

ONE

Aryn Rayburn had become accustomed to violence, to people dying around her. She doubted it was the sort of thing any person with a functioning conscience ever hoped for, but this time was certainly easier than the last. Her breathing had become soothing now and she recalled all of the years she had spent running, training as an Olympian. She understood the rate of conditioning and what to expect from her body. The sweat on her skin had mixed with the salt of the sea and turned sticky and lukewarm like the blood on her fingertips.

It was nearly five months to the day since the first time she had been so directly exposed to death and murder. Then, like now, it was about greed and secrets kept by generations preceding her own. Again she had been chosen for her love of history and her superior knowledge of Bishop's Island. She had only ever taken an interest in history because it gave her a greater sense of connection to her beloved grandfather, Arthur Rocard.

Arthur was the first newspaperman on Bishop's Island and had a reputation for truth and fairness. He was the sort

of man who possessed real character and integrity. Aryn had met him only one time, the day she was welcomed into this world, before his death in a tragic accident a day later. That accident claimed the lives of forty-two islanders, travelers who found themselves trapped upon Hollis Bridge the night it fell into the Pacific.

Had she believed in fate, she would have marveled over the fact that her in-laws, who she never met, were also traveling on that bridge. With them, their only son, who would grow-up to become her husband, Ryan. He was on the mainland now, believing her to be hip deep in another dull discovery about her beloved island. Eyeing the clock on the dashboard in front of her, she checked it against her wristwatch and wondered if it would be too late to call on him now.

Ryan had risked his life once to rescue Aryn the first time that history got her into trouble. He and two other men helped her defeat the Vilkova brothers and a band of mercenaries hired to help find gold stolen by Nathaniel Bishop, founder of the island. Like the correlation between her birth and her grandfather's death, she and Ryan had made a new friend that day only to have to say farewell to another. Still, Aryn had protected Ryan every bit as much as her husband protected her.

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Once more, secrets had threatened her life. As it happened, she had discovered that secrets and history went hand-in-hand, and she had much to learn about both. She felt she was correct in thinking that one protected the other, a marriage of sorts. Sometimes people composed history to cover a secret because the truth would have been too damaging, too unforgivable.

If there was one thing Aryn had learned since her encounter with the Vilkova brothers, it was forgiveness. She had struggled to forgive her captors and the emotional aftermath their actions created in her life. She had worked hard to be forgiven by Ryan, for having pushed him away in their marriage prior to her abduction. She had worked equally hard to forgive him for the very things that drove them apart in the first place. She had even sought forgiveness from the family of Shawn Moss, the loyal friend who lay down his life that Ryan might save her.

She had asked the God she served to forgive her for all she had to do in order to survive her abduction. So many lives had been destroyed over the course of those three December days that she wondered if she might ever do enough good to restore some sense of balance. Everything came down to balance: her life and her grandfather's death, history and secrets, truth and consequence, resentment and

forgiveness. As she caught a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror, she reconsidered consequence.

Two wet strands of blond hair hung across her eye, dividing her attention in much the same way it divided her blue iris. A split in the flesh of her cheek had turned pink from the brunt of force she had suffered only hours earlier. In the darkness, to which her eyes had adapted, the wound appeared gray, like a gloomy smudge of charcoal on an untouched canvas. The same strike had caused a ringing in her inner ear to intensify, though it had never quite healed from a diving expedition she was forced to make by her former captors.

Now the ringing felt as though it were burrowing into her brain, into the memories, as though to cloud her perception and to dizzy her thoughts in much the same way it hindered her balance. She watched the splash of light from ambulance sirens as they rippled across her countenance and turned the center of her facial wound crimson and black. The ambulance was parked at such an angle that she could see the body bag inside and for a moment she stared at it as though to ensure the person within would not rise. A slamming car door distracted her and she saw a smooth-faced man with tattooed forearms move to the front end of a car too feminine in design and color to suit him.

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The stranger reminded Aryn of a boy lost in the crowd. His creamy complexion became greener by the second as he looked around with sheepish eyes. She wondered what his part in this unwinding tale might be and watched him with a sense of captivation as first responders moved to and fro. It fascinated her that in the maze of confusion, the man had chosen a perfectly peaceful place to stand. Until he reached out towards an agent in a baggy jacket, he had gone unnoticed.

She could not discern the man's words, only muffled noise that made her think of a voice under the water. The scent of salt and sand on her clothes reminded her of her own time submersed and she brought clammy hands to her face to blow into the palms for warmth. Around her wrists, a pair of handcuffs had been affixed, tighter around the left wrist than the right. The man yelled out before Aryn could study her restraints and she looked back through the window to watch him run to a police sedan much like the one she was seated in.

Kneeling down, the recently arrived man blocked a dark-haired woman who wasted no time wrapping her arms around his neck. Like Aryn, she wore handcuffs. In many ways, actually, in *every* way, it was Aryn's fault that the woman was here. She could not see their faces anymore, only the tops of their heads and then they disappeared completely. An

inspector with the Bureau of Global Crime Investigation stepped into her line of sight and approached the sedan she had been placed inside.

The inspector was smooth-faced but not innocent like the other man and Aryn remembered him as the same agent who stood watching her while a paramedic named Norman treated her. His name was Durvis, this young inspector, and he was about to enter the vehicle with her. The sound of a departing squad car filled the cab of the sedan as he opened the driver's door, further aggravating the ringing in Aryn's ear. When Durvis slammed the door shut, it felt like Aryn's ear had been stuck underwater again and the sound went murky.

Durvis, a *probationary* inspector, looked at Aryn's reflection in the rearview mirror and impatiently gripped the steering wheel. Starting the engine, he had the courtesy to turn on the heater. Aryn was still wearing wet clothes, a sleeveless blouse and some dive shorts, stained with blood and speckled with coarse sand. She thought they might drive away but it seemed the investigator preferred to sit a while longer.

In that same instant, Aryn stared out the windshield as the lantern from Caper Lighthouse washed over them. The light made the man's eyes appear sickly and her wounded cheek appeared bright red. Raising her hands, she could feel the heat coming off the side of her face and wished she had

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the mobility to gouge at the ringing in her ear. Instead, she fixed her eyes on the lighthouse and wondered if she would ever love it as once she had.

“Do you want to tell me what happened out there?”

Durvis had an ordinary voice, she thought, the kind that seemed easily forgettable.

“Mrs. Rayburn, are you with me?”

“I can go back to the very beginning if you’d like,” she challenged the man.

“Just,” Durvis splayed his fingers as he pressed his palms against the steering wheel. “Tell me what happened tonight.”

“Okay,” she nodded in agreement. “But believe me when I tell you, the woman who lost her life this week is in many ways connected to the chain of events that claimed another life sixty-six years before.”

“Sixty-six years?” The man asked in disbelief and stared at her reflection.

“The agent who brought me to the car,” Aryn said, “he promised to find a blanket since you bagged everything else I own. I’m chilly, as you can imagine.”

Adjusting the vents on the dash, Durvis aimed the heated air towards the back seat and sat quietly watching Aryn.

“Thank you.”

Nodding, Durvis said, “So, 1946. That’s sixty-six years ago.”

“Yes, it is,” she agreed. “Will I be allowed to make a phone call? I don’t want my husband to worry.”

“The abduction thing,” Durvis replied. “Right, I read about that in your file. I’ll have someone notify him.”

“And my sister, if it isn’t too much to ask?”

Durvis lowered his head respectfully and then tensed his posture. “You’re telling me the reason that stiff is in a bag is because of, what, something that happened two generations ago? Maybe three?”

“It seems unlikely, doesn’t it? But yes, Inspector, that’s what I’m telling you. I can only hope that your love of history exceeds your partner’s.”

“What’s this got to do with him?”

“Well, he *is* the one who approached me about the cases you’re investigating,” Aryn said.

“He asked you to consult on *one* murder,” Durvis corrected. “Now we’ve got *three* dead bodies on our hands.”

Aryn lowered her head and closed her eyes as the lighthouse lantern swept across the car again. In that same gesture, she found a moment to utter a quick prayer for all the souls involved in these events.

Ignoring the woman’s prayerfulness, Durvis nudged her along by saying, “Help me make sense of all this, will you?”

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“If you’ll indulge me, I’ll tell you everything you want to know. This is a story about five families, one outsider and, more than anything, two friends,” Aryn explained.

“It was the best of times,” Durvis heckled the woman in the back seat of the car and rubbed his wrinkled brow.

“I don’t know if it was ever the best of times,” she confessed. “But I’d like to think it felt as close to perfect as it could have been for Oliver Moore.”

“Oliver Moore,” Durvis repeated. “Who’s Oliver Moore?”

Setting her shackled wrists atop the front seat, Aryn pointed both index fingers in the direction of Caper Lighthouse. Durvis followed her fingertips with his eyes and squinted as the lantern scanned the calm, black sea. The heater blew a little harder now and Aryn could hear the noise above the ringing in her ear. She wondered what the shores of Galilee might have looked like all those years ago.

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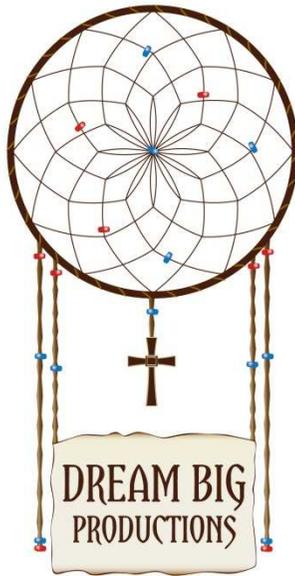
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The End

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