, who was turned again to the back seat, apparently awaiting an answer. "I'm sorry. What?"

"Evan said his wife has potato soup and sourdough bread waiting for us. Doesn't that sound good?"

Did it? She supposed so.

Margot must have sensed her confusion. "Sheona knows what we need on a day like this," she said smoothly, indicating the gathering darkness and rain, which was pounding harder.

“Ah, yes, right. Soup.” Julianna did remember Sheona, a pretty little thing who came in upon occasion to cook, when she and Connor didn’t feel like going out. But had she already decided not to go out? She looked at the rain and the trees permanently bent by these winds. Well, good decision if she had.

Julianna saw Evan’s eyes squint in the mirror. She attempted a smile. “Margot, you did pack my laptop, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” Her assistant hesitated. “Why?”

“So I can write, silly. Why else?”

“I packed it so you could keep up with the news from Charleston.”

“I can do both.”

“I... I’m just surprised. That’s all,” said Margot.

Julianna laughed. “Why else would I come to Scotland in March?”

Again, a look passed between the two in the front, but this time Julianna caught it. She hesitated. “Margot?”

The young woman turned and faced her. “It’s just that you and Dr Fitzgerald and Liza Holland thought it’d be good for you to get away. You hadn’t said anything about writing.”

Julianna frowned. Charlie Fitzgerald was her longtime neighbor and family physician. He was always offering advice. But Liza Holland? Why would she weigh in? Julianna did remember the silver-haired neighbor who lived six doors down. They walked their dogs together and compared notes about what had possessed them to adopt Shiba Inus, a highly anxious Japanese breed. They apologized repeatedly as the dogs tried to attack every other dog on Sullivan’s Island. But why would Liza Holland think she needed to get away?

Julianna puzzled over the question for a minute, then lost interest. She laid her head back and closed her eyes once more. She was tired, so very tired. More tired than the plane trip from Charleston to Philadelphia to Edinburgh warranted. A tiredness that had crept into her brain and made thinking difficult. She needed to talk to Connor. She relied on him, personally and professionally. It’d been this way for the twenty-two years of their marriage, years in which he’d become much more than a husband; he had become her first reader and

business manager and publicist and travel agent, dealing with editors and publishers, bookstore owners and hoteliers.

For one thing, he encouraged her wanderings. That's what they called it when Julianna's mind left the prosaic world of victims and killers and weapons and alibis to arrive at the furtive twists and psychological turns that so captivated her readers.

Her first wandering had occurred in this very place, in the house overlooking the North Sea, when Connor returned from an afternoon of golf to find Julianna gone. He'd told her the story a hundred times, and she'd repeated it a hundred more. He'd opened a beer and poured her a glass of white wine, sure she'd be back at any moment. But as the long and chilly day stretched toward sunset, he'd grown worried and, guessing correctly, had hurried down the coastal path in the direction of Anstruther.

He overtook her within the first mile, and with relief suggested they continue on for the village's famous fish and chips. But his relief soon gave way to puzzlement at Julianna's passivity. He tried to engage her in conversation, and she smiled and agreed with everything he said, but her eyes were glazed, trance-like. He was beginning to be alarmed when she tripped and went sprawling. Connor rushed to help her up, and she looked at him in surprise.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, then looked around and laughed shakily. "What am *I* doing here?"

"I found you on the path," he said, the incoming tide crashing on the rocks below. "Are you all right, Jules?"

She smiled. "I know exactly what happens next," she said. "And exactly how to set it up."

She insisted they turn around immediately, without dinner. Back in the stone house, Julianna worked feverishly through the night, jotting down the numerous changes she would make in the manuscript, crafting the ideas that would make her plodding story soar, deleting entire sections and writing new ones. They'd talked about it in the years since, named it: Julianna's *wanderings*. When her subconscious or her soul or her spirit or her muse or whatever the heck you called it

took over her conscious writing self and saw possibilities that simply weren't there before. It was not so much a silencing of her inner critic as it was a releasing of her inner genius. In the trance of wandering out of the day-to-day, Julianna was able to access complex mysteries that swayed critics and readers alike.

She'd like to wander now, she thought peevishly. She always awoke from those episodes energized and excited about the next twist in her novel. She might stay up for eighteen to twenty-four hours straight, pounding out sentences and paragraphs and pages that made critics swoon, and made readers stand in line on the days her books went on sale, even in this sorry day of online publishing. She shook her head, felt the satisfying weight of a book in her hand. But wait. She wouldn't wander now. There was no book, no plot, no mystery to be worked out. Or was there?

She opened her eyes and stared at the rain, pounding now, shrouding the countryside like the inside of a charcoal coffin. Odd metaphor, she thought idly. Could an entire view be reminiscent of the *inside* of a coffin? And why charcoal? Didn't Charlestonians prefer highly polished cherry to burnished metal? When was the last time she'd been to a funeral anyway? Recently, it seemed. *Focus, Julianna*. Was she working on a book?

She honestly didn't know. She felt as if she was in that strange land between sleep and wakefulness, when the sticky remnants of a dream were so overpowering that she wasn't sure who she was, who she was married to, or where she lived. Part of her wanted to fight to the surface to answer the questions. Part of her wanted to sink deeper and ignore them. The latter won, and she fell asleep.

Julianna startled awake at the slam of two doors in quick succession and found herself alone in the plane. No, not the plane. The Volvo, of course. She heard the trunk open and squinted to see a man – what had Margot called him? – carry her suitcases through a doorway where a young woman stood. He bent to kiss her. Then Liza Holland's face was at her window, and she was startled

again. Liza opened the door and the cold wind off the North Sea whipped in.

But this face was younger, and the hair a swirl of flying red curls, not silver. Julianna peered more closely.

“Julianna, are you all right?”

“Oh, Margot, of course. I was just, ah, dreaming.” She was ashamed of her confusion. No reason to confess if she didn’t have to.

She took Margot’s arm and let the younger woman lead her across a drive of pea-sized pebbles to the brightly lit kitchen. Sheona – see? She remembered just fine – greeted them with a smile, and hurried to close the door behind them before the wind could rip it off its hinges. She took their coats, shaking off the rain and hanging them in a room beside the kitchen.

“Evan’s taking your luggage to your room, and supper’s on the stove,” she called. “I’m so glad to see you, Mrs B.” Bustling back to the kitchen, she looked as though she wanted to hug Julianna, but resisted. Instead, she patted her arm awkwardly. “I’ve been praying for you.”

Julianna stopped for a moment to study Sheona’s face. What did that mean, she was praying for her? It might mean something or nothing. Back home, people said they were praying for you, or “Have a blessed day!”, like they said good morning. Many – many! – put the blessed-day refrain on their voicemail greeting. Frankly, it annoyed Julianna, though that wasn’t the kind of thing you expressed aloud in South Carolina.

Sheona was smiling tentatively. Maybe she meant she was praying for their safe travel. Julianna returned her smile and let it go, patting Sheona’s arm with a well-rehearsed “thank you, dear”. That got her through a great many encounters when she wasn’t quite sure what was going on. Because of her celebrity, chances were good the remarks were complimentary. A vague “thank you, dear” covered a lot of territory, Connor assured her.

She looked around the kitchen and wished Connor were here already. They’d have a glass of wine in the solarium before they got

to the soup or whatever it was Sheona had cooked. They'd talk about the flight, how the writing was going, whom he'd played with today. But no, he wouldn't have played in this driving rain, she thought, looking out of the kitchen window into impenetrable darkness. The wind fairly roared off the sea, and rain attacked the windowpane like machine-gun fire. Even a golfing fool had his limits.

But wait. She struggled to clarify her thoughts. If they'd flown today, he couldn't have played anyway. And she couldn't have written. She'd never been able to write on planes.

She sighed. Margot was looking at her, and Sheona was busying herself at the stove so she wouldn't have to look. That much was clear.

Julianna pulled herself together. "I understand you have made soup for us," she said. "How very kind."

Sheona and Margot looked relieved. "Yes!" said Margot with more enthusiasm than potato soup usually warranted. "Let's eat!"

The soup was indeed delicious but the two generous glasses of cabernet sauvignon were what Julianna needed. She felt more relaxed, mellow. So what if she couldn't remember every little detail of every single day? She lived in parallel worlds.

There was the workaday world of Sullivan's Island in the warm and shabby beach house where she'd been raised. Her pine-paneled office overlooked the side yard of the Atlantic Avenue home, and a screened-in porch perched above the dunes to offer a view of the mighty Atlantic Ocean. She padded barefoot back and forth with her laptop and coffee to write passages in each place, depending on her mood and the mood of the ocean. Next door lived the Fitzgeralds, good friends and an unending source of hilarity for her and Connor. Meg and Charlie never told their horde of adult children who was visiting when, so there were screaming matches in the driveway and on the exterior decks during long, sodden drinking parties.

The workaday world also included book signings and university lectures and launch parties, the exhausting and necessary marketing side of the business that followed every release. That had been fun

in the beginning, but it had grown close to unbearable. Connor had taken on the nuts and bolts, but when it came to facing readers, she was the commodity, she was the celebrity, she was the creator, she was the one they wanted to hear, to see, to touch. What had been exciting at first became grueling, and then foreboding. All those people, they wanted her advice, her celebrity, as if her success might somehow rub off on them, her glitter might sprinkle into their lives.

And then there was the world inside her head, the world of twisty plots and dark traumas and characters who lived and breathed as surely as those noisy Fitzgeralds next door. But what those characters did and had done to them was the key. *How did a genteel Southern lady come up with this stuff?* critics repeatedly asked. *Are you not afraid?* Connor's friends echoed. She and Connor had laughed out loud when they read thrill-master Gillian Flynn's acknowledgment of her husband: "What do I say to a man who knows how I think and still sleeps next to me with the lights off?"

"Oh, I sleep with a night light," Connor assured his friends. "And a sand wedge."

That was Julianna's cue to add to their shtick: "If a little fear keeps him in line, so be it."

But that had been when she had clarity between her worlds – when she might lose a few hours deep in thought at her laptop, sure, but a ringing phone or a doorbell or the barking of her Shiba Annabelle would rouse her.

Lately that clarity had blurred. When she was deep into a plot, it might take her several minutes to surface, not unlike a diver kicking free of the ocean's pull. That's how she felt sometimes when she re-emerged on her porch, as if she was gasping for air, surprised, relieved even, to find herself in familiar surroundings. She was always glad if no one was around, because she didn't want anyone to see the time it took for reality to click into place.

Parallel worlds, she thought, finishing her second glass of wine. She lived in parallel worlds – one literal, one literary. That meant she had twice as much to remember as most people. No wonder some of the

details got lost. Totally understandable.

Julianna glanced around the dining room and found that she was alone. But there was an empty glass and plate across from hers. Margot, she remembered triumphantly. She heard movement in the adjoining kitchen and Margot returned, hoisting a nearly empty bottle of wine.

“Want the last few sips?” she asked.

“No, you go ahead,” Julianna replied. “I think I’ll go on to bed. I’m beat.”

“I won’t be far behind you.”

“Margot, what day is Connor coming? I know you’ve told me, but I’m rather hopeless with times and dates.” She smiled. “As you well know.”

Margot looked stricken. Julianna felt dread rush into the pit of her stomach, but she had no idea why. She waited for her assistant to speak. “Margot?” she repeated.

“Julianna, honey, we’ve talked about this. Connor’s not coming.”

Chapter 2

Logan Arnette opened the plastic-windowed door of her Jeep Wrangler and allowed her mother's dog to hop out. "You're home, Jezebel."

The fawn-colored dog looked at her suspiciously, then barked. She seemed to know that Logan had deliberately mangled her name.

Logan reached into the back seat and retrieved her overnight bag, along with canvas totes that held the dog's bowl, canned food and leash. "Surely you can make it into the house unleashed," she told her. "I don't see any animals that need attacking between here and the door."

Annabelle curled her tail haughtily and climbed the splintered steps to the entrance before turning to wait for Logan. But Logan wasn't rushing. This was the beginning of a weekend in her family's old beach house, and she planned to savor it. Of course, it took only a glance next door at the Fitzgeralds' gloriously updated house with wraparound decks of splinter-free faux wood to rouse her irritation. Why wouldn't her mother renovate this Moby Dick of a house? That's exactly what it reminded her of – some creaky old monstrosity that would've suited Captain Ahab. Oh, she knew it was built in the 1950s rather than the 1850s. But still.

She gazed up at the weathered gray shingles and darker gray shutters in need of painting. She and her brother Harrison endlessly suggested renovations or, better yet, a sale. Then her mother could buy on nearby Marshall Boulevard, one of those sunny, post-Hurricane-Hugo mansions that actually reflected the South Carolina coast rather than dreary New England.

But Julianna was immovable. And with their stepfather Connor shrugging off their suggestions, they had no chance. He would have eventually come around; Logan was sure of it. But now he was gone.

Logan shivered in the early March breeze and reached into the Jeep to grab a sweatshirt. A gray cloud the color of the house scuttled across the sun, and the temperature seemed to plunge ten degrees. She hurried up the steps and unlocked the door, watching Annabelle charge off in search of Julianna. She turned to the security console, tapping in the code she'd recently memorized. It was a gleaming new addition, out of place in this dim entrance. Out of place chronologically, too. It had been installed *after* Connor was killed. *After* detectives had satisfied themselves they'd gotten every shred of evidence from the crime scene and allowed Julianna to move back in.

Logan knew Julianna could never have arranged the installation of the security system. Margot had emailed her the code, so surely it was Margot's doing. With Connor gone, Logan was counting on Margot to save her from dealing with her mother on a daily basis.

She dropped her overnight bag on the speckled linoleum in the kitchen and dumped Annabelle's things in the adjoining laundry room. She headed for the oceanfront porch, the saving grace of the place, the selling point should she ever convince Julianna to part with it. But the chances of that had diminished the minute Connor died. As if her mother weren't attached enough to her childhood home, now it was the house she'd shared with Connor. How she'd loved that man. Certainly loved him more than the children who'd come along before. Logan and Harrison agreed on that – one of the few things they had ever agreed on. Connor had married their mother when Harrison was thirteen and Logan nine.

The substitution of one stand-offish stepfather for one absentee father had meant little to either child at first, though the money was better after Connor came along. Harrison and Logan suddenly had their pick of toys and books and clothes, and eventually cars and colleges. It was much later, once the self-absorption of her teen years had passed, that Logan began to recognize Connor as so much more.

Logan gazed out over a yard of bristly grass and sandspurs, a line of dunes and the gray waters of the Atlantic. The street and its houses were set back from the ocean, but this porch was perched high enough to give an unobstructed view of the coastline. As she watched, the sun emerged from behind a cloud and magically turned the water's sandy gray to glittering blue. She took a deep breath. She loved this beach, loved this vista, even if she'd prefer to have it from a more palatial homestead. She smiled as Annabelle bumped her leg, apparently realizing that Julianna and Margot weren't around, and Logan was it as far as food supply went.

"So you've figured out who's got the can opener, huh, Jezebel?" Logan patted the dog's head and walked back to the kitchen to feed her.

In two recent visits to the house, she had avoided the narrow hallway off the kitchen that led to her mother's office. On these occasions she'd been able to see its doorjamb from the kitchen doorway, crisscrossed with yellow tape screaming *Crime Scene*. Sticking her head into the hallway now, she could see that the tape had been removed. She edged to the office and looked in.

Logan's great-grandfather and grandfather had built this house, and at one time, before the notion of "man cave" caught on, the room had been her grandfather's den. Knotty pine covered all four walls and ceiling, creating a pockmarked, red-hued box that wasn't to Logan's taste – or anyone else's in the twenty-first century, she was pretty sure. But Julianna had loved her father and loved visiting his den, where they talked books. *Moby Dick*, no doubt, Logan always thought when her mother told the story.

Julianna had been a late-in-life baby and inherited the house while still in her thirties. She made the beloved den her writing study, keeping every shelf and every book that had belonged to her father and only swapping his recliner for a handsome desk and writing chair, his cracked leather sofa for a colorful chintz-covered one. From this unassuming room had come an unlikely string of successful thrillers. Logan shook her head. She had never told her mother, but she was

a huge fan, eagerly awaiting each masterful book, amazed that the woman who was so vacant and flighty and scattered in real life was so incisive and focused on the page. But maybe one was necessary for the other, Logan sometimes thought. Maybe to be as good as Julianna was as a writer robbed her of an ability to function as a mother.

Averting her eyes from the upholstered chair by the window, Logan walked to the shelf reserved for Julianna's books. *Charleston at Dusk*. That was the one that started it. Her mother and Connor had been newly married then and had flown off to Scotland, leaving her and Harrison with their severe grandmother on their father's side. The old lady demanded that Logan wear a dress for dinner every evening; she made Julianna look like Donna Reed.

Logan continued down the shelf, running her fingers along the hardback spines: *The Mango Thief*, *The Palm Rustler*, *A House Built on Sand*. Logan recalled the thrill of reading each one, the tales so compelling that she lost any sense of knowing the author. *The Relentless Tide*, *Murder on the Marsh*. She remembered the jolt that inevitably occurred as she finished each book, thinking, *My mother wrote this? How in the world?*

In Charleston, of course – heck, in the entire state, the entire country – Julianna was a big deal. But here on Sullivan's Island, where her family had lived for generations, no one cared. Or if they did, they took pride in pretending they didn't. Here she was still Julianna, that Montague kid who rode her bike down Atlantic Avenue, and clambered over the cannons at Fort Moultrie. Her neighbors afforded her privacy, because that was what well-mannered Southerners did.

Logan halted her bookshelf journey. Maybe that was her mother's attachment to this ramshackle house. Maybe she worried that if she took on the trappings of a more opulent residence, it would endanger her privacy, her seclusion, her comfortable anonymity in this place.

Still, a bathroom with Italian marble would be nice.

The thought reminded Logan that she wanted a shower before settling in for the evening with a Netflix movie and a glass of wine. She heard a shout and turned to the window to see two young boys

riding their bikes in the Fitzgeralds' driveway. Her eyes reluctantly fell on the chair below the window, rescued years ago from an unused guest bedroom and re-covered in a vibrant Laura Ashley print. Like a squirrel on the roof, her brain scrambled to avoid thinking about what had happened in that chair, and rushed, instead, to the chair itself. For if her mother spent no money *on* the house, she had no problem with splurging on items *in* the house. Elegant fabrics, expensive rugs and luxurious towels overlay warped cabinet doors, aged floors and rusted enamel tubs.

Logan's eyes stubbornly refused to settle on the chair's flamboyant print in pink and red and indigo and green, roving instead to the abstract oil painting on the adjacent wall that repeated its colors. Her eyes fell to the identically upholstered sofa beneath the painting, then slowly, slowly, returned to the chair. The police had taken the seat cushion, but the matching floral print persisted underneath and on the seat back. She saw it now, the rust-brown stain marring the pink and red.

Connor's blood. The emptying of so much blood that his life had ended. Just like that.

Logan spun abruptly and left the office, suddenly desperate for that hot shower.

Three hours later, she huddled beneath a blanket on the porch, listening to the palms scratch against the house as the wind rose, watching the moon stripe the distant heaving water. Her movie forgotten, she sipped from a delicious red blend she'd found in Connor's wine rack. That was one thing they'd always found to talk about, she and her stepfather. Connor was no wine snob, but he had loved to discover new reds at wineries when he and Julianna traveled, and to introduce them to Logan when they returned home.

She glanced around and saw a Tom Clancy hardback on a side table. That had to be his. This was Julianna's house, but Logan couldn't imagine it without the stepfather she'd known for the past twenty-two years. He'd inhabited these spaces as surely as her mother had.

On an impulse, Logan got up and walked to the living room, then mounted the unadorned stairs to the top floor. Julianna and Connor had shared the largest room, but the house was built before master bedroom suites were compulsory. Amazingly, Julianna, or maybe Connor, had covered its paneling with grasscloth. The comforter on the four-poster bed picked up the browns and taupes and olives from the wallpaper, making the space a tranquil backdrop for a collection of watercolors by local artists, including two of Logan's own.

As Logan entered, her bare feet sank into thick carpeting, and she stood for a moment before her paintings. One was a sunset over the marsh, the sky glowing orange and pink and purple. The other was a scene of the beach in front of this house, but it was on an overcast day, so the canvas was dominated by grays and dark blues. Seeing her work unexpectedly always jarred Logan. With her guard down, she grudgingly admitted these paintings were good.

She walked to Connor's side of the bed, and was surprised to see another of her works hanging above his nightstand. She hadn't realized this was where he'd hung it. A face remarkably like her own stared back at her, her mother's face of years before, blonde hair whipped by a fierce wind, aquamarine eyes echoed in her jacket and in the sea behind her, cheeks flushed, and a smile caught halfway between a laugh and a surprised shriek. Only the nose was wrong, she noted. Her mother's was straighter than she'd captured it.

She'd painted the portrait from Connor's favorite photograph, taken near the couple's house in Scotland. She'd nervously given him the canvas as a Christmas gift the year before last. His astonished delight apparently hadn't been faked since he'd hung the portrait where he'd see it every morning and every night.

Logan thought of another canvas, another face, turned against the wall of her studio. It'd been intended as a gift this past Christmas. She'd held back out of... what? Pique? Hurt? It was likely that she'd waited too long.

Lowering her gaze, she noted another Clancy book on the nightstand, along with a John Hart and a Ruth Ware. Scoping out the competition?

She hesitated for a moment. Surely the deputies had already been through it. There was no privacy for the deceased. She tugged open the nightstand's single drawer, and found a deck of worn cards sporting the Budweiser logo. Connor had taught her and her best friend Britt to play poker with these cards. She found a book light and plugged it in. It clicked uselessly. That was so like Connor. He never threw anything away.

She rummaged through the rest of the detritus – CDs, pencils, notepads, a telephone book from 2004, orphaned cables and chargers. She saw a yellow envelope and recognized her own handwriting. Puzzled, she opened it, but as soon as she saw the silly birthday card, she recognized it as one she'd sent her stepfather during her senior year in college. She opened it, knowing the words penciled inside before she read them.

"If I haven't thanked you properly for what you've done for our family," she read in her rounded cursive, "I want to do it now. Thank you, Connor. For everything."

There were no other cards in the drawer, no Christmas cards, no Valentines, no more birthday greetings. This was the one he'd saved, as stilted as its message was. A lump rose in her throat.

She shoved the drawer closed and opened the door beneath it. It held an orderly stack of three-ring binders. She opened the top one, which was filled with a neat sheaf of copy paper. "The Mango Thief," read the top page. "By Julianna Burke."

Logan slid to the floor and flipped through it, her excitement rising at seeing her mother's original manuscript. She'd never seen one before. Julianna and Connor, and eventually their team of editors and publicists, kept them closely hidden until publication. Logan read the hardbacks like everyone else, though hers did have unique autographs – "To my darling daughter" and such. And of course, *Charleston at Dusk* had been dedicated to her and Harrison and Connor. But an original manuscript? Logan had never thought to ask.

She pulled out more of the notebooks. *A House Built on Sand. The Palm Rustler. The Relentless Tide. Murder on the Marsh. Charleston at Dusk.*

How odd to see the famous books on these humble printed pages. She counted seven binders. But her mother had published only six novels.

She flipped open the last one. There was no title page, no acknowledgments, no dedication.

“It wasn’t that Martin Engler wanted to die,” she read. “It was simply that he didn’t care any more.”

Logan’s heart began to beat faster. Was this a new book by her mother? She’d had no idea she was close to finishing one. She rifled to the last page. The number 190 was tagged at the bottom. Above that, after the final paragraph, were the tantalizing words “Chapter 28”, followed by blank space.

Logan sat back against the bed. An unfinished manuscript. Is this how Connor had read along as her mother wrote?

In the days following Connor’s death, Logan had spent more time with her mother than in the past several years. Julianna had gone to stay with her neighbor, Liza Holland, and had moved through Liza’s house like a ghost – or a mental patient. She had appeared vacant at the funeral, with Margot hovering at her elbow to cover her lapses with both local mourners and New York publishing executives. Just last week, after deputies allowed Julianna back into this house, Logan had brought dinner. Through all that, her mother had never mentioned a new book.

But then she wouldn’t have. She was spacey at the best of times. After Connor’s death, her sleep became more disrupted, her empty stares more pronounced, her answers more nonsensical. Frankly, Logan had been relieved when Margot whisked her out of the country.

But if you didn’t have to deal with the real Julianna Burke, the thought of a new Julianna Burke mystery was delicious. Logan would snuggle into bed sooner than she had planned and see what Martin Engler’s problem was.

But first she had to lock up downstairs. She stood, nearly tripping over Annabelle, who’d followed her into Julianna’s room unnoticed. The dog whimpered.

“I know, baby girl,” Logan said. “Your mama will come back. I promise. But you get to sleep in my room tonight. How’s that?”

Annabelle trotted out of the room and dashed to Logan’s childhood bedroom. She sat at the door, looking up expectantly.

“Back in a flash,” Logan assured her.

She walked down the stairs and through the living quarters, turning off a living room lamp, rechecking the security alarm, and locking the door that led from the kitchen on to rickety side stairs. Circling back, she saw the glow from her mother’s office. She knew she’d left a light on, but the hairs on the back of her neck bristled nonetheless. She’d never been afraid in this house, not once, not even as a teen left alone overnight when her mother and Connor remained in Columbia or Greenville or Asheville after a book signing. “The neighbors are *so close*,” she’d whined in her successful campaign of persuasion not to be dragged along. But those close neighbors hadn’t prevented Connor’s murder. For that matter, neither had the other two people in the house.

Logan took a steady breath and returned to the office, the black binder still in her hand.

She reached to turn off the desk lamp, but then thought about this treasure she’d unearthed in Connor’s bedside table. What else might there be? Resolutely turning her back on the blood-stained chair, she pulled open the slender top drawer of her mother’s desk. She felt guilty for a moment. Though she’d talked to her distracted mother from the office doorway or slouched on the couch as a teen seeking permission for one thing or another, she’d never been alone in this space. Julianna had not forbidden it – the family simply understood that the study was her private place. Even Connor entered only as work-related Connor, not as husband Connor.

Feeling like a snoop, Logan peeked at the contents of the drawer and found an orderly arrangement of paper clips and pens, nail files and miniature staplers, lip balms and reading glasses.

She sat down in her mother’s chair and pulled open a file drawer on the right side of the desk. A neat array of labeled folders hung on metal

tracks. “Invitations” read one. “Speeches.” “Guns.” Logan glanced inside that one and found pictures of various guns, their barrels and stocks and triggers painstakingly identified. She ran a finger along the other files, came to one full-to-bursting marked “Mail/Fan”. Behind it was another one, slimmer, marked “Mail/Ideas”.

She opened the second folder and pulled out a handwritten letter with a yellowing newspaper article paper-clipped to it.

Dear Mrs Burke,

I am your biggest fan - well, at least in these parts.

Logan looked at the dateline on the article: Altoona, Iowa. She removed it and turned the news page over, taking care because of its age. The reverse side included the top of a page, so Logan could tell it came from the *Des Moines Register* on July 7, 2002. Seventeen years ago. She returned to the letter.

I loved, loved, loved Charleston at Dusk and eagerly await more of your novels. When I saw this in our local paper, I thought of you and how it might make a good story in your hands.

Logan picked up the newspaper article again. “Man Electrocuted in Freak Accident” read the headline. The reporter had played it straight, probably because his Midwestern editors wouldn’t allow him to make light of a death, no matter how bizarre.

An Altoona dentist died Tuesday after an opossum apparently crawled through the basement window of his Easter Lake house and gnawed through the protective covering of a hairdryer cord, according to the Polk County Medical Examiner. When Dr J. V. Gravley turned on the

dryer, the exposed wires came into contact with water on the sink counter, electrocuting him, said ME David Lang.

Lang said the teeth marks on the cord matched that on other cords in the cabin's boat shed. He also located a brush pile with a nest of opossum babies.

Gravley had been alone in his fishing cabin at Easter Lake for a long Fourth of July weekend, said his wife, Alicia Gravley. He frequently stayed alone in the cabin, fishing and catching up on his reading, she said. He had built the rustic retreat and was looking forward to remodeling it in his retirement.

Gravley was formerly Chairman of the Board of the Greater Des Moines Dental Society, President of the Altoona Rotary Club and an active golfer at Fox Run Country Club. He is survived by his wife and two sons, Carter and Cleveland Gravley.

Logan laughed out loud at the ridiculous story, not bothering to read the concluding paragraphs in which residents of Altoona testified to what a great man Dr Gravley was. But the article triggered a faint memory.

She returned to the letter:

Of course, the question people in Altoona are asking is, "Why was Dr Gravley drying his hair at a lonely, rustic fishing cabin?"

Who was he trying to look good for?

Was the lovely Alicia tired of her husband's long weekends away? Had they coincided with a certain dental assistant's absences? Or, for that matter, were the sons disgusted with their father's behavior?

The gossip will continue in these parts because that idiot medical examiner is satisfied with his possum theory.

*And who knows? Maybe it did happen that way. But I
thought you might get a kick out of it.*

Sincerely,

Rhonda McIntosh, Iowa's Biggest Julianna Burke Fan

Logan placed the letter and clipping on her mother's desk, all thoughts of the black blinder forgotten. She rose and stood before her mother's bookshelf, running her eyes along the titles. There was something about a chainsaw cord with peanut butter on it...

She picked out *The Palm Rustler*, her mother's darkly comic novel about a loving, middle-aged couple who received a large inheritance. Logan remembered the plot before she reached the page she was looking for. After getting the windfall, the two bought new cars, a huge house, and a vacation home. As they began to spend, and climb socially, they subtly changed. Eventually each began to suspect the other of infidelity and believed the other was going to take the money and disappear. They began to consider ways of killing each other, passively at first, not entirely sure it was what they wanted to do. That's when the wife dabbed peanut butter on her husband's chainsaw cord, knowing that squirrels had easy access to their garage.

Nothing happened at first, Logan remembered, and she'd been sure from the tone of the novel that the couple would realize their mutual misunderstanding and get back together. In fact, they were headed that way when a huge rain came and brought down a dead tree in the back yard. When the husband went out to dismantle the tree, the combination of frayed cord and standing water electrocuted him, horrifying his wife as much as anyone.

Logan leafed through the book, recalling how Julianna had carefully set the trap and manipulated the reader's emotions. Logan located the incident and re-read several pages, recalling the gut punch the episode had provided on first reading.

She leaned back in her mother's chair. So Julianna's peculiar idea of getting squirrels to assist in a murder had come from a reader. A real-life newspaper article. What about that?

Logan returned to the folder and read through another clip, this one from Sacramento, California. She shuddered in distaste at the description of a Lizzie Bordon-style murder. To her knowledge, her mother had never used it.

A third clipping told of a hit-and-run death that authorities in rural Maine had solved only two years after the event. Great fodder for somebody's novel, Logan thought, but her mother hadn't got around to it.

The fourth clip, however, startled her. It was closer to home, from Raleigh, North Carolina, and was a well-written, three-part newspaper series. A woman had killed her seventeen-year-old daughter when the girl stumbled on to an old crime from her mother's past. Logan stared at the three broadsheet pages allotted to the real-life murder. That was the plot of *A House Built on Sand*, though the daughter had become a son and the story was set in Charleston rather than Raleigh.

Logan spun around in the chair, her mind reeling. She had assumed her mother's novels sprang straight from her imagination. There was nothing wrong with taking the kernel of a story and running with it. After all, the books were made over the course of 350 twisting, turning pages, not in the plot summary. Still, she'd had no idea that readers sent in ideas.

She returned the papers to the folder and slid it into the file drawer. She'd come back later, perhaps, to match up clippings and how they made their way into her mother's books. Or maybe not. She wasn't sure how she felt about it.

She grabbed the black binder and clicked off the lamp, her lingering nervousness at being alone in the house trailing her up the stairs. Luckily it was matched by her eagerness to see how Martin Engler fared in her mother's hands.

Chapter 3

Julianna woke to the wind rattling the windows. This old stone house was unshakeable, but the windows, well, what could you expect when the North Sea flung March winds at them?

She got out of bed and went to the ocean-facing window, in search of the Isle of May. The story she loved best about this stretch of wild, eastern seaboard involved the Blue Stane, or stone, at the entrance to the kirk of St Mary's in Crail. Legend had it that the devil got so mad when he learned the church was being built that he stood on the Isle of May and hurled the boulder across the water. There was even a little sign in Crail that told the story, a naked blue devil dancing beside the text.

With the sun sparkling on the water, Julianna could indeed make out the small island in the distance. Funny, but her mind seemed clearer this morning. She didn't know if it came from a good night's sleep or if it was that the dreaded sundowners tripped her later in the day, but she definitely felt clearer. She'd talk that over with Connor.

A chill slithered up the back of her nightgown, then a cold dread hit her chest like an anvil. Oh, no. That was what she'd had to face last night. Margot had told her that Connor wasn't coming because Connor was dead. She had screamed in outraged disbelief and fear, she recalled with embarrassment.

How could she possibly have forgotten finding Connor in her office, bleeding, bleeding? She thought it was some sort of hemorrhage until she saw that most unbelievable sight: her very own blood-covered letter opener on the floor. The woman who had made millions writing such scenes didn't recognize it when she saw it in real life.

How could she possibly have forgotten the funeral, the horrible ordeal of all those people coming at her, all those people hugging her and patting her and crying against her neck, all those people whose names and faces she couldn't place?

She closed her eyes, gathered her strength. How long ago had that been? Margot said that Connor died on February 22, she was pretty sure. She reached for her purse and pulled out her daily planner. It opened to March 9, but the page was blank. She flipped back to March 8, and there in Margot's handwriting was the word "Scotland". Okay, two weeks then. Connor had been gone for two weeks.

She took a moment to let the grief wash over her with a pain so physical it made her want to retch. She drew a deep breath and allowed another moment for self-pity. The worst thing about losing her memory, she thought, was that she had to keep reliving the fresh pain of Connor's loss. How many days had she woken to face the loss with a piercing newness? Most of them, she supposed.

She yanked her nightgown over her head and pulled on a pair of sweatpants, a hooded sweatshirt and heavy socks. She ran her hands through her ash blonde hair, cut stylishly short. In the kitchen Sheona had coffee ready, and Margot and Evan were already eating.

"Good morning, Mrs Burke," said Evan, standing to leave. The women smiled a greeting. Julianna felt everyone waiting – probably to see if she knew them.

"Good morning, Evan. Sheona. Margaret." She smiled mischievously. "Oops, I mean Margot." She saw their eyebrows shoot up. "Now, now, don't get excited. I have all day to forget you."

The three of them laughed. Julianna poured her own coffee, and Margot pushed a pill across the table toward her. "Your ginkgo."

Julianna swallowed the pill with a sip of coffee, and accepted a piece of toasted sourdough bread and orange marmalade from Sheona.

"What do you want to do today, Julianna?" Margot asked.

"I want to look online and see if the sheriff's office has turned up anything. Then take a walk, maybe up to Crail."

"I've been online this morning," Margot said. "Nothing yet."

Julianna tried to remember talking to the Charleston County Sheriff's investigators. Surely she had. She hated to admit to her confusion, but curiosity won out. She waited until Evan left the kitchen and Sheona was busy in another room. She slid her chair directly across from Margot and leaned forward.

"Can you tell me about my interviews with the detectives? I'm having trouble remembering."

"Sure," said her assistant. Margot could've come from this part of the world, her mane of curly red-gold hair pulled into a loose ponytail, and freckles liberally sprinkled across her pretty face. With her frequent and easy smile, she looked even younger than thirty-four. She had moved from the South Carolina foothills to attend the College of Charleston, and as so many graduates did, opted to stay in the coastal city. Connor had hired her two years before, stealing her from a wedding planner after observing her efficiency at a neighbor's extravaganza. She had been an English major and a Julianna Burke fan, so she leapt at the opportunity. Julianna questioned how long she'd want to stay cooped up with a couple old enough to be her parents. Connor said the speeches and book tour appearances provided plenty of stimulation. Julianna wasn't so sure.

Margot was of the same generation as her children, but Julianna related to her differently. She seemed older, somehow, more poised, more organized, and certainly more thoughtful.

Now the young woman sipped her coffee. "How can I help?"

Julianna smiled at her fondly. "First, I want to apologize for my behavior last night."

Margot shook her head. "No, Julianna. I understood what was happening. The flight, the rain, the strain on you was terrible."

"I know, my dear. But the histrionics cannot have been easy for you, and I do apologize." She paused for a moment as a wave of memory passed over her. That was how grief felt in these moments of lucidity – like huge waves hitting her over and over, dragging her underwater, hammering her until she couldn't catch her breath. Could forgetting be any worse? She didn't see how. She smiled tremulously.

“So, what did the detectives want to know? And how did I answer them?”

“Well, they talked to you the evening...” Margot looked into her coffee cup. “The evening it happened.”

“I called them?”

“I did. You ran up to my room and told me to call 9-1-1.”

“So you were in the house too?”

Margot cocked her head. “Yes, I live there, remember?”

“Of course. I, ah, just didn’t remember if you were home. It was on a Friday, right?”

Margot nodded. “I left you working on the porch. I had come to see if you wanted an afternoon pick-me-up – coffee or tea or a pina colada.” Both women smiled. One of the bonuses Margot brought to the job was bartending. She blended several specialties, from mojitos to watermelon sangrias to frozen pina coladas. Happy hour was a cherished summer tradition for Julianna and Connor and the neighbors they invited over.

“But in February?” Julianna asked.

“Actually, yes. It was one of those freak warm weeks. You had people over the afternoon before and I’d made our first batch of margaritas this year. The Fitzgeralds. The Satterfields. Liza Holland and her friend. You seemed to really enjoy the drinks, so I thought you might like one that day too.”

“And did we have one?”

“No.” Margot hesitated. “To tell you the truth, I’m not even sure you heard me. You were really hunkered down over your laptop.”

“Doing what?”

Now it was Margot’s turn to look surprised. “Working on your novel.”

“So I *am* in the middle of a novel?” Margot continued to look ill at ease. Julianna sat back, speculating as to what her assistant wasn’t saying. “It’s okay. You can tell me.”

Finally, Margot blurted, “I think you were in the middle of a ‘wandering’.”

“Oh, I see. What makes you say that?”

“Well, this is going to sound silly, but you have this look you get when I mention a pina colada. You look roguish, younger, like a college girl playing hooky. You once told me that you and your girlfriends skipped class on the first beautiful day each spring and laid in the sun on your dorm roof and made frozen drinks. You kept the blender in your room because you lived beside the rooftop door.”

Julianna smiled, remembering those long ago days stretched out on beach towels on the flat surface that served as their personal sundeck. That’s why she and her buddies requested third-floor dorm rooms. Who *were* the girls? Martha, she recalled. Nancy. Stefanie with an “f”. Jackie. Karen. All of them students at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She was on a memory roll.

Margot was speaking again. “Anyway, when I asked on that Friday afternoon, you looked up and your eyes didn’t look quite right. Kind of glazed over. You said, ‘No, thank you,’ and returned to your keyboard. I honestly didn’t think you’d taken in what I asked. I’d never seen you like that before, but I’d heard you and Mr Burke talk about it.” She shrugged. “I thought it might be that wandering thing, anyway.”

Julianna tried to picture the scene Margot described. Of course she knew her favorite writing spot on the screened porch, knew the long table kept clear of papers because of the constant breeze, knew the way she absently reached for a coffee mug or a sweating glass of iced tea or a chilled glass of Chardonnay. But she couldn’t picture a warm day two weeks ago or Margot asking if she wanted a pina colada. Where was that memory? Her newfound confidence began to waver.

“Go on,” she said.

“So I went to your office to speak to Mr Burke. He was lying on the sofa with his laptop on his stomach – you know how he used to do that?”

Julianna nodded, her eyes suddenly filling with tears.

“We talked about the invitation from the University of South Carolina for the spring.”

Julianna’s chin jerked up. “You didn’t accept, did you?”

“No, no. Everything... happened. I emailed them that you couldn’t make it.”

Julianna was unsure she’d ever be able to speak publicly again.

“We only talked for two or three minutes, Mr Burke and I,” Margot continued. “Then I went to my room and worked on details of some events we *had* accepted. For next fall and beyond. Then I lay down for a nap.”

Julianna nodded to encourage her.

“It was getting dark when I heard you walking through the kitchen. You know how that floor squeaks even if you’re barefoot? I think that squeak is what woke me up. Then just a minute or so later, you ran up to my room, shouting, ‘Call 9-1-1!’ I called on my cell then tried to ask you what had happened, but you couldn’t answer. You just screamed, ‘Connor! It’s Connor!’ and ran back downstairs. So I told the dispatcher I thought it was a heart attack. I couldn’t think of anything else it could be.”

“A heart attack?”

“Yeah, that’s why the fire department came to the house. They’re first responders.”

“I didn’t know they did.”

“Yeah. I followed you downstairs. That’s when I saw Mr Burke.” Margot paused, recalling the blood-soaked scene. “And so I called 9-1-1 again and told them it wasn’t a heart attack but a stabbing. The Sullivan’s Island police were right behind the fire truck.”

Julianna waited for Margot to say more, and when she didn’t, asked, “So someone came into the house between you speaking to Connor, and me finding Connor in my office? How long was that?”

“Maybe an hour and a half.” Margot sighed. “I guess I slept pretty hard. Anyway, I didn’t realize all this until later, but apparently Sully’s police chief is in transition. They’ve got some new guy coming in from Pennsylvania.”

“Pennsylvania? My word.”

Margot laughed, relieved at the momentary break in tension. “And I hear they have Yankees in Atlanta.”

Julianna slapped at her hand. “Go on.”

“When the interim chief saw that the victim was Mr Burke, he called the mayor, who told him to call the county sheriff for back-up.”

“Ah. Lance Royston. Did he come?” Julianna tried to recall seeing her old high school friend, but couldn’t.

“He did come. Later. His detectives arrived first. And they were more than a little skeptical that neither of us heard anything. But I honestly didn’t and I assured the one I talked to that you were ‘in the zone’ and didn’t either.”

“Did I tell them that?” Julianna asked. “That I didn’t hear anything?” Margot nodded.

Julianna had a sudden vision of a slim black woman in a taupe suit and low heels. “Wait, I talked with a woman in the living room, didn’t I?” she said, fragments coming back.

Margot looked up. “Yes, that’s right.”

Julianna closed her eyes and pictured the high-ceilinged living room of her beach house, paneled in the ubiquitous knotty pine, but soaring twenty feet at its apex. She had kept her mother’s huge fishing net on one wall, dotted with starfish and sand dollars and shimmering aqua sea glass. It was totally 1960s, her daughter Logan complained, but Julianna liked it.

Now she could see the detective inspecting the net, then taking a seat on the striped couch that picked up the aqua of the sea glass. She tried to hear herself addressing the woman: Detective? Officer? But she drew a blank on the name.

Margot seemed to read her mind. “Detective Cynthia Giles talked to you. Detective Brad Lancaster talked to me. They separated us pretty quickly.”

“I can’t remember what I told her.”

“When the first officers on the scene talked to us, you were struggling. Understandably,” Margot added hastily. She paused, choosing her words carefully. “You told them that you didn’t hear anything – not me talking to Connor in your office and no one coming in the front door. At first they didn’t believe that was possible.

Then they separated us. Detective Lancaster took me, and Detective Giles stayed with you. Ultimately, Harrison and Logan and I told them about your ‘wanderings’. I hope that was all right. It seemed the best way to protect you.”

“Protect me?”

Margot looked uncomfortable again. “I don’t think they ever suspected you of killing Mr Burke. Not really.” Julianna looked at her in horror. “But they couldn’t believe that you – or I for that matter – didn’t hear some sort of commotion. That’s the puzzling part. How someone came in so quietly and killed Mr Burke without raised voices or arguments or anything else to alert me and you. I can’t answer that.”

“And fingerprints?”

Margot looked miserable. “Yours, of course, since it was your letter opener. But apparently Mr Burke pulled it out and smeared any new prints that were on it. So there were only his and yours.”

Julianna looked at her in horror, a realization dawning. “He pulled it out?”

Margot drew a deep breath and nodded. “That’s one of their theories – that he was sleeping on the couch when he was stabbed. That’s why we didn’t hear voices. Then he staggered over to the chair by the window and pulled the letter opener out. That’s where all the blood was.”

Despite the coffee, Julianna felt her energy flagging. Maybe it was the dismal nature of the conversation. Or maybe it was the heaviness of her grief. She glanced out of the kitchen window and wasn’t surprised to see that the blue sky had disappeared, and a cloud bank of iron gray was all that was visible. Scotland’s weather tended to change hourly, if not more often.

The worst part was seeing her future – whether here on this frigid coast or in the humid subtropics of Sullivan’s Island – spool endlessly before her. Knowing that she had to get through the rest of her life without Connor. That life held no interest for her any more, no spark. She tried to remember what she’d been like two weeks ago, and couldn’t. Tried to remember what she’d been writing, and couldn’t.

That woman was gone, as surely as Connor was.

Her head drooped and she decided to return to bed rather than walk to Crail.

"Oh, one more thing," Margot said. "The detectives asked over and over why Annabelle didn't bark."

Julianna frowned. "Why didn't she? She barks at everyone." She looked around in confusion, and her voice took on a hint of panic. "Wait a minute. Where *is* Annabelle?"

"She's fine," Margot said. "Logan's got her." She paused to give Julianna a moment to calm down. "But the night it happened, she was with you when you came up the stairs. Apparently she was on the porch with you the entire time."

"Annabelle didn't hear someone enter the house?" said Julianna. "That's not possible."

Margot gave a rueful grimace. "That's what the officers thought. I would've thought the same thing." The women eyed each other, contemplating the implication of Margot's words.

"Do they still think that?" Julianna asked. "Do they suspect one of us?"

Margot started to say something, then stopped. She seemed to reconsider. "Well, they allowed us to come here, which tells me no. But they have our address and phone numbers. If they give the word, we have to return within twenty-four hours."

"That's rather strange, isn't it?"

"Well, given that you *are* Julianna Burke, they figure you're not going to go unnoticed in Scotland for long. Plus, Dr and Mrs Fitzgerald and Liza Holland spoke to Sheriff Royston last week. They guaranteed our return if there's any reason he needs us. And I think they lit a fire under him to find the real killer."

Julianna stood shakily. "So now Lance Royston knows about my memory too. We went to high school together, you know. Did I already tell you that?" She closed her eyes, but it only made her dizzy. "I suppose it will be only a matter of time before the media catches on." She looked around as if she'd forgotten

why she was in the kitchen. “Did I take my pill already?” Margot nodded.

“Thank you, Margot. For telling me all this.” She started to leave, shuffling as if she’d aged ten years since waking. She thought of something, and turned. “Have I asked you about this before?”

Margot looked uneasy for a moment, then nodded. “Every morning,” she said.

Chapter 4

Logan awoke on Saturday to a single ring of the doorbell followed by the high-pitched frenzy of Annabelle's barking. When her heart stopped pounding, Logan hurried down the stairs in irritation, yelling for the dog to shut up.

She flung open the door to find Annabelle on the other side of the storm door. She stared in bewilderment for a moment, then opened the door for Liza Holland. "I forgot how much your Maxie looks like Annabelle," she laughed. "It's unbelievable."

The trim older woman in cycling pants and sweatshirt smiled. "All these brown ones look alike," she said, as a fawn-colored Shiba Inu with the same white forehead and foot markings as Annabelle nosed her way into the house. "Is it okay for her to come in? Julianna lets her."

"Sure," said Logan, throwing the door wide. "Can I offer you coffee?"

"If it's no trouble."

Liza Holland unsnapped Maxie's leash, and the two dogs sniffed each other before bounding through the house and into the kitchen. Logan opened the door for them to go on to the porch, and they jumped on to Annabelle's couch. "I agree with them," Logan said. "Best seats in the house."

Liza perched on a stool at the U-shaped kitchen counter. "I just stopped by to see if you want me to walk Annabelle," she said. "I was doing it before Julianna left for Scotland."

"Really? That's awfully nice of you." Logan filled the coffeemaker with cold water, then spooned coffee into the basket filter. "My mother said you guys walked together."

“We did... before,” Liza said. “But Julianna hasn’t been up to it, and Shibas are terribly high energy. They ramble around the house at night if you don’t walk them. But I don’t have to tell you that, since you’ve had her at your place.”

“Yeah, I learned the hard way.” Logan took two mugs from an antique kitchen cabinet that had been her grandmother’s and placed them on the chipped tile counter. “But we very much appreciate you doing that.”

“So how’s Julianna doing? Have you heard from her?” Liza brushed her silvery-white hair out of her eyes, which were an iridescent shade of blue. She didn’t wait for an answer. “I cannot imagine the pain she is in. The way she talked about Connor wasn’t the way most women talk about their husbands. Best friend, husband, business partner. It was like she lost everything in one fell swoop.”

“Yeah, I know,” Logan agreed. “I haven’t talked to her, but I got an email from Margot. She said Mother is very much the same – clearer in the mornings and gradually getting worse as the day wears on.” She shrugged. “I’m afraid that whatever was going on with her memory has been magnified by losing Connor.”

“She told me that Charlie recommended ginkgo supplements. Are they not helping?”

“Dr Fitz?” Logan asked. “I didn’t know. But I suppose they can’t hurt. She was so much worse before she and Margot left. Harrison and I are hoping that getting out of this house will help.” Logan poured the coffee and slid a mug to Liza.

“And the sheriff’s office?” asked the neighbor. “Any progress?”

“They’re not telling us. Those two detectives who questioned Mother are coming by this morning to see me and Harrison. Again. What time is it anyway?”

Liza looked at her watch. “Nine o’clock. Do you need me to leave so you can get dressed?”

“No, they aren’t coming until ten. I’m glad for the company. Catch me up on island gossip.”

Liza threw back her head and laughed. “You know I wasn’t born here. I’ll never be an insider.”

"Be that as it may, what's going on with the Satterfields? And Mullenses? And Fitzgeralds? I need to know we're not the only subject being discussed."

Liza laughed again. "You are bad, my girl. Let's see. I haven't seen the Mullenses all winter. They go to Key West for four months. But the Satterfields and Fitzgeralds were right here two weeks ago, the night before... Well, you know."

Logan turned from where she'd been rummaging in the refrigerator for milk. "No, I don't know. Mother had a party?"

"Not really a party. More like happy hour." Liza shifted to get more comfortable on the wobbly stool. "You may remember we had a real warm week in late February. Margot makes those yummy drinks that we guzzle all summer. But she called and said Connor and Julianna wanted us over for a preview of spring. She made margaritas and we all brought salsa and chips and guacamole. It was fun." She looked sad for a moment. "Who knew it was the last time?"

"Who was here?"

"Charlie and Meg Fitzgerald. Dick and Sunny Satterfield from across the street. My friend Fred Manigault from Mount Pleasant. He was at my house because we had plans for dinner, but we came here instead. Oh, and that woman from your mother's publishing house."

"What woman?"

"You know her. She was back for the funeral."

"There must've been fifteen people from her publisher at the funeral."

"Yes, but this was someone Julianna and Connor worked closely with. I think she even spent the night here. Early fifties? Black hair? Loud?"

Logan grinned. "That's got to be Renata O'Steen."

"Yes, that's the name."

"Did the detectives talk to all those people?"

"I'm sure they did. I know they talked to Fred and me and the Fitzgeralds. But Renata left the morning after the margarita party for

New York. Since she was already out of town when Connor was killed, I don't know whether they tracked her down or not."

Logan twisted the mug in her hands. "I'm not sure I'll have anything more to tell them."

Liza looked at her without answering, waiting quietly, intentionally, her blue eyes kind. It struck Logan that the older woman was a good listener. Maybe that's what Julianna prized in her.

When Logan didn't follow up, Liza said, "Why would you think you wouldn't have anything to tell them? They need to know about Connor – who he was, what he did, who he knew. From everything I've heard, you and he were buddies. Anything you could tell them about him would help."

"Yes," she said slowly. "But they asked about that before. Our relationship, if we got along, things like that. We were okay. But my mother and I not so much. I hadn't been out here for six months before he died."

"I didn't realize. Why was that?"

Logan shrugged. "No real reason. I mean, we didn't have a fight or anything like that. It was just that my mother was wrapped up in her writing. And Connor. She didn't have a lot of time for me."

Liza nodded solemnly. "Not even Christmas? No, that's right. They were in Florida." Liza continued to look at Logan steadily, and Logan expected her to protest on Julianna's behalf. Instead she said, "Mothers and daughters have complicated relationships. They often leave things unsaid and undone without realizing it."

Logan looked up from her coffee mug. "What did she tell you about me?"

"Oh my goodness, what didn't she tell me? Logan is smart. Logan is beautiful. Logan is a talented artist but she doesn't know it yet. Logan is sensitive. Logan is kind. Logan is a good cook. I don't think Logan reads my books."

Logan let out a bark of laughter. "*What!*? I don't know which is weirder! That she thinks I'm a good cook or that I don't read her books!"

“So you don’t cook but you do read?” Liza smiled.

“In a nutshell, yeah.” Logan shook her head in perplexity. “I’m probably her biggest fan. And she doesn’t even know it, huh?”

“No, she doesn’t,” Liza said, touching Logan’s arm briefly. “You might want to tell her.”

“If it’s not too late,” said Logan. “I’m not sure it would register now.” She wiped a T-shirt sleeve across her eyes. “Have you read her novels?”

“I hadn’t before I moved here,” Liza admitted. “I’d heard of Julianna Burke, of course, but I wasn’t a mystery fan. But when I found out she was my neighbor, I began reading them. And I’d contend they are not simply mysteries. Your mother elevates the genre.”

“What’s your favorite one?”

“That’s hard to say. I loved *Charleston at Dusk*. But I’d have to say *A House Built on Sand* was my favorite.”

“Ah, the jolly subject of filicide.” Logan remembered the newspaper clippings from Julianna’s files and thought about mentioning them. Would that be disloyal to her mother?

“What?” asked Liza. “You look like you want to say something.”

“I found a folder in her file drawer,” Logan said slowly. “Apparently readers send her clippings of real-life murders in the hope she will use them in a book.”

“Yes, she mentioned that.”

“She did?”

“Sure. When you walk as much as we do, you talk a lot.”

Logan relaxed. “I just never knew that some of those things really happened. I thought they came from her imagination.”

“Well, believe me, to turn a 3,000- or even a 10,000-word newspaper article into a 100,000-word book takes plenty of imagination,” said Liza. “She may have borrowed the smallest grain of an idea, but it was her talent and discipline that turned it into a pearl.” She smiled. “You see why I’m not a writer. My metaphors are rather mundane.”

Logan laughed. “I guess you’re right.”

“Do you feel it’s somehow cheating to use ideas from real life?”

“Oh no, not at all. It just feels odd to think I know her plots and characters so well and didn’t grasp something as central as that.”

Liza finished her coffee and slid off the stool, placing her mug in the scratched enamel sink. “Let me get going so you can get dressed for your detectives. I’ll be glad to take Annabelle and bring her back in a little while.”

“That would be great,” Logan said, calling for the dog. “The more that chick gets tired out, the better.”

After Liza had left, Logan ran upstairs and dressed in jeans, a lightweight taupe sweater and flip-flops. She pulled her sun-streaked hair into a ponytail and brushed on a little mascara. She had her mother’s fair coloring and petite build, while Harrison took after their burly dad.

There were framed photos of her and Harrison in her old bedroom. She could see Rivers Arnette in his son’s face. She didn’t know her father well and didn’t care to. Her mother never talked about him, so most of what she knew came from Harrison and an occasional cryptic comment from Grandmother Arnette. Rivers was her youngest son, wild and handsome enough to turn the head of the bookish Julianna Montague when they met the summer after her junior year at Wake Forest. Rivers was a drinker and a gambler even then, but the prominent Arnette family was able to buy him out of trouble. Julianna found him dashing and exciting, and they married the spring she graduated.

But marriage didn’t suit him. His vices got worse, and he ran to fat. He had little interest in his children and, after a while, little interest in coming home. The couple divorced when Logan was two. The senior Arnettes, whose other sons were a bank executive and a lawyer, seemed relieved when he left Charleston.

Logan had seen her father exactly twice during her twenties, when he returned home for his parents’ funerals. She was embarrassed by the large, ambling man, his face marked by broken blood vessels. She didn’t like seeing him, because her embarrassment led to incredulity that he’d been married to her mother, which led to guilt for feeling

that way. When she could get past the guilt, she recognized that she too was glad he'd left Charleston, and glad his leaving had provided an opening for Connor Burke to enter their lives.

The doorbell rang, and she was grateful Annabelle was gone so she didn't have to hear the piercing yap. Coming up the oyster-shell driveway behind Detectives Lancaster and Giles was Harrison, beefy and red-faced and irritable.

"Detectives, it's good to see you," she said, going over their names in her head. Brad Lancaster was blandly handsome and stone-faced, dressed in the navy blazer and khaki slacks that was the business-casual uniform of the Lowcountry. Cynthia Giles was African-American and athletic-looking; Logan got the feeling that her conservative gray pantsuit would be history the minute she was off duty. "You remember my brother, Harrison Arnette."

Harrison barely acknowledged them, slumping into a wing chair and propping his boat shoes on the matching ottoman. Logan left them sitting in silence and went to the kitchen for the fresh pot of coffee she'd brewed. She filled four mugs and placed them on a whimsical fish-shaped tray along with spoons and cream and sugar. The detectives waited politely as she re-entered the living room, while Harrison wore his habitual scowl. He was her only brother and she loved him. But she found that dealing with him from afar was preferable to having him nearby. Not unlike her mother.

"Okay, how can we help you?" she asked, handing around the coffee mugs and motioning for everyone to help themselves to cream and sugar.

Detective Giles launched right in. "Remind me what it is you do, Ms Arnette."

Harrison laughed. "You better ask what she hasn't done," he said. "It won't take as long."

Logan shot him a withering look. "I'm a receptionist at a medical office," she said.

Detective Giles looked up mildly. "And from what your brother says, you've had other jobs?"

“Well, yes,” she said, reddening. “Dog groomer. Waitress. Marketing rep. Retail clerk. Art gallery manager.”

“She’s an aspiring *artiste*,” Harrison put in. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t pay the bills.”

She tried to ignore her brother. “I currently work for Drs Littlemeyer and Johns in Charleston. They’re internists.”

“And how long have you been with them?”

“Eighteen months.”

Harrison hooted. “That’s a record, isn’t it, Sis?”

Logan clamped her lips to prevent herself from answering him. Detective Giles turned to him. “And, Mr Arnette? You’re a real estate developer?”

“That I am.”

“Do you build on Sullivan’s Island?”

“Don’t I wish? If you can talk my mother into moving, we can tear this place down and build a real house.” He waved in disgust at the fishing net on the wall of knotty pine. For the first time, Logan felt a twinge of disagreement with her brother. Maybe this old house ought to stay just the way it was, she thought, if for nothing more than to frustrate him.

“In your previous statements,” continued Detective Giles, “you indicated that you were at your separate homes on Friday evening, February 22. What we wanted to follow up on this morning is to get impressions of your mother and her assistant and the neighbors.”

“Sounds like a blast,” Harrison muttered.

“We are still puzzled,” said Detective Giles, “as to how someone entered the house without Mrs Burke or her assistant, Margot Riley, hearing anything.”

Harrison snorted. “Margot, I’ll grant you,” he said. “That’s a mystery – if she didn’t do it. But didn’t you get the memo about our mother being a space cadet?”

The officers didn’t react. “We heard from you two and Dr Fitzgerald that your mother has memory problems,” Detective Giles continued. “Perhaps even dementia. That doesn’t explain not hearing the door

open or your stepfather being stabbed to death.” She looked at them both directly.

“I don’t know what we can tell you,” Logan said. “We weren’t here.”

“Can you tell us about your mother’s neighbors?”

Harrison looked interested in spite of himself. “Her neighbors? You think Connor outraged somebody with a loud lawn mower or weed whacker?”

“We don’t know what to think,” Detective Giles answered calmly, her dark face and hazel eyes betraying no trace of annoyance. Yet. “But we know that Mr and Mrs Burke held a gathering here the night before Mr Burke’s death. And we wondered if something happened that led to his murder the next day.”

Harrison dropped his feet to the floor and leaned forward. “First I’ve heard of a ‘gathering’. Did you know about that, Logan?”

“Yes. Liza Holland mentioned it. The Fitzgeralds, the Satterfields, Liza and a man she’s seeing, and Renata from Ironwater.”

“What was Renata doing down here?” Harrison asked. Logan shrugged and turned to Detective Giles. “I really don’t know. Do you?”

“We’ve talked to Ms O’Steen,” she said, looking unsure about revealing information. She glanced at her partner. “She said she was consulting with your mother about a book she’s working on.”

“Mom’s working on a book?” Harrison asked, looking dumbfounded. “I didn’t think she was up to it.”

Logan only nodded, unwilling to share what she knew of the half-completed manuscript lying open, waiting for her return, on her bedroom floor.

“So, the neighbors?” Detective Giles prodded.

“Well, let’s see,” said Harrison. “Old Fitz and his wife are boozers, and they have a passel of maladjusted kids who are waiting for them to die so they can tear each other apart over the oceanfront property.”

“Harrison!” Listening to him belittle her was one thing, but Logan loved the Fitzgeralds. Their daughter Britt was her best friend, and she had spent a lot of time in their home. She turned to the detectives.

“Ignore him. Dr Fitzgerald is our family doctor, and Meg is great. We grew up with their family.”

Harrison persisted. “Dick Satterfield comes from old Charleston money. His wife, Honey or Bunny or After His Money, showed up from the big city to show us hicks how it’s done. She sits on the board of the symphony and talks about it incessantly.”

Logan translated: “Mr Satterfield is a perfectly nice man who married Sunny, from Atlanta, I think. She was a talented violinist and now helps the symphony raise money.”

Detective Lancaster tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile behind his coffee mug. Cynthia Giles shot him a warning look.

Harrison kept on. “Renata O’Steen was originally Mother’s agent, but she went to work for her publisher, Ironwater, and became sort of her editor and liaison. Of course, the even better connected Connor – who up and married the author – represented a challenge for her. If we’re looking for a murderer among the party guests, my money’s on Renata.”

Logan threw up her hands. “Renata and Mother have been close for Mother’s entire career. No way she’d do anything to hurt her.”

“Well then,” said Harrison, “that leaves the lovely Liza Holland and her mysterious beau.” He turned to Logan. “Who’d she bring? That gay guy with the designer house?”

“She said his name was Fred Manigault. He lives in Mount Pleasant.”

“Fred Manigault! I know him! He owns that restaurant on the marsh. The Mangrove. Funny he never mentioned he was consorting with Lady Liza.”

Logan rolled her eyes and waited for the detectives to say something. But they were carefully noting every crazy thing Harrison said. She supposed they rarely got such unfiltered opinions.

A knock on the door diverted everyone’s attention. Before Logan could get up, the door opened and a slender hand slipped in, unhooking a leash. “She’s home!” called a woman’s voice. “I won’t disturb you.”

Annabelle charged into the living room, nails skittering across the wood floor and barking madly. “Give her a minute,” Logan instructed.

“She’ll calm down. It’s okay, girl. Come over here.” The dog took up watch beside Logan’s chair, her tail down and her eyes on the detectives and Harrison.

“You’d never know I was family,” Harrison grumbled. “She hates me as much as she does you guys.”

Detective Giles looked at Detective Lancaster and a silent message passed between them.

“That was something else we wondered about,” said Detective Lancaster, slipping into the conversation for the first time. “The dog.”

“As in why does our mother have such an obnoxious dog?”

Logan imagined that Detective Lancaster would like to punch Harrison’s smug face. “No,” he said calmly, “as in why didn’t the dog bark when someone came into the house and killed Mr Burke?”

Harrison looked at Annabelle. “Good question,” he said, serious for the first time. “She barks at everybody who comes to that door.”

Logan thought of something. “There’s a storm door at the front,” she said. “Mother and Connor sometimes left the front door open to let in the afternoon sun. So maybe Annabelle saw who was coming in and knew them.”

Harrison shook his head. “It wouldn’t matter. That dog barks even when Mother comes in.”

“Well, Harry,” said Logan, deliberately using a name he hated, “I’m not sure you’re the best judge of that. You’re never here.”

The detectives remained silent, watching the siblings. Harrison smirked. “Well, *Sis*,” he said, using a nickname she hated equally, “you’re the only one I can think of that Annabelle *wouldn’t* bark at. So I guess that makes you or Margot or Mother the prime suspect.”

For a long moment, everyone looked at the Shiba sitting alert at Logan’s side. “Mr Arnette,” said Detective Lancaster, skimming over Harrison’s accusation, “earlier you mentioned your suspicion of your mother’s assistant. What can you tell us about Margot Riley?”

“Ah, Margot’s okay, I guess.” Harrison seemed bored with his earlier game. “But who knows? She hooked her wagon to Mother’s star, and it was fading. Maybe Connor was trying to fire her.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Logan interrupted. “Connor was not trying to fire Margot. Mother needs her more than ever. We all do.”

“And why is that, Ms Arnette?” asked Detective Lancaster.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Harrison answered instead. “Our mother’s losing her mind.”